

Take-Aways for Small Group Leaders to Consider

1 Corinthians 7:1-24 can be confusing and has been misunderstood and misinterpreted over the years. However, it can provide great insight when studied in its cultural context and with Paul's original intentions in mind. Note that for this study, I relied almost solely on Richard Hays' commentary, *Interpretation Series: First Corinthians* because it was so helpful and thorough.

Try not to let the group dwell too long on the analysis questions. With these questions, I'm trying to establish the general outline of the passage (see below)—so stay focused on basic observations here. Because of the nature of these verses, it might be easy for the group to get stuck in the analysis section and start debating some tricky verses. Keep moving forward through the study for contextual information and thought provoking questions.

General outline of 1 Corinthians 7:1-24

- Guidance to married couples: (1) Sexual relations (v. 1-7) and (2) Divorce (v. 10-16)
- Guidance to widowers/widows (v. 8-9)
- General rule: live the life the Lord has given to you (v. 17-24):
 - Explanatory analogies: (1) circumcision/uncircumcision and (2) slavery/freedom

Consider the positioning of these verses within the book of 1 Corinthians:

- Richard Hays writes “it is striking that Paul takes up the Corinthians’ concerns about sexuality and marriage only after writing the lengthy discussion of chapters 1-6, in which he calls for unity, reasserts his authority, forcefully scolds the community and calls them to new standards of holiness and community discipline...He addresses their questions only after carefully rebuilding the foundation upon which he believes answers must be based.” (this will help with Analysis question #1)

Mutual Submission in marriage (this quote refers to 1 Cor 7:4):

“The marriage partners are neither placed in a hierarchical relation with one over the other nor set apart as autonomous units each doing what he or she pleases. Instead, the relationship of marriage is one of *mutual submission*, each partner having authority over the other.” – Richard Hays

Slavery

The slavery analogy can be particularly hard to digest. Here Hays notes a distinction between slavery during Paul's era and how we as Americans view slavery as a result of our country's history:

“...we must consider what is known about ancient slavery and observe how Paul is using the illustration in his argument. First, slavery in the ancient Greco-Roman world was a pervasive institution, but it was not invariably perceived as oppressive...slavery provided for many people not only economic security but also upward social mobility. To be the slave of a powerful master could be an honorable station, and slaves were sometimes highly educated and entrusted with major administrative responsibility...[Paul's] point is to reassure his readers that they should not be troubled about their present social location and that they should not be troubled about their present social location and that they should focus their attention on serving God, wherever they stand in the social order.”

It goes without saying that slavery as we know it (and some know it still today) is totally antithetical to all that Jesus stands for. Though Paul's analogy may have been helpful to Corinthians at the time he was writing, it has been misinterpreted with tragic consequences and has been twisted by some Christians to justify an evil institution.

SUMMARY AND REVIEW

1. Take 3-5 minutes to discuss last week's sermon.

INTRO TO THE TEXT:

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul pivots from the tone and topics of the first seven chapters to address questions the Corinthians have presumably brought to him through a letter. Verses 1-24 focus on sex, marriage and divorce. By examining the passage in its cultural context, and by keeping Paul's overall thesis in mind, we can learn much through his profound commentary on these topics.

READ 1 Corinthians 7:1-24

ANALYZE THE TEXT

1. Think back on 1 Corinthians 1-6. What are the overarching themes in these first chapters? Why might Paul wait until this point in the book to address the specific questions that the Corinthians are asking him (see 7:1)?
2. There are two overarching directives to married couples in this passage—(1) verses 1-7, and (2) verses 10-16. What are these two directives?
3. Considering the first directive, what do you make of verses 3-4? Why would these verses have been considered revolutionary for the time?
4. Paul addresses the widows and widowers in verses 8-9. What is his advice to this group?
5. What do you make of Paul's exhortation in verses 17 and 24?
6. What two analogies does Paul employ to help explain this imperative (v. 18-23)?

A FEW THINGS TO CONSIDER

In verses 1-7, Paul exhorts married couples *not* to abstain from having sexual relations with one another. The need to clarify this issue for the Corinthians may seem silly to us today; yet, during the time of this letter at least two notions were at play: (1) A negative association of sex with "fleshly" desires and the need to reject it to achieve holiness, and (2) asceticism within and outside of the church that associated sexual purity with wisdom. By encouraging married couples to continue sexual relations, Paul rejects these ideas, implying that sex within marriage is good. He

goes further to explain that husbands' and wives' bodies are under the authority of the other. This concept of mutual submission shows up throughout this passage in the symmetry with which Paul refers to the husband-wife/men-women (7:3, 4, 12-13, 14, 16).

Paul speaks to the singles and widows next, declaring their single status as "good" and even desirable. If they, however, have a strong desire for physical intimacy, he or she should marry/remarry.

Commentator Richard Hays emphasizes that this qualifier is once again indicative of Paul's more open stance on these issues, as the ascetic faction of the Church would have forbidden remarriage.

Paul also addresses those married to unbelievers, encouraging them to stay with their unbelieving spouse, so long as the unbeliever is willing. This is a bold stance because it rejects the assumption that a holy person is made impure through contact with an unbeliever or unclean person.

Finally, Paul exhorts all Christians to "lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him." Using the analogies of slavery and circumcision, he illustrates that a relationship with God transcends our earthly labels and identities—married, single, widowed. Paul shows that these so-called barriers to holiness (i.e., marriage to unbelievers, sexuality, marriage after being widowed) *are not incongruent* with a God-centered life. God, through Christ, draws near to all people, married, widowed, singled, divorced. No identity or label can separate us from his love.

APPLY

1. How do you feel about the concept of mutual submission in marriage? Explain.
2. In his discussion of verses 13-16, Hays asserts "*Holiness is, as it were, contagious. This extraordinary affirmation declares the power of God to work through the believer to claim and transform the spouse and children.*" How have you seen holiness be "contagious"?
3. What roles would you say have defined you over time? How has God met you in various roles, stages and situations?

MEMORIZE "*Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.*"
1 Corinthians 7:17