

“Stay Put” 1 Corinthians 7

Hymns:

Reading: 1 Corinthians 7

In the year 480 AD, a nobleman from the central Italian city of Nursia had a son. He was born just 4 years after the first sacking of Rome by the pagan Visigoths. Society was falling apart. The Appian Way and other roads that ensured the “Pax Romana” were deteriorating; people felt insecure as it wasn’t safe to travel anymore; there was a loss of confidence in civil government; the military was weak and reliant on mercenaries; cities were becoming lawless, forcing many into fortified enclosures in the country side; further barbarian invasion pressed against the last vestiges of society; and civilization itself was about to be extinguished for a very long time. Nothing was stable.

When the nobleman’s son was of age, he sent him to Rome to study. But disgusted by the rampant decadence and chaos of Rome, at 20 yrs of age, his son fled Rome to Subiaco where for the next three years he lived as a hermit in a cave. Gregory described him as having been “instructed with learned ignorance and furnished with unlearned wisdom” (*Dialogues 2 Prologue*). Eventually settling in Monte Cassino where he established a monastic order, he consolidated the essential wisdom of the men whose shoulders he stood on and wrote a brief Rule, Lit. a “trellis”; a framework for those seeking to live together and pursue God. Who was this son? I am speaking of Benedict; the father of western monasticism and the various Benedictine monastic orders.

In the 58th chapter of the Rule of Benedict, Benedict set forth three vows that were required to enter into their community and way of corporate living together. The three vows were stability, on-going conversion of life, and obedience. These three vows are in stark contrast to the traditional clerical vows that would develop 600 years later when the Roman Catholic Church appeared on the scene. Most of us have heard of them: “poverty, chastity and obedience”. But how many of us have heard of this older vow of “stability” in place of the Roman Catholic vow of “chastity”? The prologue to the Rule of Benedict explains what the first vow of “stability” actually means: “Thus, never departing from His (Christ’s) school, but **persevering in the monastery according to His teaching until death**, we may by patience share in the sufferings of Christ and deserve to have a share also in His Kingdom.” This was a promise to stay in stable relationships within the cloistered walls of the monastery for life. It really was a “till death do us part” vow...the same vow Christians have traditionally made when entering into marriage. Stability is the commitment to “stay put” both within a monastery and within a marriage.

This vow of stability; this commitment to “stay put” is the central theme of this 7th Chapter of 1 Corinthians. Having dealt with the divisions and immorality reported to him by members of Chloe’s household, Paul now turns his attention to some specific questions brought to him by Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus (16:17). For the rest of this book Paul seeks to clarify their confusion about marriage, food offered to idols, instructions regarding public worship, the resurrection and others. Chapter 7 deals fundamentally with marriage and addresses questions regarding those already married; vocational concerns; advise to the unmarried, to parents and to widows. Paul’s central teaching to them all is simply this: “Stay Put”!

1. Instructions to the Married: Stay Put! (V. 1-16)

A. Christian Married to Christian: Stay Put! (V.1-11)

Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. 2But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. 3The husband

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should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. 5Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6I say this as a concession, not as a command. 7I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. 8Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. 9But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. 10To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 11But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.”

Here in v. 1 we see another “slogan” in use in Corinth. Paul dealt with three slogans back in chapter 6 which were not serving them well and this one is no exception. “It is good for a man not to touch a woman”. That was the slogan being bantered around. The NIV over translates this as “not to marry”, but the Greek is “to touch”, a euphemism for sexual relations. Apparently there were some within the church that were saying even married couples should abstain from sexual relations. Some of them appear to have been unilaterally abandoning their marital duties and were practicing celibacy; unilaterally taking a vow of chastity while married. Rather than leading to holiness this was actually contributing to the increase of immorality as the other partner then went outside of marriage for what they should have had within it. Pauls corrects them saying “stay put” in your marital duties to each other. Reciprocity between a husband and wife was their true duty not some self-assumed schismatic chastity. He does give them one exception as a concession, though not a command, provided three conditions were met: 1) Mutual Consent- both partners agreed; 2) Time Frame- both agreed to a specific time when it would end; 3) Prayer is The Goal- a concentrated focus of prayer, not a passive aggressive weapon. Paul was no ivory tower theologian. He knew people and he knew that lack of self-control was a real issue, particularly for the Corinthians, therefore he gave these instructions concluding with the assessment that it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

In v. 7 when Paul says he wished all men were as he was, he was not elevating singleness over marriage. He fully recognized that both states are “gifts” and each person has one gift or the other. What he was saying is that singleness is indeed a great and blessed state, and that he wished all could know the joy of it, not that it was the greater gift. The lack of recognition that not all men or women have the gift of celibacy, yet forcing a vow of chastity on all irrespective of their gift, has been a major contributing factor the child sexual abuse epidemic in parts of Christendom. We ignore God’s word and wisdom to our own peril and that of others.

