

## I. Paul and the Three Legged Stool

### A. The Three-Legged Stool

1. Wise man - “The Christian life is a three-legged stool. The legs are doctrine [essential Truth about God, creation, and the relationship between them], experience, and practice (that is, obedience), and you will not stay upright unless all three are there.”
2. As Paul turns his attention to the questions raised by the Corinthians regarding marriage, divorce, and other intimate relationships, he reminds them of doctrine, guides their experience, and urges their obedience.
3. We do well to keep in mind that the Holy Spirit who inspired Paul to set down this word of God, does the same for us:
  - a. teaches us doctrine,
  - b. guides our experience,
  - c. and expects our obedience to the knowledge and understanding He will give us through this word.

### B. The Interpretive Opportunity in 1 Corinthians 7:6-9

1. These verses present some interpretive opportunities that I would like to get to quickly.
  - a. As I mentioned to you last week, ancient Greek was written in all capital/upper case letters without spacing between the words and with little punctuation.
  - b. Fluency in day to day usage was required to read Greek. Because no one is culturally fluent in ancient Greek these days, every translation attempt requires a degree of interpretation:
    - (1) what do these words mean in their original context
    - (2) and how do we express the same thing for English language speakers.
2. I choose to preach from the English Standard Translation.
  - a. Others of you choose other translations.
  - b. They are all reliable witnesses to God’s revelatory intent.
  - c. But sometimes, different translations committees resolve different interpretive opportunities differently than one another, and our passage today presents one of those opportunities.

## II. The Two Interpretive Questions of 1 Corinthians 7:6-9

### 1 Corinthians 7:6-9 (ESV)

<sup>6</sup>Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. <sup>7</sup>I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

<sup>8</sup>To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. <sup>9</sup>But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

- ### A. Question #1: To what does Paul refer as a “concession,” what he has already written or what he is about to write? What precedes or what follows?

1. First, a concession is something that Paul is allowing, or permitting, and suggests that there is some aspect of this discussion where he and the Corinthians are of the same mind. But upon what do they agree?
  - a. We know for certain that verse 10 begins a command and not a concession.
    - (1) What Paul has to say about divorce and remarriage comes directly from the Lord Jesus and should be understood as primary doctrine: essential, basic teaching straight from Jesus Himself.
    - (2) So, whatever Paul means to call a concession, it is found somewhere in verses 1-9.
  - b. Potential Concession
    - (1) Is Paul conceding that it's okay for married people to have intimate relations at all once they become Christians because celibacy is better spiritually?
    - (2) Is Paul conceding with the Corinthians that married people may occasionally abstain from intimate relations, but only for the purpose of prayer and devotion?
    - (3) Is Paul's following expression of his own celibate condition the concession to the attitude of celibacy questioned by the Corinthians?
      - (a) When Paul writes, "I wish that all were as I myself am," is Paul conceding the benefit of celibacy while upholding the primacy/priority of intimacy in marriage?
      - (b) Is Paul teaching that intimate relations within marriage is good for those who are married AND celibacy is good for those who are not married, so that Christians are equally free to be fully married or fully single based on the calling and gifting of God?
  - c. **I believe Paul supports the God-glorifying role of marriage and intimacy in marriage for all those who choose marriage, but as he considers his own personal experience, he cannot deny the advantages to the work of the kingdom that celibacy supports.**
2. So, I'm saying that Paul is consistent in his teaching here.
  - a. The Corinthians have raised a question about whether celibacy, refraining from sexual relations even in marriage, is how Christians should conduct themselves as a matter of their newfound spirituality.
  - b. Paul upholds God's creation command: "Be fruitful and multiply."
  - c. He directs them to be faithful to their marriages and to remain faithful within their marriages, faithful to the emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of their spouses as a means for honoring God.
  - d. Her does not negate that advice in the next sentence.
3. That means, I think, that the end of verse 6 should not be a period, but a colon.
  - a. What follows verse 6, in verses 7-9, is the concession where Paul concedes to some favorable aspect of the Corinthians original question.
    - (1) In response to your way of thinking, my dear Corinthians, I

concede this: “I wish that all were as I myself am.”

