

1 Corinthians Session 5: Marriage and Singleness (1 Cor 7:1-40)

(Scripture references based on NIV)

1. Key Learning Objectives

Key pointers to keep in mind as you prepare to lead this session.

To understand that:

- Christians are free to choose to marry or remain single for both are a gift from God.
- Whether married or single, a Christian should in faith, accept and live in obedience to God in whatever situation/ place in life he / she is in, trusting that this is the life God has assigned and not be troubled by it.

2. Warm-up activity / Starter Question

These questions are meant to lead into the themes of the study. Pick one to discuss.

- What do you prefer to do alone, and what is better done together with your friend/s?
- Who is your favourite pop idol/celebrity/influencer and what is it about him/her that you like?

3. Opening Prayer

Father God, thank you for gathering us today to hear and study your word from 1 Corinthians 7. We pray for your Holy Spirit's guidance to teach us and to help us understand your word. Open each of our hearts and minds to humbly accept and to do your will. Bless our sharing and fellowship. In Jesus' name, Amen.

4. Context

Link from 1 Cor 6

- In last week's lesson, we learnt that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and they belong to God. Thus, we are to honour God with our bodies and not indulge in sexual immorality (in the Greek referring specifically to sex outside of marriage).
- The Corinthian church had also written to Paul asking several questions. From chapter 7 onwards, Paul starts answering these questions.

First issue - "It is good for a man not to touch a woman."

- The Greek text of v1 literally says "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." In this context, "touch" can be read as referring to marry or have sexual relations with. Thus, in the NIV the question is translated as: it is good for a man not to marry, or alternatively, not to have sexual relations with a woman. In Corinthian culture, it was normal for married men to visit prostitutes. On the other hand, some Christians felt that since they were now already spiritual, they should live like spiritual beings which neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matt 22:30).
- Paul addresses the question and both issues in v2-5: First, in v2 he recommends marriage to avoid sexual immorality, thus each man should only have sex with his own wife. Second, Paul is not promoting a form of Christian asceticism (abstaining from sexual relations) but instead, Paul insists on full conjugal rights for **both** the wife and the husband, i.e. they both yield their bodies to one another (v3-4).

Second issue - "Now about virgins..." (v25)

- Paul's view is that "Because of the present crisis" (v26) (understood to be unusually difficult circumstances) the Corinthians should remain as they are: if married, do not divorce; if single, do not marry (v27). What Paul is saying is, if you are facing unusually difficult challenges of this fallen world, remain as you are! Do not initiate divorce / seek to get married. Nevertheless, he says it is not a sin to marry (v28).

Paul's thoughts on marriage (for leaders' reference)

- *Paul's personal preference is for singleness (v7-8).*
 - *An unmarried person can devote himself/herself to God without the distractions of a married life (v32-35). But he also recognises that celibacy (abstaining from marriage and sexual relations) is a special gift from God which is not given to everyone ("gift" in v7 is used again in 1 Cor 12 referring to the gifts of the Holy Spirit).*
- *It is unlikely that Paul was against marriage.*
 - *The conventional Jewish view was and is for all to marry if possible, and Paul, being an observant Jew, would have considered marriage as normal for most people. After all, his first answer to the Corinthians is to get married (v2-5). Later in 1 Cor 9:5, he says "Don't we have the right to take a believing wife..." though he was single when he wrote 1 Corinthians.*
- *Paul's advice on marriage here is specific to the Corinthians.*
 - *This is in light of their promiscuous culture. He tells the Corinthians that marriage is necessary to avoid immorality. In his other letters, it is clear that he considered marriage as more significant in other ways. He had a high view of marriage: likening marriage to Christ's relationship to the church (Eph 5:25-33) and acknowledging God's institution of marriage (Gen 2:24).*
- *Ultimately, Paul says that whatever their status, Christians should live according to God's specific calling for them (v17) having been bought by His blood (v23).*

5. Scripture Reading

Assign two or three youths to read the passage aloud.

6. Discussion Questions

Q1-2: Married life (v1-5, 10-11, 39)

1) What do you think Paul is advocating in v1-5? What is his priority for them?

- Christians should marry, especially if they are unable to resist sexual temptations (v2).
- Husband and wife should not withhold having sexual relations with each other so as to avoid the temptation of sexual immorality (i.e. sex outside of marriage) (v2,5).
- His priority is for them to avoid sexual immorality.

