

Verse 7 concludes Paul's summary introduction and elaborates on the reason he regarded and treated the celibacy/marriage question as a matter of concession: Paul recognized that each Christian is unique as a human being and is also uniquely "graced" by God with distinct gifts: "...each man has his own gift from God." In context, he wasn't referring to spiritual gifts as treated in chapters 12-14, but to divine endowments by which God fits each Christian to either a life of celibacy or to married life. Here, again, the determinative ethic of Christian freedom comes to the forefront, for freedom speaks to a person's conformity to the truth – the truth of *who* he is as well as the *what* of his individual life in Christ: The unmarried believer (widowed or single) who would employ the mind of Christ must decide the celibacy question on the basis of who God made him to be as a unique person as well as the truth of his marital status and what marriage demands.

Paul understood that Christians who are free of sexual desire and its pressures and distractions enjoy an enviable position as servants of Christ. He was such a person, and in that sense could rightly wish all of Christ's saints were like him. But God has not ordained it to be so; He has uniquely fitted and gifted each of His children and each is obligated to know himself in truth and order his life accordingly. *Freedom in conformity to the truth, not subjection to formula or prescription, is the measure of godly obedience.*

4. This principle of true freedom lay behind Paul's overarching ethic that the Lord's people are to remain as they are. Are they unmarried? Let them remain so, but only if their singleness doesn't violate the truth of who they are and how God has gifted them (7:8-9). Are they married? Let them remain so and honor the truth of their married state and its privileges, responsibilities and obligations (7:10-16). *Each Christian thus shares the exact same obligation: the obligation to conform to the truth of his person and his life situation, which includes, but isn't limited to, his marital status (7:17-26).*
 - a. In Paul's judgment, singleness has advantage over marriage for the Christian man or woman, and thus he encouraged the unmarried to remain that way. Singleness is preferable for various reasons, but not absolutely so (7:8-9). Its preferability is subject to continence, as also to continuance and contentment: Christians are to be content to remain in the condition in which the Lord found them. For those who are married, this means they are not to reject their spouses and jettison their marriages for the sake of their devotion and service to Him (7:10-16). If they came to faith after marrying, didn't Jesus know that when He called them to Himself? And for those saints who married subsequent to their new birth, wasn't that also of the Lord (however much they might now question that decision)? Why, then, would they seek to end their marriage? They may have married wrongly or unwisely, but that, too, falls under God's providential oversight.
 - b. Married Christians are to remain in their marital state, and do so contentedly and with full commitment to their spouses and their marital obligations. In the case of both spouses being believers, neither is to take action to end their marriage. Wives are not to leave their husbands and husbands are not to put away their wives. But if a couple divorces (which doubtless had already happened at Corinth), then the divorced spouses are to reconcile with one another or remain single (7:10-11).

This was Paul's instruction to Christian couples, but he wanted the Corinthians to know that it did not originate with himself. However he came to this conviction – whether through Jesus' disciples or Jesus' own words, Paul was able to affirm that his counsel on this matter accorded with the Lord's design and will.

- c. On the other hand, he had no such word from Jesus respecting “mixed” marriages involving only one believing spouse (7:12-16). It's possible that Jesus had spoken on this subject and Paul was not aware of His teaching; it's more likely that the Lord never addressed this sort of situation precisely because His ministry and instruction were directed toward the people of Israel. In the Israelite context in which Jesus lived and taught, mixed marriages between Jews and non-Jews were forbidden and scandalous. When they did occur, the offenders were expelled from the covenant community. Obviously Jews marrying non-Jews is entirely different from Christians marrying unbelievers (who lack the life, spirit and mind of Christ), but Jewish marital convention helps to explain why Jesus didn't teach on the matter of mixed marriages.

Paul insisted that Christian marriages remain intact, but what about believers who are married to unbelievers? If the advantage of singleness for one's devotion and service to Christ isn't enough to justify ending a marriage, being yoked with an unbelieving spouse certainly seems to warrant it. Who can live for the Lord as he ought when he is bound to a spouse whose interests and life orientation are contrary to Him? Surely Christ wouldn't have His servants dragged down and impeded in their faith and devotion by such a marital situation. This was doubtless the thinking of many at Corinth who, having come to faith, were now at odds with their spouse. But what appears good and proper to the natural mind is contrary to the mind of Christ. Paul's ethic applies to *all* married Christians, whether or not their spouses are believers: Christians are to remain in their marriages, content and committed to fulfilling their marital obligations to their spouse (7:12-13).

All Christians have the same marital responsibilities regardless of whether or not their spouses share their faith and union with Christ. Moreover, they share the same *spiritual* responsibilities: Whereas Christians with believing spouses are to faithfully strive to see the life of Christ perfected in their mates, those married to unbelievers are to apply the same faithfulness unto the goal of seeing Christ's life *formed* in them. Thus Paul: The unbelieving spouse is *sanctified* by the presence and faithfulness of the Christian spouse, as are the children of their union (7:14).

This statement, perhaps more than any other in this context, has challenged interpreters. Some conclude from Paul's language that unbelieving family members share in the believer's sanctity. But whatever the unbelievers' “holiness,” it clearly differs from the believer's since it exists apart from their being saved (ref. v. 16). Within Reformed circles, this statement is often used to support the notion of “covenant children” (and so also paedo-baptism): children of believers who are not saved, but are “holy” in the sense of being true members of the covenant community (the Church) which God has set apart to Himself.

