

1 Corinthians 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Corinthians chapter 7 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer, but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Now as a concession, not a command, I say this, 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.

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

[1:07] To the married I give this charge, not I but the Lord. The wife should not separate from her husband, but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband, and the husband should not divorce his wife.

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. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

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. 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. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband?

Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

[2:13] Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision.

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a bondservant when called?

Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord.

Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price. Do not become bondservants of men. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

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. I think that in view of the present distress, it is good for a person to remain as he is.

[3:17] Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned. And if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.

Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles. And I would spare you that. This is what I mean, brothers. The appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none.

And those who mourn as though they were not mourning. And those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing. And those who buy as though they had no goods. And those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.

For the present form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord. How to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things.

How to please his wife. And 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. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things.

[4 : 20] How to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit. Not to lay any restraint upon you. But to promote good order. And to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly towards his betrothed.

If his passions are strong. And it has to be. Let him do as he wishes. Let them marry. It is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart. Being under no necessity.

But having his desire under control. And has determined this in his heart. To keep her as his betrothed. He will do well. So then he who marries his betrothed. Does well.

And he who refrains from marriage. Will do even better. A wife is bound to her husband. As long as he lives. But if her husband dies. She is free to be married to whom she wishes.

Only in the Lord. Yet in my judgment. She is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the spirit of God. In chapter 7 of 1st Corinthians.

[5 : 17] Paul seems to be responding to some specific questions. From the Corinthians. The claim of the opening verse. It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. Is not Paul's own claim.

Rather it seems to be a quotation from the Corinthians letter to Paul. Throughout this chapter. And at various other points in the letter. We have to guess at the position of the Corinthians. Or the positions that they were inquiring about.

Through a sort of shadow reading of the text. Inferring from Paul's arguments. What the arguments of his opponents or interlocutors were. In a situation with so much sexual immorality.

Each man should have his own wife. And each woman her own husband. Paul is writing into the Corinthian context. Where they are sitting rather easy to gross sexual sin in their midst.

Paul is not arguing however. That marriage is merely for the sake of avoiding sexual immorality. Rather that a situation like that in Corinth. Is one where marriage makes even more sense.

[6 : 14] If we read between the lines of Paul's argument. It might seem that his opponents. Have a sort of spirituality that both denies the body. And ends up indulging the body. In their super spirituality.

They think themselves above the body. And so things associated with the bodily passions. Such as sexual relations. Might need to be avoided. However. If sexual relations are engaged in.

It's no big deal. It's just a matter of the body. While it would be more desirable to give oneself to asceticism. If you cannot do that. It merely inconveniences your spirituality. It doesn't imperil it.

We might think of Paul's teaching in Colossians chapter 2 verses 20 to 23 here. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world. Why as if you were still alive in the world.

Do you submit to regulations. Do not handle. Do not taste. Do not touch. Referring to things that all perish as they are used. According to human precepts and teaching. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom.

[7 : 12] In promoting self-made religion and asceticism. And severity to the body. But they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. A religion that is supposedly above the body.

And seeks to deny its appetites. But which also. In its downplaying of the importance of the body. Doesn't take the sins of the body very seriously. Is wide open to all sorts of problems and abuses.

The alternative to this. Is a society of marital faithfulness. Over against a society of widespread sexual immorality. The Corinthians like many in the early church.

And in that society. Seem to have had strange views about sex. And how it relates to supposed spiritual persons. Sex can be seen as something bodily. To be denigrated.

Paul's point is not that marriage is something lesser. A mere concession to the flesh. However his concern is to avoid sexual immorality. And to advocate for faithful and sexually active monogamy. [8 : 08] Or celibacy. As the licit alternatives. And there is an element of realism in Paul's counsel here. People have often claimed an elevated spiritual character. Exempts them from the temptations and dangers.

Surrounding sexual behaviour. And relations. Again and again we discover that it doesn't. And that responsible limits and practices. Guard us from temptation. And are necessary and wise. We should not like the Corinthians. Think that we reign like kings. And are above the temptations of Satan. Rather we should be humble and wise to his ways. Guarding and arming ourselves against his stratagems.

Both spouses in a marriage. Should give the other their conjugal rights. One of the problems at Corinth. Might be a sort of asceticism. In which couples are denying each other sexual relations. And as a result of such denial. Improper sexual relations are occurring. Paul argues that neither the husband nor the wife. Have authority over their own bodies. This is not a claim that the spouse's

bodies. [9 : 06] Are entirely the possession of the other. But that neither has exclusive rights. Over their own bodies. But has a duty lovingly to render their bodies to the other. And should not deprive the other.

For lengthy periods of time. Save by mutual agreement. Paul is saying this as a concession. Not a command. He isn't instructing married couples. To refrain from sexual intimacy.

For periods of time. He's merely presenting this as an option. Paul himself is celibate. And if he were asked his personal preference. It would be that all were like him. However, what really matters is God's action.

