

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 32

Studying the Original Languages of the Bible: Word Study Techniques, Part 1 (Part 3 of 4-part series)

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Teacher: Dr. Michael S. Heiser (MH)

Summary

Today we're continuing with our series on Bible study at the word level. Last time we talked about exegetical fallacies that arise from flawed word study methods. In this episode, I want to transition to some important elements that go into word study. Today we'll primarily be focused on examining a word as it's used by a single author throughout the material that author wrote – in this case the apostle Paul. But the word I've chosen for our focus also means that we'll be getting into the issue of a word's distribution across a corpus – in this case, obviously, the New Testament. Since this example is so restrictive – since my primary interest in this episode is a single author's use – I'll probably return to word distribution when doing word studies in a future episode.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast.

Today I'm going to continue with our series on Bible study at the word level. Last time we talked about exegetical fallacies that arise from flawed word study methods. In this episode, though, I wanted to transition to some important elements that go into word study—something positive that you *want* to do.

Today will primarily be focused on examining a word as it's used by a single author throughout the material that the author wrote—in this case the Apostle Paul. But the word I've chosen for our focus also means that we'll be getting into the issue of a word's distribution across a corpus—in this case, obviously, the New Testament. Since this example that I've picked is so restrictive (since my primary interest in this episode is a single author's use, as opposed to a wider distribution), I'll probably return to word distribution when doing word studies in a future episode. But let's just jump into what we want to cover today.

I want to get started by turning to 1 Corinthians 7. During the course of the podcast that follows as we go on here, I'll be talking about specific words in 1 Corinthians 7. I've reproduced the important sections of the chapter on the podcast website (Episode 32). I have certain words colored and marked for reasons that I'll indicate as we proceed here. You can reference that material as you listen, or go back and

look at it afterwards. I'll also mention certain Greek lexicons. Those are specialized dictionaries that cover a certain corpus in a language—in this case, the New Testament and some of the eras that are related to the New Testament. There are links to those tools that I'll mention under Episode 32 at the Bibliography tab on the podcast website.

So without further ado, let's jump into 1 Corinthians 7. You've probably read this chapter before. It's a controversial chapter. Paul is dealing with marriage and divorce and remarriage and betrothal and all these different things about sexual and marital relationships. In the first seven or eight verses, he basically gets warmed up and recommends marriage to avoid sexual immorality and so on. Verse 8 is where I want to jump in. Paul says (in the ESV):

⁸To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.⁹But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry.

Notice that he just said they should marry. He's recommending that two groups marry if they can't remain single because of sexual temptation. The two groups were the unmarried and the widows. We'll come back to that in a moment. He says:

For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

¹² To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

That's a whole separate issue, what Paul is talking about there. He's not talking about salvation, but let's move on.

¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

What I want to focus on here is the word "unmarried." It occurred two times in that section I just read, and if you're looking at the section there on the website, I have

them colored in red. "To the unmarried and widows I say," and then Paul talks about the woman who has separated or divorced from her husband and that she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. It's interesting... How do we define "unmarried?" What does that mean? It occurs two times here, and it's actually only going to occur four times in the entire New Testament. Guess what? We've seen two of them here. The other two occurrences are also in this chapter. If we go down to verses 32 through 34 we get the other two occurrences. Let me just pick them up for you. Paul says:

³²I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. ³³But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit.

So there are your other two occurrences of "unmarried." What this means is that the word "unmarried" occurs four times in the entire New Testament, all of them in this chapter and, therefore, all of them are used by the apostle Paul. It's not found anywhere else. I'm going to suggest to you that we should allow Paul (since he's the one who uses it and it's used only here) to tell us how to understand the range of meanings that he would have in his mind for the word "unmarried"—for what constitutes an unmarried person.

If we look this up in a Greek lexicon (the Greek lemma here is *agamos*) like Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich's [Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (BDAG, as it's called by users and those of us in the field), or maybe in Liddell-Scott's [An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon: Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon](#) (which covers more historical eras than just the New Testament and early Christian literature), we would discover that *agamos* (unmarried) is used by Greek writers in all different periods for all the expected states of being spouseless. At the heart of it, that's what "unmarried" means. "I am in a state of not having a spouse." Whatever constitutes that or led to that state isn't the issue, but if you are in the state of being where you do not have a spouse, you are by definition "unmarried."

Now "unmarried" can mean several things. It can mean that you've never been married at all ever before in your life, with or without having a virginal status or not. The virgin, in fact, is covered by a different term that's actually used in this chapter, as well (*parthenos*). But if you're a virgin (you've never been sexually active and therefore you've never been married), you would be *agameo*—unmarried. But you could be unmarried if you had been married before and are now in the state of being spouseless. That would cover people like those who have been divorced or those who are widowed or widowers, and it would also cover a situation where you were married but your spouse has deserted you or abandoned you—just left you. That is implied in this chapter in the sections we just read, although the vocabulary

that Paul uses for separating is used elsewhere within and without the New Testament for divorce.

