Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Why Is It Better for Single Christians to "Marry Than to Burn"?
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7:8-9
Code: BQ050112

But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self–control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn. (7:8–9)

These verses answer the question, “Should those who were married and divorced before becoming Christians remarry?” No doubt that was a key question in the Corinthian church. Formerly married people came to salvation in Christ and asked if they now had the right to marry someone else. Paul’s response here is uniquely fitted to those who want to know their options.

The **unmarried** and **widows** are the two categories of single people mentioned here, but there is a third category of single people (“virgins”) indicated in verse 25. Understanding the distinctions in regard to these three groups is essential. “Virgins” (*parthenoi*) clearly refers to single people who have never been married. **Widows** (*cherais*) are single people who formerly were married but were severed from that relationship by the death of the spouse. That leaves the matter of the **unmarried**. Who are they?

The term **unmarried** (*agamos*, from “wedding, or marriage,” with the negative prefix a) is used only four times in the New Testament, and all four are in this chapter. We need go nowhere else for understanding of this key term. Verse 32 uses it in a way that gives little hint as to its specific meaning; it simply refers to a person who is not married. Verse 34 uses it more definitively: “the woman who is **unmarried**, and the virgin.” We assume Paul has two distinct groups in mind: whoever the unmarried are, they are not virgins. Verse 8 speaks to “the unmarried and to widows,” so we can conclude that the **unmarried** are not widows. The clearest insight comes in the use of the term in verses 10 and 11: “the wife should not leave [divorce] her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried. …).” The term **unmarried** indicates those who were previously married, but are not widows; people who are now single, but are not virgins. The **unmarried** woman, therefore, is a divorced woman.

Paul is speaking to people who were divorced before coming to Christ. They wanted to know if they had the right to marry. His word to them is that **it is good for them** who are now free of marriage to **remain even as I**. By that statement Paul affirms that he was formerly married. Because marriage

seems to have been required for membership in the Sanhedrin, to which Paul may once have belonged, because he had been so devoutly committed to Pharisaic tradition (Gal. 1:14), and because he refers to one who could have been his wife's mother (Rom. 16:13), we may assume that he was once married. His statement here to the previously married confirms that—**even as I**. Likely he was a widower. He does not identify with the virgins but with the unmarried and widows, that is, with the formerly married.

The point is that those who are single when converted to Christ should know that it is good for them to stay that way. There is no need to rush into marriage. Many well–meaning Christians are not content to let people remain single. The urge to play cupid and matchmaker can be strong, but mature believers must resist it. Marriage is not necessary or superior to singleness, and it limits some potential for service to Christ (vv. 32–34).

One of the most beautiful stories associated with Jesus' birth and infancy is that of Anna. When Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the Temple to present Him to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice, the prophetess Anna recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Much as Simeon had done a short while before, "she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." Her husband had lived only seven years after their marriage, and she had since remained a widow. At the age of 84 she was still faithfully serving the Lord in His Temple, "serving night and day with fastings and prayers" (Luke 2:21–38). She did not look on her lot as inferior and certainly not as meaningless. She had the gift of singleness and used it joyfully in the Lord's work.

Later in the chapter Paul advised believers to remain as they were. Staying single was not wrong, and becoming married or staying married were not wrong. But "in view of the present distress" the Corinthian believers were experiencing, it seemed much better to stay as they were (7:25–28).

If, however, a single believer **did not have self–control**, that person should seek to **marry**. If a Christian is single but does not have the gift of singleness and is being strongly tempted sexually, he or she should pursue marriage. **Let them marry** in the Greek is in the aorist imperative, indicating a strong command. "Get married," Paul says, **for it is better to** marry than to burn. The term means "to be inflamed," and is best understood as referring to strong passion (cf. Rom. 1:27). A person cannot live a happy life, much less serve the Lord, if he is continually burning with sexual desire—even if the desire never results in actual immorality. And in a society such as Corinth's, or ours, in which immorality is so prevalent and accepted, it is especially difficult not to succumb to temptation.

I believe that once a Christian couple decides to get married they should do it fairly soon. In a day of lowered standards, free expression, and constant suggestiveness, it is extremely difficult to stay sexually pure. The practical problems of an early marriage are not nearly as serious as the danger of immorality.

Deciding about marriage obviously is more difficult for the person who has strong sexual desires but who has no immediate prospect for a husband or wife. It is never God's will for Christians to marry unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14), but neither is it right just to marry the first believer who will say yes. Though we may want very much to be married, we should be careful. Strong feelings of any sort tend to dull judgment and make one vulnerable and careless.

There are several things that Christians in this dilemma ought to do. First, they should not simply seek to be married, but should seek a person they can love, trust, and respect, letting marriage come as a response to that commitment of love. People who simply want to get married for the sake of getting married run a great risk of marrying the wrong person. Second, it is fine to be on the lookout for the "right person," but the best way to find the right person is to be the right person. If believers are right with God and it is His will for them to be married He will send the right person—and never too late.

Third, until the fight person is found, our energy should be redirected in ways that will be the most helpful in keeping our minds off the temptation. Two of the best ways are spiritual service and physical activity. We should avoid listening to, looking at, or being around anything that strengthens the temptation. We should program our minds to focus only on that which is good and helpful. We should take special care to follow Paul's instruction in Philippians: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things" (4:8).

Fourth, we should realize that, until God gives us the right person, He will provide strength to resist temptation. "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

Finally, we should give thanks to the Lord for our situation and be content in it. Salvation brings the dawning of a new day, in which marriage "in the Lord" (v. 39) is an option.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).