Not Paul's personal perspective. And God has given different people different situations. And different callings. Paul speaks to the unmarried and the widows. He tells them that it's good for them to remain single.

The point isn't that it is the only good thing to do. But rather that the urgency of marriage or remarriage need not be felt. If a man's wife has died for instance. There's no necessity that he remarry again.

[10 : 04] There's no urgency to that. Paul himself is single. And is contentedly remaining in that state. It is likely that Paul himself was a widower. Or perhaps his wife left him when he became a Christian.

When such a thing happens. We need not desire to change everything about our position. We can remain in our current position. The point is not that the single must remain single.

But rather that it is not necessary for them to enter into the state of marriage. The New Testament treats the unmarried state as one that Christians can purposefully pursue. And one that in certain instances is even preferable.

As the unmarried person can devote themselves more fully to the service of the kingdom of God. One of the things that this does is to disrupt the cultural script of marriage as a matter of course. The expectation that everyone should get married. Marriage ceases to be something that we just do because it is what everyone is expected to do. And it becomes something that we need to think about as a particular Christian vocation.

[11 : 03] A vocation among other vocations. Viewing marriage primarily as one possible mode of Christian discipleship. Rather than as the presumed script that everyone must follow.

Is really important. If marriage is just the necessary following of a cultural script. We lose the ability to see Christian marriage as a form of vocation. And a similar sense about the various vocations that exist for the unmarried is lost.

There are too many people who think that since they are unmarried. They have somehow forfeited God's plan for their lives. That God's purpose for everyone is to happily pair them off with another partner. Yet Paul wants the readers of this letter to understand that.

With regard to God's calling. There is no urgency to leave the unmarried state. However, if the unmarried cannot control their passions. They should marry. Rather than have those passions burning in more dangerous ways.

Paul then turns to speak to married couples. Divorce or separation must be avoided if at all possible. Where divorce does occur. The person should seek to remain single.

[12 : 06] Or should seek reconciliation with their alienated spouse. And Paul bases this on the commandment of the Lord. He's likely referring to Jesus' teaching on the subject in the book of Matthew or Mark.

Jesus himself has spoken directly to that issue. And Paul relays Jesus' teaching to the Corinthians. He goes on to deal with further categories of persons. For instance, Christians with unbelieving partners.

In those situations, they should not seek divorce when the partner consents to remain. Now, you can imagine after the preceding chapter, there is a question that arises here. Wouldn't having a relationship with an unbelieving spouse pollute the body of Christ along the lines discussed in chapter 6?

No, Paul argues, the unbelieving partner is sanctified by their continued willing union with the Christian spouse. And the same is true of their children, who have been separated from the pagan world by their association with their Christian parent.

In such a marriage, a Christian wife or husband may exert a considerable influence upon their unbelieving spouse. When reading this chapter, it is really important to recognize the way that, in the words of Anthony Thistleton, Paul deals with the good, the possible, the just, the feasible, the constructive, the useful, and the right.

[13 : 21] Paul is very sensitive to matters of circumstance and situation and the contingent issues of people's lives. There's a very careful interplay between pastoral and ethical concerns in Paul's teaching.

Most of the teaching in this chapter does not come as absolute commandment. But in form of wise counsel, in the form of preferred courses of action in different situations and other things like that. Even when things go wrong or people do not act as they should do, the grace of God remains for them still, and can be known in their circumstances, even the most difficult. Paul's teaching about calling here and different situations helps us to realize that God's grace can take root in our lives wherever we find ourselves.

Paul draws back from the specific case of marriage at this point to explore the broader principle. People should live in the life that God has placed them in, and not always seek for alternative situations.

We all find ourselves in constrained situations, but our freedom to obey God is not compromised or undermined by this. And he's challenging a sort of over-realized eschatology, which would present escape from certain conditions as necessary for the realization of our spirituality.

[14 : 34] The slave, for instance, cannot be a Christian in the condition of slavery. He must become free. For such an approach, the person who's married to the unbelieving spouse would be imprisoned by that fact, and denied the possibility to live a proper Christian life.

But yet Paul teaches quite otherwise. The reality of God's call can come to us in whatever situation we find ourselves, even ones that are far from ideal. And this saves us from having to fret about the situations and the conditions we find ourselves in, without denying the power of the gospel to transform the actual lives that we are living.

He gives the example of circumcision and uncircumcision. The condition is not the point. What matters is living faithfully, keeping the commandments of God. He then turns to slave and free. He deals with a situation not clear in the ESV's translation, where there is a future possibility of freedom. In such a situation, use your current condition of slavery for Christ.

Don't allow your hope or yearning for a more ideal future situation to deprive you of the possibility of serving God where you are right now. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't take the opportunity if it arises.

[15 : 43] But do not allow your service of God to become contingent upon the possibility of that eventuality occurring. The calling to faithfulness comes to us in our current situations and circumstances, where we are right now.

And there's a vast difference, of course, between slave and free in the present age. However, viewed from the perspective of the age to come, which has been inaugurated in Christ, the master is no longer over the slave, and the slave is no longer under the master.