(2) As I teach you to honor your marriage vows before the Lord, I am not ignoring my own experience, and I concede that I think my experience is also a good thing.

b. So, we need to ask at least two more questions:

(1) What does Paul mean by “I wish that all were as I am?” and

(2) What does he mean by “each has his own gift from God?”

## B. Question #2 What does Paul mean by “I wish that all were as I am?”

1. Context

a. Context determines (“wish”) that his interest is in a non-essential.

b. If this were a doctrinal essential he would command, not wish.

(1) **1 Corinthians 7:10 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband

(2) **1 Corinthians 7:25 (ESV)** <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.

2. Does this mean Paul was a single person?

a. If Paul concedes the benefits of celibacy based on his current condition, then Paul must have been single and be referring to his singleness, otherwise he would be refuting the advice he had just written.

(1) He has just instructed the Christians to remain faithful to one another, to love one another, in their marriages.

(2) Is he now going to say, “Do what I say, not what I do”? Of course not.

b. The Implications

(1) The implication is not that Paul is ignoring his own wife, practicing celibacy within his marriage.

(2) The implication is that Paul is not married (and not practicing sex outside of marriage!)

(3) **If Paul is not married, then that presents an interpretive opportunity we need to pay attention to.**

c. Internal NT Evidence for Paul’s Status

(1) We have to try and understand Paul’s relationship status from several verses in the New Testament and what we know of their cultural background.

(2) The first are these verses here in chapter 7, where Paul asserts as a concession to the Corinthians the benefit of celibacy based on his own current condition.

(a) He writes, “I wish that all were as I myself am,”

(b) and then in verse 8, advising the unmarried and widows, he writes, “I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.”

(3) The Interpretive Problem: The Greek text of v. 8 does not include the word “single.”

(a) It simply reads, “I say that it is good for them to remain . . .

as I am.”

- (b) So, the nearest contextual clue to what Paul means is in the phrase that identifies to whom he is speaking: “To the unmarried and the widows.”
  - i) We know that widows are woman who were once married whose husbands have died.
  - ii) But who are the “unmarried?”
    - a) Typically we understand that to be the category of people not currently married, including widows (but that would be redundant), divorced persons, and those who have never married.
    - b) So, if the unmarried are to remain as Paul is, their status being equal to his, what is his status?
  - iii) What is Paul’s Status
    - a) Is he a widow? No. He’s not a woman. And we’re not just splitting hairs here. Widows are specifically mentioned. There is a Greek word for “widower” and it is never used in the in the form of Greek used the New Testament, not only in the NT but anywhere else.
    - b) Is Paul divorced? Given what we know of Paul, his history and his teaching, not likely.
    - c) So, that leaves us one last possibility: has Paul never been married? Is that how he relates to the unmarried?
- (4) In order to answer that question we need to take into account another verse regarding Paul’s marital status:
  - (a) **Acts 26:10 (ESV) <sup>10</sup> And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.**
  - (b) Paul recounts here his participation in the persecution of Christians as a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council.
  - (c) We know from historical documentation that any voting member of the Sanhedrin was required to be married.
- (5) The third verse we have to consider is **1 Corinthians 9:5 (ESV) <sup>5</sup> Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?**
  - (a) What we get from this verse is that while other leaders in the church, including Peter, travel and minister with their wives, Paul does not travel or minister with a wife at his

