

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **The Unmarried and the Widowed**

*1 Corinthians 7:25-40*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

September 4, 2011

# The Unmarried and the Widowed<sup>1</sup>

## Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of singleness. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "The Unmarried and the Widowed."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 7:25-40:

<sup>25</sup> Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. <sup>26</sup> I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. <sup>27</sup> Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. <sup>28</sup> But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. <sup>29</sup> This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, <sup>30</sup> and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, <sup>31</sup> and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

<sup>32</sup> I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. <sup>33</sup> But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, <sup>34</sup> and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. <sup>35</sup> I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the material for this message is from John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 177-187.

upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

<sup>36</sup> If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. <sup>37</sup> But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. <sup>38</sup> So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

<sup>39</sup> A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. <sup>40</sup> Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God. (1 Corinthians 7:25-40)

## Introduction

Americans living alone or with unmarried roommates now make up 1 out of 3 households in the United States. The “singles” lifestyle is a new trend that is affecting every aspect of society. Unwed couples living together and divorcees are also in this group.

In San Francisco, one-half of the residents above the age of 17 are single. Nearly 3 out of 4 people of Carl Sandburgh Village, a suburb of Chicago, are unmarried.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 7 of *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* has to do with the issue of marriage and singleness. In his discussion of marriage and singleness, the apostle Paul has made it clear that neither state is better than the other.

There are many conferences, books, videos, and programs designed to help people grow in their understanding of the biblical standard for marriage. Many of them are helpful.

Much less attention, however, is given to what the Bible teaches about singleness. Some of the material that is available seems to reflect the underlying assumption that being single is not

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996).

quite normal and it is certainly not desirable.

The apostle Paul taught in verse 7 of this chapter that God has given the gift of singleness to some Christians. In the last part of this chapter he continues teaching about the reasons for remaining single.

## Lesson

So, in our lesson today, Paul gives six reasons for remaining single. They are:

1. The pressure of the distress (7:25-27).
2. The problems of the flesh (7:28).
3. The passing of the world (7:29-31).
4. The preoccupations of marriage (7:32-35).
5. The preference of singleness (7:36-38).
6. The permanence of marriage (7:39-40).

### I. The Pressure of the Distress (7:25-27)

The first reason for remaining single is the pressure of the distress.

Paul said in verse 25a: **“Now concerning the betrothed. . . .”** Who are **“the betrothed”**? Some of your Bibles say “virgins,” which is the correct translation of the Greek word. Paul was speaking here to unmarried singles, and particularly to those who were engaged to be married—to **the betrothed**.

He continued in verse 25b: **“Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.”** Paul was aware that that Jesus had not directly addressed unmarried singles. And so this is an instance in which Paul urged his readers to pay attention to his pastoral experience.

And then Paul gave his first reason for remaining single. He said in verse 26: **“I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.”** The question that must be

asked is this: “What is the **present distress**?” Since Paul did not specify exactly what the **present distress** was, commentators have speculated about what it could mean. Some say that the **present distress** referred to conflict between the Christian worldview and the non-Christian worldview. Others say it referred to the events preceding the return of Christ. And others say that it referred to the famine that existed at the time in and around Corinth.

Whatever its exact meaning, it seems to me that the **present distress** refers to any time of calamity in which people may find themselves. Calamity, such as war or suffering or persecution for the Christian faith, is difficult enough for a single person, but the problems are multiplied for a married person.

In verse 27 Paul continued to address the betrothed. He is not switching his attention from fiancés to spouses. Remember that in that culture when single persons became engaged to be married, they were **betrothed**. The only way to break an engagement was to get a divorce. Because of the importance of the engagement, betrothed people were often referred to as “husband” and “wife,” even though the wedding ceremony had not yet taken place.

And so Paul said to the betrothed fiancé in verse 27, “**Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.**” In other words, “If you are engaged to be married, get married. But, if you are still single and not yet engaged to be married, because of the pressure of the present distress, do not seek a wife.”

Singleness is a gift from God. Sometimes, because of the pressure of calamity, whether it be war, suffering, persecution, or whatever, it may be best to remain single.

So, the first reason for remaining single is the pressure of the distress.

