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## Chapter 3

# Vocation

**1 Corinthians 7**

**UNDERSTANDING**

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

*Read 1 Corinthians 7*

## The Big Picture

Dealing with practical issues on marriage, St. Paul gives several important pieces of advice.

On one hand, the pagan culture of temple prostitution and affairs leads to sexual immorality (1 Cori 6:12–20). On the other hand, some Corinthians have decided to go the completely opposite way and condemn marriage and sex altogether. In this sexually charged city of Corinth, St. Paul walks a fine line in his advice to the Church.

## To Marry or Not to Marry (1 Corinthians 7:1–7)

On this topic, St. Paul is replying to a specific question from the Corinthians (v.1). The phrase “it is well for a man not to touch a woman” is a euphemism meaning “not to have sexual relations.” While here and elsewhere St. Paul will affirm that it is better to be celibate (v. 8), he does not fall into the trap of viewing marriage and sex negatively. He notes that “because of the temptation to immorality”

(v. 2), men and women should marry one another. Verse 4 shows St. Paul's view of equality and self-giving between husband and wife in marriage, where both rule over one another's body. While it would be commonplace in the ancient world to say that the man rules over the woman, it would have been revolutionary to grant men and women equal status. Notice the balance: While St. Paul prefers celibacy, he does not discourage marriage.

St. Paul also allows spouses to refrain from sexual relations for a time (v. 5). Concerned about the immorality in Corinth, St. Paul instructs the married partners to come together again to avoid temptation (v. 5). Catholic teaching also allows periodic continence from sex for child spacing and family planning (different from artificial contraception). In a study filled with culturally charged topics, this one might be the most controversial. At the same time, it fits very well with this letter. Using contraception is the wisdom of the world; it is ingrained as a cultural truth. Will we trust in the wisdom of the world or the wisdom of the Spirit through the Church? (For more on this topic, see CCC 2368–70 and search online for Janet Smith's talk *Contraception: Why Not?*, available in both print and audio format.)

### **The Question of Marriage in Different Situations (1 Corinthians 7:8–16)**

In perhaps the most complete advice about marriage in the New Testament, St. Paul gives a very clear teaching on divorce, referring to Jesus' teaching on the subject (Mt 19:1–9): Married spouses should not seek a divorce from one another. If divorce does occur, the spouses are told to "remain single or else be reconciled" (v. 10). Like Jesus, St. Paul leaves no room for remarriage, because a marriage in the Church is life-long bond that can only end with the death of one of the members (7:39–40).

St. Paul goes on to give advice to those who are married to non-believers. One can imagine that a conversion to Christianity, especially in the early Church, could be a cause for alarm for the non-believing spouse. For most pagans, the worship of a crucified criminal must have been quite odd. Because of this fact, divorce was a realistic situation for many of these new Christians. St. Paul notes that divorce should not be instigated by the believing spouse, because conversion of the non-believer can happen through marriage. But, if the non-believing spouse initiates the divorce, the believing spouse is not bound to the marriage (v. 15).

St. Paul's principle on marriage between believers and non-believers has been developed into Catholic Canon law as the Pauline privilege (CIC 1143 §1–2). In addition to this privilege, the Catholic Church does grant annulments that allow those who were married in the Church to have their marriages dissolved. Unlike a divorce, an annulment acknowledges that a sacramental marriage never occurred. Rather than breaking the marriage, as a divorce does, an annulment sees that something was wrong at the very beginning, such as a lack of consent. (For more, see the Canon law of the Catholic Church, specifically 1096 §1141–55.)

### **Application to Jesus**

Just like Jesus, St. Paul discourages divorce and promotes celibacy.

## **Remaining in Your State (1 Corinthians 7:17–24)**

The message of this entire section is summed up in verse 20: “Every one should remain in the state in which he was called.” Historically, this section was used to justify slavery (v. 21). Slavery in the Roman Empire was not the same thing as slavery in America: While some slaves were still treated poorly, many slaves were educated and held important posts. St. Paul does note that, if one can gain his freedom, then he should do so (v. 21), and that Christians should not give themselves to slavery (v. 23).

## **On Marriage and the World (1 Corinthians 7:25–40)**

In this section, St. Paul expands on his reasons for preferring celibacy over marriage (similar to Jesus’ words in Matthew 19:11–13). First, he mentions an impending distress (v. 26), and later that the form of this world is passing away (v. 31). Specifically, St. Paul could be referring to Jesus’ prediction in Mark 13 about the destruction of the Jewish temple that would mark a new age, or perhaps to some other impending distress. Generally, St. Paul is giving the Corinthians an eternal perspective on life: This world lasts only so long, including marriage. Verses 29–31 express this perspective vividly but, of course, do not discount St. Paul’s instructions in the beginning of the chapter (vv. 7:1-5).

