

His Virgin?

Some time ago , I received a brief question by e-mail from a man named Ned. Here is what he asked:

Could you please explain the fullness of meaning in I Corinthians 7:36-38?

In this article, then let us answer Ned's question.

First of all, let us read the whole scripture; then we will go through each verse in detail:

But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better. (I Corinthians 7:36-38)

Was the apostle Paul a male-chauvinist? Was he here giving Christian men the go-ahead to make improper demands on young women? Even ones to whom they were not married?

Context

One of the first rules of effective Bible study is to examine the context. And the context of these three verses is that of Christian marriage – especially whether or not Christians should marry in periods of trouble, persecution or difficult circumstances – as apparently was the case in Corinth during time that Paul wrote this letter.

Paul had previously written that, under difficult and dangerous circumstances of that day and that area, it was advisable to avoid marriage:

I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is. (I Corinthians 7:26)

Things may have been so bad that Paul and his brethren there might have thought that the end-times had arrived:

But this I say, brethren, the time is short... And those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away. (Verses 29 and 31)

Paul clarified these statements, adding that, if a couple's love and desire for each other was so very great, then they certainly *should* marry, in order to avoid any possibility of fornication.

But Paul also pointed out the benefits of remaining single; for example, an unmarried person is able to dedicate more of his or her time to the worship of God and service to the church. Please keep these factors in mind as we look thru these verses.

Verse 36

But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. (Verse 36)

The opening word "but" shows that this verse is not introducing a new topic of discussion. Rather, it is linked to a previously stated idea – an idea that we have already seen as discussing the pros and cons of marriage in times of trouble.

In this verse, Paul mentions, “his virgin”? This begs the question, “Whose virgin?” We will see as we continue.

The word “virgin” is mentioned five times in this epistle; all mentions being in chapter 7.

The sub-topic on the specific subject of virgins begins in verse 28:

But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you.

My Greek lexicon tells me that the English word “virgin” is translated here from Greek word *parthenos* which can refer *generally* to a young woman, a marriageable maiden, or a person’s marriageable daughter; and more *specifically* to a woman who has never had sexual intercourse with a man, a man who has never had sexual intercourse with a woman, or a man or woman who has abstained from uncleanness, whoredom or idolatry, and so has kept his or her chastity.

Bible commentators differ on the correct application of the phrase “his virgin” in the context of verses 36 to 38. There seem to be two main opinions:

The less probable view is as advice to young men who are engaged to be married to young women, but are behaving improperly by deferring marriage for unsound or selfish reasons, taking their fiancées for granted, or expecting certain “benefits” from their fiancées which should properly be reserved until after their marriage.

The most probable view (as seen by a study of verse 38) is God's advice to the fathers of their unmarried daughters. The fathers' potentially improper behaviour would be that they (the fathers) forbidding their daughters to marry – specifically daughters who are approaching the age when young women of that time and culture would normally be expected to be married – hence the phrase “past flower of youth” in verse 36.

But what this verse emphatically does *not* mean is that God through Paul is giving any man justification to behave improperly toward his daughter, fiancée, girlfriend, or any woman by selfishly “doing what he wishes” against her, to her, with her, or with her future.

In my time in God's church, I have witnessed church men treating their girlfriends disrespectfully – bossing them around in a manner that is even improper for a husband to behave towards his wife. This is wrong! It is sin! And it is unbiblical! The apostle Paul, his Master, Jesus Christ, God the Father and their holy Word in the Bible all teach respect for all!

Verse 37

Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. (Verse 37)

If the father of an unmarried daughter is a loving, concerned parent, but is adamant that he will not permit her to marry because of the troubled times and circumstances, or because of the potential husband' poor character, he is of course making the right decision – and is not acting selfishly – e.g. because he does not wish to lose her services in his home, this is the kind of thing being referred to as “having no necessity.”

With the words “has power over his own will,” Paul is *not* giving unreasonable power to the girl's father or suitor to mistreat her or to improperly force or prevent marriage for selfish reasons.

Verse 38

So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better. (Verse 38)

With the words “gives her in marriage” or “does not give her in marriage,” here we see again that the first possible scenario mentioned above – i.e. the “father of the young woman” scenario, is the most feasible of the two possibilities.

Paul is saying that even though he previously (in verse 36) had acknowledged a fathers’ freedom to decide either way because of the dangerous conditions of that day and place, or because of the poor character or the potential spouse, the wiser choice of a truly loving father would prevent his daughter from marrying rather than allowing her to marry.

Is the application of this scripture totally outdated in our day and age? Suitors still sometimes ask fathers for their daughter’s hand in marriage. Perhaps they do so merely as a nice old custom – asking for the father’s approval and blessing. But if the girl is of age, they can legally ignore the father’s wishes.

But less than a hundred years ago in many countries, fathers had the real power to say yes or no.

Perhaps in many cases it was a good rule, and one that might perhaps be reinstated in the World Tomorrow in order to protect young women from an inferior husband and marriage.

The lesson for our day is that it is a sin to disrespect women or take them for granted, and more specifically those who might be young and/or vulnerable. All women are worthy of respect.

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