

Eastwood Baptist (28 October, 2018) **QUESTIONS ABOUT MARRIAGE** (1 Corinthians 7)

Introduction In this chapter Paul responds to questions from the Corinthians about marriage. It is not easy to know how best to preach from this chapter. We don't have the Corinthians' questions available to us, so we have to infer their questions from Paul's answers. And they lived in a different time and place from us, so their questions may be different from ours. Also this chapter covers many matters, and some of them are complicated. I have decided to select those answers (and inferred questions) which seem to me to be most relevant to us, and to try to find in Paul's answers principles which will guide us today, especially but not only in matters of sex and marriage.

Is it Good Not to Marry? (7:1-7) Look at how Paul begins his first answer – **read 7:1b**. This is not a good summary of what Paul goes on to say, so I think that we can be pretty confident that Paul is quoting from their question. Apparently some of them are saying that it is better not to marry, and that if you are married it is better not to have sex. The people who say this probably have a negative view of sex, and indeed of the body generally. Paul clearly does not agree with these people. First he makes a general statement in favour of marriage – **read 7:2**. I think that he is saying that opposing marriage does not lead to holier living, but rather to increased immorality. Certainly he is saying that it is normally a good thing for men and women to marry. Then Paul goes on to deal with the idea of refraining from sex within marriage (vv.3-6). He teaches that sexual intercourse is good within marriage, and lays down strict conditions for anyone who chooses to refrain from it. He emphasises that this must be a mutually agreed decision by both husband and wife, and adds that it must only be for a short time, with the purpose of being devoted together to prayer. Finally Paul says this – **read 7:7**. This is not entirely straightforward, but I think Paul is referring to the fact that he is at the time of writing single, and he sees this as God's gift for the sake of his missionary calling. Probably the opponents of marriage have been claiming Paul's singleness as a model for all Christians. So Paul says that only some have a gift from God for living the single life. From all this we can derive the principle that it is normally good to be married, but God calls some Christians to singleness. As a church, we should encourage and teach about healthy family life, but also provide for single people.

What If I'm Married to an Unbeliever? (7:12-16) In vv.10-11 Paul reminds them of Jesus' teaching against divorce, but in v.12 he turns to a question which Jesus hadn't addressed. What if a believer is married to an unbeliever, to someone who does not acknowledge Jesus as Saviour and Lord? It looks as though some of the Corinthians think that this totally changes everything, that a Christian is holy while a non-Christian is unholy, therefore their marriage is wrong and must be ended. And it looks as though others have been saying that it makes no difference at all, that the Christian must treat the marriage as unbreakable. Paul, however, says neither of these things. First he addresses the situation where the unbelieving partner is willing to continue in the marriage, and opposes those who see the marriage as unholy. **Read 7:12b-14**. The Christian is to continue in the marriage, which is to be seen as holy in God's sight. There is debate over v.14, but I think that Paul is saying that the marriage is valid in God's sight, and the children of the marriage are fully legitimate. I don't think that Paul can possibly mean when he uses the word "sanctified" that one

partner is saved by the other's faith. This would contradict Paul's general teaching on salvation and v.16 in particular. Paul then addresses the situation where the unbelieving partner chooses to leave the marriage – **read 7:15**. Then, he says, the Christian should let their partner leave, and the Christian is not bound. But what does he mean by this? I don't think he is talking about not forcing the partner to stay in the marriage, since this would have been impossible for Christian wives. I think he is talking about viewing themselves as still married to that person, and saying that they should not do this, but see themselves as set free. I think this implies freedom to remarry, although I am aware that not every Christian would agree with me. We need to be supportive of fellow believers who are married to unbelievers. We need to recognise that not every case is the same, and that we never know the whole story. We need also to note Paul's final comment. **Read 7:16**. It is clear that he is saying that the Christian partner can't know how things will end. I think that he is saying to the Christian whose non-Christian partner abandons the marriage not to insist on preserving the marriage in the hope of winning the partner to faith. But he may well also be saying that the Christian whose partner wants to remain in the marriage that he or she should not give up hope of the partner's coming to faith.

Paul's Principle of Being Content (7:17-24) After the section which I have just been talking about, Paul offers a guiding principle which applies not only to being married or single, but to a wider variety of personal circumstances. I have chosen to call it the principle of contentment, but Paul introduces it in these words – **read 7:17**. Paul then goes on to apply it to being circumcised or uncircumcised, and slave or free. The second example is particularly helpful to us in interpreting the principle – **read 7:20-24**. The fact that Paul says that a slave who can gain his or her freedom should do so makes it clear that his advice to remain in the situation in which they were when called by God is not an absolute. Rather, I think he is saying that they should be content in that situation. This stands not against the possibility of change but against a demand for change. We can imagine a new Christian expecting God to provide a desired change. We can even imagine some people claiming that this is a right expectation, a claim not unlike modern Prosperity teaching. A Christian slave might say, "If God loves me, then he will enable me to stop being a slave, and I'll be happy." A Christian single might say, "If God loves me, then he will provide me with a husband (or wife), and I'll be happy." Paul says that this is not the way to happiness. It is not the fulfilment of such wishes that makes for a good life. Rather it is being thankful for what God has done for every believer, and living obediently toward God. And it is not just the Corinthians who needed to hear this. We live in a world where we are being constantly bombarded with false messages about what will make us happy. Such messages come through advertising, but also in many more subtle ways. We are told that we will be happy if we are rich. We are told that we will be happy if we can marry the man, or woman, of our dreams. We are told that we will be happy if we can take luxurious overseas holidays. We are told that we will be happy if God grants our every wish. But these are false messages. There is far greater happiness to be found in being grateful for God's having sent His Son to bring us forgiveness and eternal life, in being content to trust and serve God in whatever situation we are in. As Paul later wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 6:6): "Godliness with contentment is great gain".