And the slave is called to live in terms of that fact right now, to stand in a different relationship to his continuing condition of service. This doesn't mean that there are not discriminations to be made.

We have been bought by Christ, so we do not enslave ourselves to men. If we can, at all costs, we avoid giving ourselves into the condition of slavery, and we should seek to abolish slavery where we can.

The enslaved person has been bought by Christ, and is his freed person. And free people should not enslave themselves to men. Paul now speaks to those who are not yet married.

[16:46] And in his teaching here, it's important to recognize the difference between what Anthony Thistleton has called a theology of eschatological imminence, and a chronology of eschatological imminence.

While the latter operates in terms of a conviction that the absolute end of the cosmos is only months or years away, the former necessitates no such belief. Rather, the theology of eschatological imminence that we encounter in the New Testament arises chiefly from the combination of the apocalyptic judgment of the cross and the inauguration of the new creation in the resurrection. The new life of the age to come has already been inaugurated. It's already starting to take effect. Life after these events is characterized by a radical relativization of the current world order, an intensified sense of its penultimacy.

From now on, all human history occurs beneath the shadow of God's eschatological kingdom, which is already at work in our midst. Our understanding of the true character of the nearness of the end things should not be allowed to be compromised by our modern reduction of all time to clock time.

Others have drawn a distinction between what has been called participant logic and observer logic. And these are two different perspectives from which we may speak of the end of the world. In the case of observer logic, the end of the world would refer to the final end of the material and the intersubjective cosmos.

[18:12] But in the case of participant logic, the end of the world can refer to the catastrophic collapse of the established state of a particular society or a person's historical existence. The destruction of Jerusalem and her temple in AD 70 would have represented just such an event for many early Jewish Christians.

In declaring in verse 29 that the appointed time has been shortened, Paul may refer to the way in which the cross and resurrection has brought the end things near to us in history. We now exist in a sort of providential window of opportunity.

This has been graciously held open by God for us. And this should heighten our sense of present urgency, our sense of the theological imminence of the eschaton and of the penultimacy of the existing social and political order and the fact that it's passing away that can be elevated by specific historical threats or instabilities.

These things can wean us off our investment in the world. Some commentators have suggested that the Corinthians that Paul addressed within this letter were facing just such a situation, maybe something provoked by famine or severe persecution.

And in such a period of social ferment, the proximity of the end things is acutely felt. We feel the shadow of eternity looming over the crumbling social order.

[19:29] That doesn't mean that the actual last day has arrived, but we do find ourselves caught in its gravity. In this context, Paul's concern seems to be less with preparing the Corinthians for the end of all things than with sparing them from the greater pressures and worries that would afflict those whose embeddedness in the collapsing order was exacerbated by marriage or by their many possessions.

It is within this context that Paul advances an ethic for life in the shadow of the last things. As the external structures of this world are slipping away, we must learn to occupy the world as those who are not preoccupied with it.

We engage with the world, but we do not tie ourselves to it. We may or may not feel the slipping away of the external structures of our present world as keenly as Paul's original addressees might have, but their transience and penultimacy remains a fact of considerable importance.

To some degree or other, all of us are invested in the current order of our world, in its political structures, in its economic and social institutions. Unfortunately, not only do we occupy these existing structures, we are all too often preoccupied with them, dull to any sense of their impermanence in the face of God's inaugurated and coming kingdom.

While the collapse of these structures may not be as near at hand as the destruction of Jerusalem was for the first Christians, it is no less certain. The present form of our national and international

politics, for instance, is passing away.

[20 : 58] Like the nations and empires before them, our prevailing political powers and certainties will one day pass away, perhaps altogether beyond memory. Paul never argues for a complete detachment and disengagement from the world.

We still are those who deal with the world. We buy and sell. We mourn and rejoice. But our participation in these activities is now tempered by Paul's radical as though. No longer are these activities permitted to be the preoccupations that they once were, to be the defining features or the determinative realities of our existence.

Rather, we now undertake these activities as people who belong to the eschatological kingdom of Christ that is coming to dawn in the world. Our existence is determined by the reality of Christ's kingdom, not the passing structures of this age.

We have been unplugged from the immediacy of our social reality and we now engage with it as those who are no longer bound to it and identified by it. Paul's concern in all of this is to free the Corinthians from undue anxiety.

While it is perfectly possible to serve the Lord in varied circumstances, it is difficult when we find ourselves pulled in different directions. Paul isn't commanding the Corinthians or suggesting that single people are better than married people.

[22 : 12] Rather, he's revealing the inherent challenges of some callings and how certain callings may afford us certain freedoms over others. The woman whose husband dies is free to remarry another Christian.

While it is possible to be faithful in a relationship with a non-Christian spouse, it is not appropriate to enter into such a state as a Christian. A question to consider.

What are some Christian practices that help us to sustain the attitudes to our circumstances and vocations that Paul identifies here?