In v. 10 -11 Paul says to the married, “Stay Put!” do not separate or divorce one another as believers. But if you do, you must remain unmarried or else be reconciled. He reminds them that this is the Lord’s command and not his own, referring back to Matthew 19:1-12. There Jesus was questioned about the lawfulness of divorce and answered unequivocally: “What God has joined together, let man not separate.” (Matt. 19:6) Jesus went on to declare that to divorce and marry another is to commit adultery (Matt. 19:9). The only exception was where one partner had been sexually unfaithful. Warren Wiersbe reminds us that “Since marriage is basically a physical relationship (“they shall be one flesh”- Gen. 2:24), it can only be broken by a physical cause. Adultery and death would be two such causes (1 Cor. 7:39).”¹

¹ Warren Wiersbe; *Be Wise- 1 Corinthians*; Victor Books; 1983; p. 78

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The prophet Malachi, in the last book of the OT expressed this same thought and the blocked life one experiences when God’s instructions are ignored. “You flood the LORD’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. 14 You ask, “Why?” It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. 15 Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? ***Because he was seeking godly offspring.*** So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. 16 ***“I hate divorce,”*** says the LORD God of Israel...” (Mal. 2:13-16).

To the married Christian couples, Paul says “Stay Put!”

B. Christian Married to an Unbeliever: Stay Put! (V. 12-16)

12To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”

In v. 12 when Paul says “I, not the Lord”, he is not saying that what he is about to say is uninspired compared to what he just wrote in v. 10 when he said “not I, but the Lord”. “In vv. 10-11 Paul is repeating in substance something already taught by the Lord (Matt. 19:3-9) but here in v. 12 he is dealing with a situation not covered by our Lord’s teaching. Instead of disclaiming inspiration for what he writes in v. 12, the apostle is actually claiming for his own words here the same authority as for the words of Christ Himself.”² This is the same meaning we’ll see later in v. 25 and 40.

You see in Corinth there were some unbelieving married couples where only one of them had come to faith. Apparently some had taken the view that the believer could or should divorce the unbeliever. Perhaps they took this view based on what Ezra had commanded the unfaithful returned exiles to do after they had married foreign women, namely to divorce themselves from their pagan wives. (Ezra. 10:11). But Paul makes it clear to the Corinthians and to us, that we are in a new dispensation and that the same principle applied to married Christians applies in this case: “Stay Put!” And he gives two reasons:

First, for the sanctification of the family and especially the children. We just read in Malachi that God hates divorce, ***“Because he was seeking godly offspring”***. It is a priority to God that children have parents; a Mom and a Dad...not same sex couples. It is God’s order that children have a home with a male father and a female mother, where if even one of them is a believer, there is a sanctifying environment for children to grow in the grace and knowledge of God.

And secondly, to be a channel of blessing that may lead the unbelieving spouse to faith in Christ. It’s important to recognize here that Paul is not saying that an unsaved spouse is saved because of their believing partner. Each individual must come to faith in Christ on their own. God has no grand children or step children, he only has His own children. The point is that a believing spouse has God’s

² Scofield Reference Bible; note at 1 Cor. 7:12

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blessing and that blessing overflows into the home and exerts a spiritual influence that can lead an unbelieving partner to faith. It is also critical to understand that Paul is not talking about a believer going out and marrying an unbeliever thinking they will surely be able to lead them to faith. This is dangerous presumption and is expressly forbidden in the Scriptures. Believers are not to be unequally yoked in marriage by choice.

As with married Christians there was one exception to this rule. If the unbeliever walked out, the believing spouse was under no obligation to chase them down. Paul says “If they go, let ‘em go. God has called us to live in peace.” Again, Paul is no arm chair theologian and he knows how hard and “un-peaceful” it can be to maintain such an unequal yoke, and he knows that God has called us to live in peaceful, joyful, Christ honouring relationships.

2. Instructions about Vocations: Stay Put! (V. 17-24) 17Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. 18Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. 19Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. 20Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. 21Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you--although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. 23You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.

Paul invokes the “Stay Put!” instruction three times (v. 17; 20; 24) in these few verses saying “Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him”.