## **II. The Problems of the Flesh (7:28)**

The second reason for remaining single is the problems of the flesh.

Paul first reiterated what he has said before: it is not a sin to get married. He said in verse 28a: **“But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.”** Frankly, even those with the gift of singleness, do not sin if they get married. The point is that marriage is a legitimate option, but it is good to consider the option of singleness first.

**“Yet,”** Paul continued in verse 28b, **“those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.”** Here is the second reason for remaining single: the problems of the flesh.

John MacArthur notes that **troubles** (*thlipsis*) literally means “pressed together, or under pressure.” Marriage presses two people together in the closest possible ways. The two become one, but they are still two personalities, two distinct people with their own likes and dislikes, their own characteristics, emotions, temperaments, and wills. Each partner has some degree of anger, selfishness, dishonesty, pride, forgetfulness, and thoughtlessness. That is true even in the best of marriages. When one partner is an unbeliever, or is immature, self-centered, temperamental, or domineering, every conflict is magnified.

Marriage involves **troubles** such as conflicts, demands, hardships, sacrifices, and adjustments that singleness does not.<sup>3</sup> And so, while marriage is legitimate, every person needs to keep in mind the **troubles** that accompany marriage. And these **troubles** are the result of the sinful flesh.

So, the reasons for remaining single are the pressure of the distress, and the problems of the flesh.

### **III. The Passing of the World (7:29-31)**

The third reason for remaining single is the passing of the world.

Paul said in verse 29a: **“This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short.”** And then he said in verse 31b: **“For the present form of this world is passing away.”**

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 181.

This **world is passing away**. It is not permanent. Moreover, marriage, even though God initiated it and blesses it, is not an eternal relationship. As John MacArthur says, “Godly marriages are ‘made in heaven,’ but they will not carry over into heaven.”<sup>4</sup> Marriages are designed only for this world and not for heaven. In fact, there will be no marriage in heaven, as Jesus said in Matthew 22:30.

Then Paul noted five different areas of life in verses 29b-31a: **“From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.”**

Paul was not speaking negatively about wives, mourning, rejoicing, buying, and dealing with the world. His point was that our priorities and perspectives must be kept right. Our priorities should not be on wives, mourning, rejoicing, buying, and dealing. Instead, we need to remember that the world is passing away and our priority needs to become like Jesus.

None of the five areas are inherently bad. Marriage, sorrows, rejoicing, possessions, and pleasure all have a proper place in the Christian life. Nevertheless, when they detract us from the Lord and his work, then they are out of place. And the reason for this is that the world is passing away.

So, the reasons for remaining single are the pressure of the distress, the problems of the flesh, and the passing of the world.

#### **IV. The Preoccupations of Marriage (7:32-35)**

The fourth reason for remaining single is the preoccupations of marriage.

Paul now distinguishes between married people and engaged (or betrothed) people. He said in verses 32-35: **“I want you to be**

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<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 181.

**free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”**

All Christians, whether married or single, are concerned **about the things of the Lord**. That is what it means to be a Christian: we want to honor and please and serve our Father in heaven.

But, in addition, married people are also concerned about their spouses. That is normal and natural and right!

Paul’s point is simply that single Christians are in a position where they do not have the additional concern about a spouse, and that may be a reason not to get married.

Pastor Robert Morgan tells the story about a woman who, after many years of being single, accepted a man’s proposal and married him. It terribly disrupted her life. Up until then she had freedom to go where she wanted to go, to do what she wanted to do. She had everything arranged in her house just the way she liked it. She had her cosmetics arranged in her bathroom just so. She could go to bed when she wanted, and she could get up when she wanted. She prepared what she liked to eat without having to bother with anyone’s else’s fussiness. She had the house empty so that she could pray and study her Bible and sing to the Lord. And she had nothing to distract her from pouring herself into her church and into the service of the Lord.

All that changed when she married, and she testified later, “I finally adjusted to it and I love my husband; I believe it was God’s will to marry. But I gave up a lot of advantages, and I often miss being single. I had so much more freedom to serve the Lord as a



single than I do now.”<sup>5</sup>

So, the reasons for remaining single are the pressure of the distress, the problems of the flesh, the passing of the world, and the preoccupations of marriage.

