

How Shall We Live? 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

You will remember last Sunday that the sermon was on gluttony and fornication and that neither brought glory to God, but we must ask the question “do our actions and behaviors honor God.” What had started this conversation was Paul’s and the other Apostles’ teaching on the fact that Jesus was coming back any day. After all, some had watched Jesus ascend to heaven and they had the witness of the angels that said in the same way they saw him leave, he would come again. In light of this belief, how are the people of God to live while they wait.

Just before today’s passage of scripture Paul had been answering the questions of the Corinthian church members, “Must a Christian get married? What about the unmarried women in the church who are not getting any younger?” Maybe Paul was addressing the parents of marriageable-aged girls. Since Jesus did not give any special teaching on this topic, Paul gave his counsel as one taught of the Lord. He asked them to consider several factors when they made their decision about marriage.

First, consider the present circumstances (vv. 25–31). It was a time of distress (1 Cor. 7:26) when society was going through change (1 Cor. 7:31). He believed there was not much time left for serving the Lord (1 Cor. 7:29). It is possible that there were political and economic pressures in Corinth about which we have no information, but it may have been like in our own communities with unrest and uncertainties. In view of the difficulties, Paul had instructed that it would be better for a person to be unmarried. But if a person was married they were not to seek a divorce (1 Cor. 7:27).

Paul felt the single state was advantageous was the potential it offered for detachment from earthly situations. Both married and single persons were to live as

if the Lord will return tomorrow (Rom. 13:11), in the same way that Paul devoted his life to the things that were of eternal importance (compare 2 Cor. 4:18). This detachment from worldly matters should characterize all Christians but it was more complex for the married (compare Mark 13:12). For Paul devotion to God should occupy first place in life (Luke 14:26), without abandoning marital duties (compare 1 Cor. 7:3-5).

Instead, Paul was calling for a commitment to eternal matters and a corresponding detachment from the institutions, values, and substance of this world which was passing away (v. 31). Such a commitment was more easily made and enacted by a single person.¹

To understand why Paul was teaching this we must understand that the Jews glorified marriage and considered it a sacred duty. There was only one valid reason, according to Jewish tradition, for not marrying, and that was in order to study the law. Rabbi ben Azai asked, “Why should I marry? I am in love with the Law. Let others see to the prolongation of the human race.” In the Greek world, Epictetus, the stoic philosopher, never married. He said that he was doing far more for the world by being a teacher than if he had produced two or three “ugly-nosed brats.” “How,” he asked, “can one whose function is to teach mankind be expected to run for something in which to heat the water to give the baby its bath?”

Paul’s teaching on marriage at this point in his ministry was because he believed that in order to please God and do the work of evangelism it would be better to be unmarried and devote one’s life to ministry. He believed those who do marry must be ready to accept the trials that will accompany it (1 Cor. 7:28). In fact, the situation might become so difficult that even those already married will

v. verse

¹Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:519

have to live as though they were not married (1 Cor. 7:29). Paul may have been referring to husbands and wives being separated from each other because of economic distress or persecution.

Because Paul believed Christ was coming any minute he believed that everything must be laid aside in one tremendous effort to concentrate on preparation for that coming. The most important human activity and the dearest human relationship must be abandoned if they threatened to interrupt or to slacken that concentration. A person must have no ties whatsoever to keep them when Christ said rise and go. One must think of pleasing no one other than Christ. I am please to tell you that after years of ministry Paul did have a change of heart and believed that marriage had a wonderful and powerful place in the church and the lives of its members, comparing marriage to the relationship of Christ and the Church.

In our society we must consider the circumstances of marriage and the commitment that requires. The average age for first-time brides and grooms is climbing, which suggests that couples are waiting longer to get married and considering that their lifestyles and priorities will change with such a commitment. Pastoral counselors remind couples that the cheapest thing in a wedding is the marriage license. From then on, the prices go up!^{2 3}

This is not a sermon on anti-marriage, rather on how to live in light of Jesus' soon return. Paul felt that there is so little time left that such things as being married, mourning for someone who has died, or celebrating the birth of a child were to be low on the list of Christians. In the same way that Paul counseled about relationship he also instructs us not to get too attached to our things. He believed

²Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. 1 Co 7:25

³ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letters to the Corinthians*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 68

whether we have much or a little, it will not matter when Jesus returns. So use what you have to promote the ministry and share with each other. After all, the world as we know it is passing away.⁴

In my own life I realize that I need to travel lighter, and not let things possess me. For example, I have two Coach Purses, neither of which I purchased myself...it is time for me to share. Why do I need two when I can only use one at a time. I need to learn to travel light and make God and the ministry my priorities.

What this is a sermon on living lightly and knowing that we don't know how much time we have to do our ministries and serve God's people. Our relationships, our behaviors, our possessions should be put in perspective and everyday we should answer the question, "how shall I live in light of the fact that this might be the very day I have to serve God!" Amen.

⁴Ellingworth, Paul ; Hatton, Howard ; Ellingworth, Paul: *A Handbook on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*. New York : United Bible Societies, 1995 (UBS Handbook Series; Helps for Translators), S. 169