10:00

I'm just casting a wide net here because the Greco-Roman culture is the cultural time of the New Testament. It's the culture in which Paul was writing and the culture in which the people who are receiving Paul's letter are living. We can't assume that the ancient culture had the same sort of legal categories that our culture does (and, in fact, it didn't). We have a category called "separated" that isn't actually divorced. We make that distinction, but Paul is dealing with a separation—a forsaking and abandoning for whatever reason, including an unequal marriage in terms of spiritual status (Christian and non-Christian), where he's saying in the passage we just read that this could happen. Your spouse could just leave you because you're a believer. And if that happens, you let them go, but you're not enslaved to that person. It's one of those things where it's kind of the same and kind of different, as well—two sides of that coin. We can't assume the same categorizations. What Paul is dealing with when he talks about separation of partners is really a practical divorce. It is something that results in a permanent condition, whether it would have the legal standing or not, and whether we would be able to match it with some of the legalese that we use today. It's a practical divorce situation.

So what does all that mean? Why does it all matter? How is it that this is the centerpiece of what we want to talk about on the podcast today? Well, it's important to correctly interpret what an author is saying—to know how he's using a term (what is included and what can be excluded). In some cases, it's not easy to determine what could be included or excluded, but here, Paul is the only person who uses this term and he actually describes certain conditions that help us determine what "unmarried" could mean.

Let's go back to verse 8. Paul says:

⁸To the unmarried and the widows I say...

Now right there, this tells you that when Paul uses the word "unmarried," most likely the people who would be spouseless there are not including widows or widowers because he follows up "unmarried" with the very term "widows." So we have widows and we know what they are (their spouse has died)—or a widower, obviously. So that means that "unmarried" could include any of those other circumstances, as well (never been married, divorced, a practical divorce through desertion or separation). So Paul is speaking to different groups here.

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

He follows that in verse 10:

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband...

Don't leave your husband; don't divorce your husband. Now, the word there is *chorizo*, which means to create a division or separation (hence, the translation "separation"). In the colored material, I've colored this green with an underline under it. *Chorizo* is green with the underline. You'll notice there are other green terms. Paul continues in verse 11 about this person that shouldn't separate from her husband. "I'm recommending not to separate, but if she does"—if there is a separation (a practical divorce or desertion here):

¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

"Divorce" is another green term. This is a different term. It's *aphiemi*, "to release" or "let go" or just get rid of, that kind of thing. It's standard divorce language. I've colored both of these terms in green because, if you'll notice in 1 Corinthians 7:8-15, they are used interchangeably. In other words, they're not strict legal categories or distinctions in and of themselves. They are used interchangeably for (and including) the situation where an unbelieving spouse deserts or abandons (in practical terms "divorces") the believing member of the marriage. So they're used interchangeably. Paul is clearly including divorce.

Here's the issue: There's a lot of controversy about divorce and remarriage... can a divorced person get remarried, and all that sort of thing. Usually it's on the basis of discussion of the Gospels in Matthew 19. I'll get back to Matthew 19 in a moment, but here we are in 1 Corinthians 7 and Paul clearly includes (both by context and also the semantic range of the word meaning—and he's the only one who uses it, so we can't go outside and get other information, at least in the New Testament)... he includes people who could be divorced in his discussion of the state of being spouseless/unmarried.

15:00

In verse 11, he recommends that the unmarried person be reconciled to their spouse. That's obviously his optimal choice. If she does separate, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled with her husband—that's what Paul recommends. But in verse 8 he had said to the unmarried and the widows that if you can't overcome sexual temptation, then you *should* marry. I would say it this way: There's no way to approach this section of scripture and legitimately say that Paul could not have had divorced people in mind when he recommends that the unmarried should marry if they can't avoid sexual temptation. I don't know how you would be able to deliberately and cleanly separate or distinguish or eliminate that possible meaning for "unmarried" from this passage. And it's important because we have situations, just like Paul did, where you have divorced people in the church wondering if they can get remarried or not. What does the Bible say? Well, I would

say there is really no legitimate way to exclude divorced people from Paul's discussion here.

If we go down, in fact, to the other two occurrences of "unmarried," they're very generic. They're talking about the state of being spouseless, and if you're single you'll be thinking more about the things of the Lord, and if you're married you'll get distracted because you have a wife or a spouse to please, and all that sort of thing. We can see here in verse 34 that Paul addresses the unmarried and the betrothed woman. It creates the distinct possibility (I would say the likelihood) that here "unmarried" is being set off from the betrothed virgin. So earlier in the chapter, Paul's use of the term "unmarried" told us that it could be distinct from someone who was widowed or a widower, and here it could be distinct from someone who's a virgin. The word "betrothed" here in verse 34 is *parthenos* (the word for virgin).