- side.
    - (b) This does not tell us that Paul does not have a wife, nor does it tell us what Paul thinks about marriage, other than that church leaders are entitled to be married.
    - (c) It simply tells us that no woman accompanies Paul as his wife.
  - 3. So, Paul says, “It is good for them to remain as I am,” but what does he mean?
    - a. It is most likely that Paul had been married at one time, but at the time of his writing to the Corinthians he is not married.
      - (1) The explanation probably lies in the word “unmarried” in 7:8 and the fact that the word for “widower” is never used anywhere, in the New Testament or not, within the Koine Greek the NT is written in.
        - (a) “Widow” is a word loaded with cultural stigma because of the status of women and widows in the ancient patriarchal world.
        - (b) So, to avoid the stigma, which widowers don’t have anyway, Koine Greek uses the term “unmarried” for men whose wives have died and they have not remarried.
      - (2) Paul probably was once married but his wife has died and now he remains single, focused on the ministry of the gospel.
    - b. And it is that life experience, single under the providence of God and devoted to the expansion of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD in all the earth that you underlies a great deal of the doctrine Paul calls the church to practice in regards to marriage, celibacy, and singleness.
    - c. **Paul, the unmarried apostle of Jesus Christ for the glory of God upholds the intent of God to glorify Himself in the marriage relationship and also upholds the possibility that God will powerfully glorify Himself in the lives of unmarried people who devote themselves to Him and to His calling.**

### III. The Connection

- A. Do you ever stop to pose this question to yourself, “I wish that all were as I am?”**
  - 1. Is your life condition so full of Jesus, so full of grace and mercy and truth and worship and faithfulness, that you could honestly say, “I wish that all were as I am?”
  - 2. Is your life so in tune with Christ, is your heart so satisfied with Jesus, is your mind so content with God’s word, is your spirit so filled with newness of life in the Holy Spirit that the best wish you could have for others is that they were as you are?
- B. If not, why not?**
  - 1. Could it be that you are like one of the soils in Jesus parable?
  - 2. The Soils
    - a. Packed soil requires a sharp plow blade.
      - (1) Maybe you need to turn off the television, put down your phone, pull the earbuds out of your ears, pick up God’s word and read

- until your heart is tender toward him once again.
- (2) Two things contribute to hardness of heart: prayerlessness and wordlessness.
    - (a) The psalmist wrote, “Thy word have I hidden in my heart that I might not sin against Thee.”
    - (b) God’s word in the heart protects us from the devil’s hooks in our hearts, and yet many Christians seldom read their Bibles today and even fewer spend any appreciable time in daily prayer.
    - (c) We can find time for all kinds of activities but we find so little time for the only activities that have eternal benefit in the here and now.
  - (3) **Perhaps, if you would not wish your current condition on others on others, you need to open the door of your heart and let God back in to your current condition.**
- b. Rocky soil requires a deep rock picker.
- (1) Walls in New England built from the stones removed from the fields.
  - (2) **Maybe its time to remove some personal, social, spiritual, and theological boulders that are preventing you from going deep with Jesus.**
    - (a) Boulder = “I’m saved. I believe in God. That’s all I need.”
    - (b) Remember, God didn’t create you or save you for your good.
      - i) He created you and saved you to fill the earth with the knowledge of his glory.
      - ii) He bought you with the precious blood of Jesus for his good, for his glory, not yours.
  - (3) Are there some boulders in your heart that keep you from developing spiritual depth?
  - (4) It might be time to break out the backhoe and do some digging in your soul.
- c. Weedy soil requires a hoe and a pair of gloves.
- (1) Grass in the junipers on the rock wall.
  - (2) Get close in and hands on.
  - (3) **Maybe you need to stop serving yourself and start serving others as Jesus did.**

### C. Conclusion

1. **Paul offered himself without reservation as an example of a satisfied, content, happy servant of God and his kingdom because he knew in his heart all was right with God, and that in whatever place God had him, or whatever condition prevailed in his life, he knew who he belonged to and what he was there for.**
2. Do you know who you belong to and why you are here?
  - a. Seek God and know.
  - b. Trust God and grow.
  - c. Serve God and glow: “I wish that all were as I am.”