## V. The Preference of Singleness (7:36-38)

The fifth reason for remaining single is the preference of singleness.

Paul stated again that it is no sin to get married. He said in verse 36: **“If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.”**

It is important to keep in mind that Paul taught that both singleness and marriage are a gift from God. Both are a blessing to be enjoyed by God.

Nevertheless, Paul also wanted to state that he had a preference for singleness. Verse 37 is very difficult to translate. The *English Standard Version* says, **“But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well.”** This seems to say that an engaged man wanting to get married will do well.

However, without going into the Greek text, it seems that the *New International Version* captures Paul’s intention better. The *NIV* says, “But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind *not to marry the virgin*—this man also does the right thing” (emphasis mine). Paul was contrasting the one who wants to get married with the one who does not want to get married. And both are right in each instance.

So, Paul said in verse 38, **“So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do**

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<sup>5</sup> Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 697.

**even better.”**

Here we see his preference for remaining single. A single person is able to give more time to the Lord and the things of the Lord.

I just finished reading a book about John Stott, my favorite commentator, who died at the age of 90 and went to be with the Lord on July 27, 2011. One thing that was often noted about John Stott was his incredible capacity for work.<sup>6</sup> This was possible in large part because he was single his entire life. Stott, like Paul, would affirm that while both marriage and singleness are gifts from the Lord, there are times when singleness is the better choice.

So, the reasons for remaining single are the pressure of the distress, the problems of the flesh, the passing of the world, the preoccupations of marriage, and the preference of singleness.

## **VI. The Permanence of Marriage (7:39-40)**

And finally, the sixth reason for remaining single is the permanence of marriage.

Marriage is not permanent in the sense of being eternal. It is permanent in the sense of being lifelong. It is binding as long as each spouse is alive.

A single person needs to keep in mind that once a person gets married, it is for life. One cannot get out of marriage. Things may get tough and you may feel like you don't want to stay in the marriage any longer. The marriage bond can only be broken on one of three grounds: death (Romans 7:2), sexual immorality (Matthew 19:9), and desertion by a non-Christian (1 Corinthians 7:15). Apart from these three grounds, marriage is permanent.

Picking up on death as one of the three ways in which a marriage covenant is broken, Paul said in verse 39: **“A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”**

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, ed., *John Stott: a portrait by his friends* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011).

Paul permits remarriage after death has broken the bond of marriage. He simply adds the stipulation that this new marriage be to another Christian—**only in the Lord.**

**“Yet,”** Paul continued in verse 40, **“in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.”** This is not a command; this is pastoral wisdom from the apostle Paul.

So, the reasons for remaining single are the pressure of the distress, the problems of the flesh, the passing of the world, the preoccupations of marriage, the preference of singleness, and the permanence of marriage.

### Conclusion

In the city of Reims, in 1234 AD, Jean Poqueron of Hautvilliers, France, was sentenced to death as a habitual thief. However, as he was about to be hanged on the gallows, he was told that he would be released if a pure maiden was willing to marry him. A homely, orphan girl stepped forward willingly.

But Poqueron took one look at her, shook his head and said, “No! I’d rather marry the gallows—Hangman, do your duty.” He was hanged immediately.<sup>7</sup>

Happily, Paul’s counsel to Christians is not nearly so extreme.

Should a Christian get married or stay single? Both are gifts from God. Neither is wrong. But, there are several good reasons for staying single, such as the pressure of the distress, the problems of the flesh, the passing of the world, the preoccupations of marriage, the preference of singleness, and the permanence of marriage.

You may not always be single. But, for the time being, if God has called you to singleness, be content with his call on your life until he provides you with a suitable marriage partner. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996).



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributor\\_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181)
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz)

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## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

**PRAAYER:**

Our God, our culture is very confused about marriage and singleness. We want to understand and apply your truth to our lives. I pray for those who are single. I pray that you will enable them to be content with their present situation, and to consider the several reasons you have given in your word for remaining single at the present time: the pressure of the distress, the problems of the flesh, the passing of the world, the preoccupations of marriage, the preference of singleness, and the permanence of marriage.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go into the world and affirm God's pattern and plan for singleness.