Again, we have clear indications that when Paul uses the word "unmarried," it's very likely that he is including in that word the idea that you are spouseless because you've been divorced formally or you've been divorced practically (your spouse has abandoned or deserted you). How would we look at the four occurrences of "unmarried" in this chapter and be able to exclude divorced people from what Paul says? Because Paul clearly says in verse 8, "If you can't contain yourselves, you should get married." In fact, if you go to verse 27 and 28, listen to what Paul says here:

²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

Are you married? Don't try to get out of the marriage. Are you unmarried? The context here, as he says in verse 28, is that there are worldly troubles, and he alluded to the "present distress" earlier. There's some sort of situation that most scholars think is persecution in which Paul is recommending that they stay as they are and not get married and have kids because of the suffering and all that sort of thing. And that gets into what the Roman persecutors would do to Christian wives and children (especially daughters). It was a serious thing. They could do horrific things to them. So Paul is just sort of recommending that everybody stay where they're at. But he says, "Look, if you're bound to a wife, don't try to get out of the marriage. If you're free from a wife, my advice is don't seek to get married." And verse 28:

²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.

There's that word "betrothed" again. It's *parthenos*—a virgin. So he's talking to two broad categories of people who are unmarried. One of them is virgins, so that means the others who are in the state of being spouseless, if they do marry they have not sinned. You see what we're saying here? What we're angling for here is if we're going to be talking about the legitimacy of remarriage in Church (this question), we must go to 1 Corinthians 7. We must include it in our discussion. And

we must let Paul define what an unmarried individual is. There's no way, based upon the word's meaning and the context in which it occurs (and these are the *only* four occurrences that there are in the New Testament), to exclude divorced people from the permission to remarry. This is what I'm angling for and what I'm talking about here.

Now, the logical question is, what about Matthew 19 and the whole statement of Jesus, "except it be for fornication" you can get married or not remarried... if you remarry you end of committing adultery and all that sort of thing? The truth is that it's beyond the scope of this podcast, but that saying is actually controversial grammatically. It could work either way. It could either disallow remarriage or it could allow remarriage, depending on the situation of how the initial divorce occurred (whether there was adultery involved in that or not). It's not actually clear (in scholarly discussion anyway) that the statement disallows remarriage.

I would also add this: the reason Paul never references the teaching here of Jesus (I think) is twofold. Paul is talking about divorce and remarriage in this whole chapter of 1 Corinthians 7. Why doesn't he quote Jesus? Well, he probably doesn't quote it because the Gospel of Matthew (and I would say Mark, for that matter) had not yet been written. 1 Corinthians has some clear chronological markers that you could look up in a New Testament introduction talking about 1 Corinthians. Scholars are very able to date 1 Corinthians to the mid-50's A.D. The date people usually target is about 55 A.D., so let's just go with it—mid-50's. Matthew is almost universally considered by scholars to have been written sometime before 70, and likely *just* before 70 (again, for a number of indications we can't go into here). So Paul would never have seen it because Matthew wasn't written yet. Mark is usually considered a little earlier, and the earliest you can put Mark is the mid-50's—the same as 1 Corinthians. So it's very likely that Paul never saw it. Mark is writing somewhere else, Paul is out ministering to the Gentiles, and that's why he doesn't quote it.

The other issue is that Jesus is addressing the question from within Jewish culture, with a touch-point, of course, to the Old Testament. Paul isn't doing that here. Paul is writing to Corinthians. He's addressing the situation on the ground in Greco-Roman culture. The situations that were present in real Greco-Roman life and his own present distress (the present persecution situation within this predominantly Gentile church here in the city of Corinth)... these are entirely different contexts for what Paul's dealing with and what Jesus was commenting on when he was confronted by the scribes and Pharisees there.

I would argue that there's not going to be an inconsistency when it's all settled and done, but again, that's really beyond the scope of this particular podcast episode. But just sticking with what Paul is saying here, it's really nigh unto impossible... because the word usage is so restricted to Paul, both in terms of distribution and its use by New Testament authors... he's the only one, it's only four times, and it's all right here. It's nigh unto impossible to exclude divorced people from what Paul says here about the unmarried in 1 Corinthians 7.

25:00

I like to use this illustration as a good illustration, I think, of the importance when you're doing word studies of taking note of not only where the word is used and how many times and all that sort of thing, but how does a particular author use the term? Is there consistency within the way an author uses a particular term? Does an author always use the term the same way? You have to be looking at the way a particular writer uses a particular term (the particular word that you're studying). In this case, we get into distribution because there really isn't any! It's only four times in this particular book. But that's another thing to consider—the isolation or the distribution of how a word is used to narrow the possibilities, to create situations where you can plausibly discern what the word means in the context. And the context is cultural, and here the context is also literary—the distribution, the actual use of the word. Observe what the word means in context so that you can draw conclusions from the passage based upon your understanding and study of the words.