You see some in Corinth apparently thought that now that they were Christians they had to change their vocations or calling. Some who were Jews thought they must abandon all their Jewishness and become Gentiles, while some Gentiles thought they must now go and get circumcised in their flesh and follow Jewish customs. But Paul tells them both “Stay Put!” You don’t have to do that. What really matters is whether or not you are obeying and bringing Christ into your vocational sphere, be it Jew or Gentile.

Others in Corinth who were slaves thought as believers they could or should *demand* their freedom from their Christian masters because of their new equality in Christ. But Paul in effect says “Hey, don’t think like that. There is actually a paradox in this equality in Christ: slaves are actually free and freedmen are actually slaves. So “stay put” and serve Christ where you are.”

Again, Paul makes a clarifying exception, saying to slaves “By all means, if you can gain your freedom do so. In fact, don’t ever become slaves of men. You belong to Christ who bought you with the price of His own blood. But in the meantime, and if you are unable to purchase your freedom, don’t let it trouble you. Every vocation can be a Christian service performed for the Lord.”

3. Instructions to the Unmarried: Stay Put! (V. 25-35) 25Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. 26Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. 27Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. 28But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in

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this life, and I want to spare you this. 29What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; 30those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; 31those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. 32I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs--how he can please the Lord. 33But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world--how he can please his wife-- 34and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world--how she can please her husband. 35I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.”

Paul has three discerning reasons and desires for why he instructs the unmarried to “Stay Put!”

First, is because of the “present crisis” v. 26. Given that there is no indication in this letter of the Corinthians suffering, in fact just the opposite, it is likely that Paul had in mind an unfolding crisis of persecution that he anticipated would shortly befall them. Whatever it was, he felt that it could be weathered more readily by the unmarried than by those with responsibilities for spouse and children. Paul’s desire was that they might be spared (v. 28) the many troubles that this life brings to married couples...even at the best of times.

Second, is because “the time is short” (v.29). Perhaps Paul had in mind the immanency of the Rapture, which is still imminent for you and me today...and is in fact much closer that it was in Paul’s day. Or perhaps Paul had in mind the brevity of human life or the shortness of time before the impending crisis hit them. Either way, time is short and Paul’s desire was that they might be “free from concern”. The Greek word used here for concern means to be pulled in different directions. There is an anxiety, care and concern that comes when we are pulled between legitimate needs of a spouse and our desire to be whole heartedly serving Christ with the short time we have. It’s not easy and can be very costly if we get the balance wrong. Even great Christian leaders in the past have fallen prey to being pulled in different directions. For “It is a fact of history that both John Wesley and George Whitfield would have been better off had they remained single- Wesley’s wife finally left him, and Whitfield travelled so much that his wife was often alone for long periods of time.”³

Paul’s third reason for the unmarried to “Stay Put!” was because “this world in its present form is passing away.” (v. 35) and his desire was for them to live “in undivided devotion to the Lord”. In other words, Paul wanted them to be able to live for eternal matters and be detached from this fallen and corrupt world’s values, institutions and greedy mammon spirit. He wanted them to be able to know the joy, which he knew as an unmarried man, of being wholly focused on storing up treasure in heaven and helping others do the same.

Paul makes it clear that if someone did marry, they were not sinning. But he did want them to know what they were giving up in exchange. This passage is the best pre-marriage counselling advice anyone could receive. If you are thinking about marriage, you will be blessed to plug this into your discernment and decision making process.

4. Instructions to Fathers: Stay Put! (V. 36-38) 36If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. 37But 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

³ Warren Wiersbe; *Be Wise- 1 Corinthians*; Victor Books; 1983; p. 82

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made up his mind not to marry the virgin--this man also does the right thing. 38 So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.

If you read the older NIV version from which I just read, I want to refer you to the footnote alternative reading of the bottom of your bible which should have this alternative text:

36 If anyone thinks he is not treating his daughter properly, and if she is getting along in years, and he feels she ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. He should let her get married. 37 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 to keep the virgin unmarried--this man also does the right thing. 38 So then, he who gives his virgin in marriage does right, but he who does not give her in marriage does even better.

The translation of this passage is difficult as the issue revolves around whether the indefinite pronoun **anyone** (v. 36) refers to a father or a prospective bridegroom. In this section the NIV translates two different Greek words “gameo” and “gamizo” as simply “to marry”. However, where these two verbs are used elsewhere in Scripture, gameo does mean to marry, but gamizo means “to give in marriage” and that is the word used here in v. 38. (See Matt. 24:38 – Noah’s day marrying and giving in marriage; Mark 12:25- Jesus teaching on neither marrying nor giving in marriage in the Resurrection). Therefore, I believe Paul was addressing fathers of unmarried daughters who were getting up in age and might have felt as if they were going to eclipse marital status and become spinsters unless they married soon.

