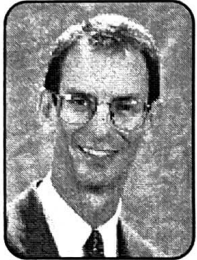




# Expository Insights

**“Single and Satisfied in God,” an exposition of 1 Corinthians 7:25-40**  
By Thomas R. Schreiner, Professor of New Testament Interpretation

What do the Scriptures teach us about being single? Many in Christian culture encourage everyone to marry, suggesting that those who are unmarried are strange, or at the very least are not filling their calling. We see in 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 that the apostle Paul does not agree.



**First, Paul’s words on this matter are inspired.**

Some might think otherwise because of Paul’s words in v. 25, “Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.” But when Paul says he has no command of the Lord, he isn’t implying that the readers may reject his advice. The point is that Jesus Christ in His earthly ministry gave no command about the single state. Paul distinguishes here between the words of the historical Jesus and his own inspired opinion. He gives a true opinion because the Lord showered His mercy upon Paul by calling him as an apostle.

So what we have in these verses is not simply Paul’s personal opinion. They are part of God’s inspired Word. They are God’s message for us today.

**Second, singles should not seek to get married.**

The main theme in the preceding verses, 1 Corinthians 7:17-24, is that we should bloom where we are planted. Paul applies this principle to those who are single in v. 26, saying, “It is good for a man to remain as he is.”

What Paul means by this specifically is unpacked by v. 27. Unfortunately the NIV completely misunderstands the verse, “Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife.” Contrary to the translation of the NIV the verse does not address the question of divorce. The NASB translates the text more accurately, “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife.” If one is

bound to a wife, i.e., if one has pledged to marry a virgin, then one should carry out that promise and get married.

On the other hand, v. 27 tells us that those who are unengaged should not seek a wife. The principle is that we should not think that we will be more pleasing to God if we marry. When we look at the whole of Scripture, it is clear that God intends most people to marry. Still, those who are single should not seek a wife or a husband and radically change their circumstances to find a mate.

If you desire marriage, it is tempting to change your circumstances to find a wife or husband. But the Word of God for you is “trust Him.” Don’t fall prey to desperation in order to get married. God will open up the doors in the natural course of your life if you are intended to be married.

What a freeing thing it is to know that as you trust God and go about your daily responsibilities, God will see to it that you are introduced to your spouse if you are intended to marry.

**Third, the desire to get married is a good thing.**

Paul says this very thing in v. 28a, “But if you marry, you have not sinned.” On first glance, it appears from these words that Paul has a low view of marriage. We need to remember, however, that Paul responds in 1 Corinthians 7 to ascetic believers who thought it was more spiritual to abstain from sexual relations (cf. 1 Cor 7:1-9).

Marriage, as Paul teaches in vv. 36-38, is not to be rejected. It is a good gift of God, and those who desire to be married should know that God is pleased with them.

In fact, the whole of the Scriptures suggests that marriage is the path for most. One means by which we can discern whether we should marry is the strength of our sexual desires (1 Cor 7:9). Some criticize Paul here for having a low view of marriage, but instead the apostle is realistic. Strong sexual desires are one indication that we should be married.

Paul, of course, has a condition for those who want to marry. “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39).

Believers are free to marry, but we must marry another believer. There are no exceptions to this rule.

**Fourth, Paul believes it is preferable to remain single, to refrain from**

**marriage.** Paul’s preference for the single state is clear in vv. 38-40. Still, Paul is balanced in these verses. He expressly states that marriage is a good thing, but thinks the single state is better. Why does Paul prefer the single state?

He prefers it because of the present distress (v. 26).

The apostle probably refers here to the battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan before the second coming. Those who are unmarried are free to devote themselves to God unhindered during this battle.

Second, Paul argues that those who are married will have “tribulation in the flesh” (v. 28) or as the NASB says “trouble in this life.” He explains this further in vv. 32-35.

When you are married, you have to put time and effort into how to please your spouse. Such effort and time distracts us from concentrating solely on the things that relate to the kingdom of God.

Paul is by no means arguing that concern for the welfare of a husband or wife is a bad thing. He is simply being realistic. A good marriage involves a major time commitment, one in which you think about how to please your spouse.

What can we learn from this?

At the very least we can celebrate the single state instead of viewing those who are single as somehow strange.

As parents and friends of those who are single, we should not assume that all those who are single are destined to be married.