But treated in context apart from a priori and systematic presumptions, Paul's meaning is not all that difficult to ascertain: At bottom, he was trying to impress on the Corinthians the importance of believers not abandoning their marriages. Some of the saints at Corinth were evidently convinced that honoring God in their sanctity meant renouncing their conjugal relationship with their spouse, if not ending their marriage altogether. Paul wanted them to understand that their marriages exist and operate within God's holy design, so that honoring Him involves discerning and living out His purpose in their marital union as it functions to manifest the gospel of His kingdom and promote its fruitfulness.

- The context suggests that this Corinthian ethic of abstinence and separation from a spouse (especially an unbelieving one) was grounded in the notion that intimacy with an "unholy" person renders the Christian unclean. The principle of separation from those outside the faith community was central to Israel's ethic under the Mosaic Code, but it was not unknown to pagan religious systems as well. Man is naturally sacral in his thinking (a sacral community is one defined and bounded by a single religious belief system and practice), and an inevitable byproduct of this mindset is the notion that personal holiness demands separation – so far as possible – from those outside the community of adherents.
- While acknowledging a right sort of Christian separation – not of physical contact or social engagement, but of understanding, conviction and devotion (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:1-7:4; Ephesians 4:1-5:17; etc.), Paul recognized the Corinthian notion of separation to be a destructive product of natural thinking. Separating from a wife or husband, either conjugally or entirely, does nothing to preserve or enhance the Christian's sanctity, and that's equally true in instances where that spouse is an unbeliever. Quite the opposite, the believer's holiness is manifest, upheld and nurtured when he honors his marital union and fulfills the Lord's purpose in it.
- In God's design, marriage enjoys its own sanctity in the one-flesh union of man and woman. But it also serves – as does every facet of the believer's life in Christ – God's ultimate purpose of restoring all things to Himself in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:9-10). The Corinthians were thinking too narrowly, for marriage has great significance beyond itself; it is an important component of the all-encompassing scheme the triune God has put in place to move the creation toward the day of its consummation.
- Every Christian is appointed and called to be the light and fragrance of Christ and His gospel in the world, and so also in the "world" of his unbelieving home (Matthew 5:13-16). If the Christian spouse abandons his marriage and family, where is the testimony of Christ to the unbelieving spouse and children? In the name of honoring God and his own holiness, such a one dishonors both. Can a Christian better fulfill his obligation of witness by forsaking it with respect to his family members?

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ – not just in verbal proclamation, but in the unimpeachable testimony of a life manifesting the truth, fruit, and power of the new creation. Rather than thinking in terms of separating from an unbelieving spouse (and so, to a certain degree at least, from the children of that union), the Christian should commit himself to draw ever closer to his unbelieving family with the goal of seeing the truth of the gospel – embodied in *himself* and his new life in Christ – bear its fruit in his family’s salvation.

It is from this vantage point that Paul designated the unbelieving spouse and children as “holy”: They are set apart to God, not in the sense that they are saved (or even necessarily will be) or are members of His Church, but in the sense that God has appointed them – through the vehicle of marriage and parenthood – to dwell in the presence of His Spirit and His gospel as they enjoy living witness in the believing spouse and parent. The unbelieving family members have their sanctity in the Christian spouse and parent, and this, in turn, imposes on the married believer the sober obligation to manifest Christ in his home; can he trust – and excuse himself – that they will see the Lord Jesus through someone else?

And so, while the natural mind is quite content to reduce issues to simple concerns with simple answers (in this instance, the rightness of celibacy, even within marriage or by the dissolution of one’s marriage); the spiritual mind understands that things must be approached with a wider view. What may appear to be a crucial concern may not even touch the real issue; and even in cases where it does, dealing with it requires discerning and addressing the whole. The Corinthians were preoccupied with the question of Christian sexuality and apparently sought Paul’s affirmation of a celibate lifestyle. They wanted him to agree that it’s good for a man not to touch a woman; Paul recognized that the truth of the matter could only be determined by a broader consideration.

Central to Paul’s Christian ethic was his conviction that believers are to remain in the condition in which God found them when He joined them to His Son. Regardless of their spouse’s standing before the Lord, Christians are not to separate from them or forsake their marital obligations within their marriages. The saints are not to leave their spouses, but what of those unbelieving spouses who are determined to depart? Can a Christian (or anyone) force his wife or husband to stay in the marriage, and should he even try? Paul’s answer was straightforward: “*Let the unbelieving one leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases,*” and the reason is that “*God has called us to peace*” (v. 15).

Peace in all things and repentance and faith in the unbelieving are God’s design and good pleasure. Opposing an unbelieving spouse who is determined to depart serves neither. But assuming the Christian has faithfully exhibited and expressed the life and love of Christ to his/her unbelieving spouse, he can let that one depart knowing that it is ultimately Christ who is being rejected. Just as faithfulness in the marriage had its goal in repentance and faith, so does faithfulness in letting the unbeliever depart. Who knows whether God will yet save him or her (v. 16)?