The idea of it being a father’s call as to whether he gives his daughter in marriage or not may seem a little strange to our western culture and our day and age. But we must remember both the Jewish culture of many believers in Corinth as well as the great decision-making authority a father in the first century exercised regarding his family. ⁴ In fact, it is not so strange even today in many cultures. Even today in traditional Christian wedding ceremonies the question is asked, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” at which point the father answers “I do.”

But Paul gives three criteria here that, if they were met, a father should feel free to have his daughter “Stay Put” and not be given in marriage. First, he had to have a settled and firm conviction about the rightness of her remaining single; Second, he was to be under no compulsion, meaning compulsion from the evidence that his daughter was not able to remain single for any number of reasons. And thirdly, if he had control over his own will, meaning he wasn’t a slave in which case his master could determine her marital destiny. ⁵

But again, Paul makes it clear that if a father is not sinning if he felt his daughter ought to marry.

5. Instructions to Widows: Stay Put! (V. 39-40) 39 A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. 40 In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is--and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Finally, Paul addresses one more situation. That of widows. His judgement was that a widow would be happier if she “Stayed Put”, but at the end of the day she was free to marry anyone she wanted to with one caveat: The one she marries must be a believer. She is free to marry Lit. “In the Lord”,

⁴ David K. Lowry; *1 Corinthians; The Bible Knowledge Commentary- An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*; 1983; SP Publications (p.520)

⁵ *Ibid.*

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meaning both in the will of God and only another believer. Obviously this principle would apply to widowers as well.

We must remember that Paul was not trying to address every topic having to do with marriage in this one chapter, rather he has dealt with some specific questions the Corinthians had sent to him regarding marriage. It also goes without saying that, while the law of the land may have redefined marriage and corrupted it with immorality, what the sinful world calls same sex marriage and the kind of marriage that Paul has been speaking of have nothing in common whatsoever.

“God has put walls around marriage, not to make it a prison, but a safe fortress”⁶, and Benedict followed that lead by putting a wall around the cloister of the monastery. Both in marriage and in a monastery, it is the vow of “stability”; the promise to “Stay Put”, that is required to enter and thrive once there. True stability is the antithesis of passivity or stubborn immovability for it exists alongside two other vows that produce zeal and growth.

As we close this chapter let us come back to those three Benedictine vows of stability, ongoing conversion of life and obedience, for I believe they can help us all apply this chapter

How do we get hold of this “stability”; this “stay-puttedness” that Paul applied to each category in this chapter? Let me suggest two ways:

First, through the vow of ongoing conversion of life. That means whether single or married, we are always putting God first in our life and are following hard after him, not our fiancé, not our spouse or our self. It’s really simple geometry. Imagine a triangle. At the top is God and at the bottom two corners are you and your fiancé or spouse or others you are hoping to draw near to. If you both move towards God, the distance between you naturally becomes smaller and smaller. But if you aim directly at your fiancé, spouse or others, you will get no closer to God or each other, particularly if only one of you is really seeking God and ongoing conversion of life in Him. None of us has arrived yet and we never stop this process of inner growth and conformity...till death do us part.

Second, is through the vow of obedience. The English word obedience comes from the Latin word “obedere” (“ob”- to + “audire”- listen) which means to listen. And the Greek word for obedience is hupakouo (“hupo”- under + “akouo”- listen) which means to listen under. Thus, the vow of obedience is fundamentally then a promise to listen. That means listening to God and doing what he says, as well as listening to each other. To really listen to each other means that we must speak to one another and do so from the honest core and reality of our being. One of the surest ways to put a stick in the spokes of stability in your relationships is to be fake; to be “nice” while being fundamentally dishonest in your communication with each other. It is impossible to “listen” to that, for in reality nothing is actually being said. To not bring our true selves into relationships is to thwart the listening process, and that by definition is not obedience, but disobedience. This is one of the fundamental causes of much marital strife and church dis-unity

But when ongoing conversion of life and obedience are our true priorities, then the “till death do us part” quality of stability will naturally flourish in our marriages; in our singleness; and in our communities...all to the glory of God.

Take some time this week and ask God to help you take a fresh assessment of your level of stability.

Let’s pray...

⁶ Warren Wiersbe; *Be Wise- 1 Corinthians*; Victor Books; 1983; p. 84