

## Is It Better Not to Marry? (1 Corinthians 7:36)

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**Question:** “1 Corinthians 7:36. Please explain this verse. It has always confused me.”

**Answer:** The verse in question states, “But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of her youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes; he does not sin; let them marry.” **Chapter 7** deals with various questions concerning marriage that had been presented to Paul, and this verse is part of Paul’s instructions for how men should treat their virgin daughters; should they allow them to marry or not?

The key to understanding this verse, and all of **chapter 7**, is found in **vs. 26**: “I suppose therefore that this is good *because of the present distress* – that it is good for a man to remain as he is” (emphasis mine, JC). The institution of marriage is from the beginning when God saw that “it is not good that man should be alone,” **Genesis 2:18**. In response to man’s need, God created woman and the marriage relationship was established. Paul would later warn Timothy of those who would forbid others to marry, **1 Timothy 4:1-3**. If marriage is instituted by God for man’s good, why would Paul make statements in **1 Corinthians 7** that make it seem as though it would be better for men and women not to marry? Paul states in **vs. 26** that it was “because of the present distress”. We are not told what the “present distress” was, but it implies that persecution had arisen against the church. Since the founding of the church, the saints have been persecuted by Satan and his followers, so it should not surprise us to hear that the church in Corinth was also experiencing persecution. Whether this persecution was localized in Corinth or part of a broader persecution, we are not told. Paul’s message to the Corinthians was that since they were being persecuted, it would be better for them to remain unmarried, unless they could not control their desires or passions, **vs. 2**. Paul was not forbidding marriage or, as the Catholics teach, stating that celibacy was more honorable than marriage. Rather, Paul was informing these saints that because of the persecution they were facing, being married and having a family would make the temptation to forsake Christ in the face of persecution, all the more difficult to resist.

Now, back to the verse in question. During the first-century, the world was still a patriarchal society, where the father exercised complete control over the family, including making the decisions of whether his daughters would marry, and whom they would marry. The saints in Corinth, some of them having daughters, needed to know whether they would be committing sin by allowing their daughters to marry, in light of the “present distress”. Paul’s message was that they would not be committing sin, although if possible they should keep their virgin daughters from marrying, again because of the “present distress”. Thus, Paul could say in **vs. 36**, “But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of her youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes; he does not sin; let them marry.” Also, in **vs. 38**, “So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better.”