In addition to this impending distress, St. Paul also mentions the reality of marriage: You face the worldly troubles of attending to your spouse (vv. 28–29, 32–34). With our interests thus divided, we have less time to devote to the Lord and His work. The Catholic Church rightly enacts the beauty of this teaching in the celibate priesthood and religious life. These men and women have the freedom to dedicate their lives to “the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord” (v. 32).

## **Understanding /** Vocation

St. Paul makes it clear that this is the best option for us, if we are able to exercise self-control (v. 9). This is similar to Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (19:10-12): He who is able to be celibate for the kingdom should do so. These are powerful passages for discerning a vocation to the priesthood, religious life, or marriage.

### **Application to Our Lives**

St. Paul's words encourage us to discern properly the vocation to which we are called.



DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

## *1 Corinthians 7*

### **STEP 1: OPENER**

Have you ever over-reacted to something?

### **STEP 2: BACKDROP**

On the one hand, the pagan culture of temple prostitution and affairs leads to sexual immorality. On the other hand, some Corinthians have decided to go the complete opposite way and condemn marriage and sex altogether. In this sexually charged city of Corinth, St. Paul walks a fine line in his advice to the Church.

### **STEP 3: PASSAGE**

Today's passage is 1 Corinthians 7. Start by reading 1 Corinthians 7:1-7.

### **STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Note that answers appear in italics.



**1. What problem is St. Paul addressing in verses 1–7?**

*Answer: St. Paul is addressing an attitude in the Corinthian Church that opposes sex and marriage.*

**2. Why is this problem interesting in light of a Corinthian culture where prostitution and sexual license are encouraged?**

*Answer: The problem is interesting because St. Paul just addressed sexual immorality and prostitution (1 Cor 6:12–20). In response to this sexual immorality, some in Corinth have overcorrected in the other direction. St. Paul has to help them find the balance.*

**3. In the Roman world, women had few rights. What would be surprising to the Roman culture about St. Paul's words in verses 3-4?**

*Answer: Not only does the man have rights over the woman's body, but the woman has rights over the man's body.*

**4. St. Paul points out abstinence in marriage as a way to pursue holiness (prayer). The Catholic Church also promotes abstinence as opposed to contraception in marriage. Read CCC 2370. What is the main reason for this teaching?**

*Answer: Contraception severs the unitive and procreative meaning of sex and obstructs the mutual self-giving between spouses. Rather than completely loving one another, spouses withhold a part of themselves from the other when using contraception, which can lead to objectification.*

**5. How does the main reasoning against contraception relate to St. Paul's words in verse 4?**

*Answer: St. Paul envisions men and women living their marriage in total self-giving to one another.*

**Read 1 Corinthians 7:8-16.**

**6. What is St. Paul's advice on divorce for believers?**

*Answer: St. Paul advises the Corinthians who are married to believers not to divorce. If divorce does occur, they are to remain unmarried or be reconciled (v. 11).*

**7. What's the difference between divorce and a Catholic annulment?**

*Answer: See the third paragraph of "The Question of Marriage in Different Situations" section in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"*

**8. Read Matthew 19:1-10. What is the disciples' reaction to Jesus' teaching on divorce?**

*Answer: They find it to be difficult.*

**9. Why is this a difficult teaching, especially in our culture today?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**10. How is this teaching helpful to spouses, families, and society as a whole?**

*Answer: For spouses, this teaching helps them to stay together during difficult times. For families, it helps to provide two parents to raise children. For society, it helps to provide more stability in society as a whole.*

**Read 1 Corinthians 7:17–31.**

**11. Overall, what is St. Paul's view of marriage?**

*Answer: St. Paul has a balanced approach: While he prefers celibacy over marriage, he does not consider marriage to be sinful.*

**12. Read Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:11–12. How does it compare to St. Paul's teaching?**

*Answer: Both teachings prefer celibacy over marriage, for those who are able to remain celibate.*

**13. What reasons do they give to support their preference for celibacy?**

*Answer: For Jesus, it is for the benefit of the kingdom. Similarly, St. Paul notes that a celibate person can be more concerned about the things of the Lord rather than the things of the world.*

**14. Why is celibacy difficult to embrace in our culture?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**15. How do these passages help us discern our vocations to the priesthood, religious life, or marriage?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*