This text is a good reminder to me, for I have a tendency to say to my children, “When you get married.” But it is more biblical to say to our children and to friends, “If you get married.”

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**Executive Editor:** Lawrence A. Smith

**Editor:** Bryan Cribb

**Design/Layout:** John Rogers

**Photographer:** Dave Merrifield

**E-mail:** towers@sbts.edu

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# Expository Insights

**“Single and Satisfied in God,” an exposition of 1 Corinthians 7:25-40**  
(Continued from page 2)

I remember teaching this text in a Sunday School class in Minnesota, and one of the elders and a close friend indicated to me that he wanted his daughter to get married, which is quite natural. And yet his daughter married, fell away from the Lord and divorced her husband. Now I am not saying that she should not have married, only that we as parents should not assume that our children will necessarily find happiness through marriage.

Those who are single should not assume that marriage is the path to happiness. Any good marriage involves self-sacrifice and commitment, and is not easy.

We can think of many single people in the history of the church who have made a great contribution to the kingdom, such as John Stott, Mary Slessor, Lottie Moon and Amy Carmichael.

Some people have even suggested that you cannot be a whole person without experiencing sexual relations, but that is

ridiculous, for then we would have to say that Jesus Himself was not a whole person because He never had sex. We know from the Scriptures that Jesus was the most balanced, psychologically whole and integrated person that ever lived.

We ought not to think that our satisfaction depends on marriage. Our joy and satisfaction comes from knowing and loving God, and from spreading the joy of knowing Him to others.

**Fifth, we should live to please God with all our energy, for marriage and singleness are only temporary. We see this in vv. 29-31.**

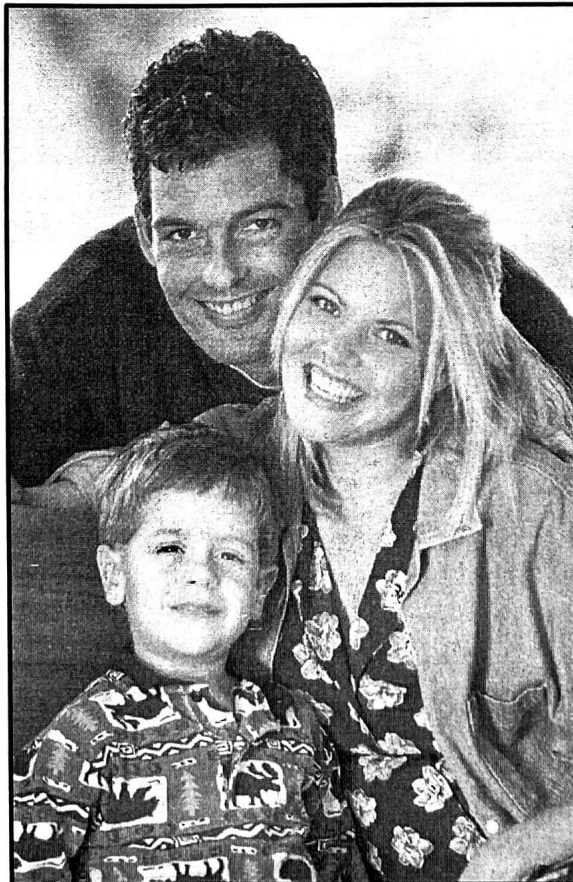
What does Paul mean when he says that those who have wives should live as though they had none? He doesn't mean that husbands can ignore their wives, live as though they were single and go off and do their own thing.

It would also be completely insensitive to say to one weeping, “Paul says that those who weep should live as if they were not weeping.” This would contradict the admonition in Romans 12:15, “Weep with those who weep.”

What does Paul mean here? He reminds us that life in this world is temporary. “The form of this world is passing away.” “The time has been shortened.” Our lives on earth are short, just a brief candle that burns away, or as James says a vapor of air that passes. So, we should not think of our lives in terms of the things of this world. Our marriages, our tears, our joys, our things, they are all temporary. And the time is soon coming when we shall live with God forever and ever and ever.

So let us not think that life on earth is our heaven. Let us not think that our happiness comes ultimately from marriage or possessions. Let us live in light of eternity, in light of the world that lasts forever, and find our greatest satisfaction and joy, not in our marriages or things, but in God Himself.

Neither singleness nor marriage is permanent. We will look back on them as we look back on our childhood, and the older we get the farther away childhood seems. The days of our true adulthood are coming, when we will be like God fully, and the shadows of this world will fade, and the sun of God's presence will rise fully upon us.



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