2) What does Paul say are the marital obligations of husband and wife within a marriage? Refer to v2-5, 10-11, and 39.

- A Christian husband and wife should have normal sexual relations with each other (v2-3).
- A wife's body belongs to her husband, and a husband's body belongs to his wife (v4).
 - In the patriarchal Greco-Roman culture, it would have been normal to assume that a wife yields authority to her husband. But Paul is saying something counter-cultural, i.e. that marriage is NOT one-sided, but it requires mutual submission and a man also does not have authority of his own body, but yields it to his wife.
- Thus, married couples should not withhold these marital rights except by mutual consent and only for a limited time for the purpose of prayer (or communion) with God (v5).
- The married couple should remain together for life (v39).

Additional thought: Ideally, marriage commitment is for life for Christian couples. However, because our "hearts are hard", God permitted divorce for marital unfaithfulness - Matt 19:3-9.

Q3-5: Singleness (v6-9, 32-35)

3) What do you think Paul means by "I wish that all men were as I am" in v7?

- He believes that remaining unmarried is a good option.
- Though marriage is desirable, it is not mandatory.

4) What is the "gift" that Paul refers to in v7?

- God gives each Christian his/her own spiritual gift. Some are given the desire or inclination to be married.
- Some have the gift or power to refrain from marriage and control sexual desires / not experience sexual temptation - this was Paul's gift.

Additional thought: In Matt 19:10-12, Jesus acknowledges that as a special calling from God, some can renounce marriage because of the kingdom of heaven.

5) How and why does Paul contrast the married and the single person in v32-34? What reason does he give in v35 for doing so?

- Paul explains why he feels the unmarried/virgins should not marry during the "present crisis" (v26).
- His main priority is that all should serve the Lord without distraction (v35) especially because the time for doing the Lord's work is short (v29).
- He contrasts the married and single person in their ability to fully serve the Lord at this time.
 - A single person can concentrate on the Lord's matters and serve Him without being distracted by marital obligations and responsibilities.
 - A married person on the other hand must be concerned also how to please his/her spouse (as well as other marital responsibilities) and thus may be distracted from fully serving the Lord.
- Paul highlights the contrast, not to restrict them (whether to marry or remain single), but for their own good to remind them to "live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord" (v35).

Q6-7: Concerning a Christian's status in life (v17-24)

6) In v17, what is the rule that Paul says he lays down in all the churches?

- Christians should accept any station of life they are in, trusting that God has placed them there for his purpose (v17).
- Whether married or single, Jew or Gentile ("circumcised"/"uncircumcised"), slave or free, a Christian should live obediently to God (v19 - "Keeping God's commands is what counts").
- Regardless of his/her legal, social, racial, or economic status, a Christian is Christ's "slave" having been bought by His blood (v22,23) and owes sole allegiance to Him. We should serve God where we are until He calls us elsewhere.

7) What do you think Paul means in v23 by "do not become slaves of men"?

- This likely refers not to literal slavery, but to spiritual/mental slavery. Christians having been purchased by Christ's blood belong to God and owe allegiance to God exclusively, whatever their status in life.
- Christians should therefore not make themselves the slaves of men, that is put themselves under the inappropriate control or influence of others or follow them slavishly, not even those they consider admirable or good.

7. Main Discipleship Takeaway

Ask the youths how they would summarise everything that has been discussed today with one sentence.

A Christian, whether married or single, or in whatever situation in life, belongs to God and should live in undivided obedience and devotion to Him.

8. Application / Reflection

Split up into smaller groups to share and pray. Leaders are encouraged to have prepared their own thoughts and sharings for the application questions.

- 1) How has today's study given you guidance on how to live your life right now as a single? What would your answer be if you are dating/engaged/married?
- 2) Is there anyone in your life that you, in practice, have put before God? (e.g. in terms of respect, attention, time, money spent etc.) What do you need to change in order to put God first?
- 3) Whether a Christian is married or single, what do you think may distract him/her from fully serving God?

9. Closing Prayer

Father God, we thank you for the lessons from your Word. We pray for humble and teachable hearts to submit to your Word and will for each of us. Fill us with your Holy Spirit and enable us to allow the Holy Spirit to work in us so that our thoughts, speech, and actions may be pleasing to You. Help us always to make the right choices and to honour you in our daily lives. Bless each of us and our families with Your presence, provision, and protection. In Jesus' name, Amen.