

Serve the Lord without Distraction – 1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Introduction – From the beginning of this chapter, Paul has been answering questions the Corinthians have regarding marriage (v1). These questions are brought to him in the context of another letter he sent (1 Cor 5:9), an ascetic-lifestyle reaction to the rampant immorality in Corinth (7:1b), and the “*present distress*” that was upon that generation (7:26). He has dealt with those who are presently married, those who are widowed and unmarried, and those who have an unbelieving spouse. In vv17-24, Paul made the argument to remain in the calling in which you were called. Now he turns to address those who are yet to be married, the betrothed or engaged. In short, the Lord uses both the married and the unmarried for the advancement of His kingdom, but all must be fully dedicated to Him (v35).

The Present Distress – Paul has no direct command from the Lord regarding their question but brings pastoral advice during the current situation in Corinth. He says his answers are taking into consideration “*the present distress*” (v 26), that “*the time has been shortened*” (v29), and that “*the form of this world is passing away*” (v31). Even as early as 53-55AD, Paul sees the signs of the end of the old aeon. Roman history reports great food shortages throughout the Greek world during these years. Paul knows what this is signifying. Jesus said, “*...there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows*” (Matt 24:7-8) when speaking of the great Tribulation upon that present generation (Matt 24:34). Luke records Jesus saying, “*For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people*” (Luke 21:22-23). Regarding these days of vengeance, Jesus mentions that the Lord cut short the days (Mark 13:20), and John writes of a world that is passing away (1 John 2:8, 16-18). Paul had also used this language in his letter (1 Cor 2:6-8).

The present distress was the birth-pangs of a tumultuous overthrow of the world system as it was. Jesus had risen to the right hand of the Father and all nations were going to witness His rule (Psalm 2). Jerusalem and the old covenant system was going to be judged and removed, and the rest of the world (Jew and Gentile) was now hearing the gospel, the light to all nations. Rome would one day submit to Christ, but in the present generation, Christians would soon feel the blade and bite of Roman persecution and so Paul is anticipating this coming hardship as well.

Pastoral Advice – Paul’s advice to the “virgins” is pretty simple. Going back to the maxim set forth earlier (v8, 17, 20, 24) he says, “*it is good for a man to remain as he is*” (v26). If you were “bound” then do not seek to throw off the obligation and if you are free from such obligations, do not seek them (v27). It is no sin to get married, none at all, but Paul is warning them that this will be harder because of the present distress (v28). The time is short and so all hands need to be on deck, they need to be a people who are going to travel lightly through life’s circumstances (vv29-30). There was a storm on the horizon “*for this form of the world is passing away*” (v31). He wants them as free as possible from all additional anxieties, cares and concerns that come with spouses and children (vv32-34). But Paul is careful not to command, only to offer counsel from his wisdom (v35).

Verses 36-38 are notoriously difficult to translate and interpret. Paul may be talking to a young girl’s father, or to the girl’s beloved. A third possibility is he is addressing a relationship known as a “spiritual marriage” where there were vows of no sexual activity in the marriage (this ascetic practice was actually condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325AD). Regardless, to marry is good, to stay single might be better in the midst of the coming crisis so that one might serve the Lord without distraction. Paul then concludes with vv39-40 and a word to women who are married but may one day be widowed.

Temporary Singleness – As we have studied Chapter 7 in context, we see that Paul is not taking an absolute stand that marriage is less spiritual than remaining single. It’s actually good to be anxious about pleasing your wife; that’s following Christ’s lead (Eph 5:22-33). And if an engaged girl is bound to her fiancé, how much more should a wife be towards her husband? Paul is addressing a time when temporarily it may be better for some to remain single, but he is not holding up singleness as always better than marriage. And so all of this points to the fact that, in times where there is such a “present distress”, a Christian society should be made up of men and women getting married, building families, and seeing the blessings of God to your children’s children. It also should be a society that takes seriously the reality and power of the human sexual drive (and so vv2-5) and the danger of sin and self-deception when that reality is denied.

Side Note to Singles and Marrieds and Strengthening the Church – We are all a part of the church. *The Lord uses both the married and the unmarried for the advancement of His kingdom.* Singles, it’s hard to be a part sometimes. But you are less distracted and so you should throw yourselves into the life and activities and service of the church family. Marrieds, it’s mind-blowing busy being married with kids sometimes. But you need to throw singles into your home to be a part of your craziness. That’s called hospitality; that’s called church life.

An Open Palm – In all times, we are to live with the attitude that the Lord gives and the Lord removes and blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21). All that we have, anything we have lost, every joy and every sorrow is to be surrendered to God, lifted up on an open palm. *“Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill, God’s truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever.”*

Dave Hatcher – November 11, 2018

Notes for Little Saints

Paul is writing to the Corinthians when he knows there is trouble coming. Imagine how hard it would be to care for your family if there was no food. That was going on in Corinth at this time. Soon Christians would be persecuted or even put to death for their faith. Even today, many Christians face persecution or death for their faith. In some situations, it might not be best to be married or have children during that time.

Paul doesn’t want to add rules to the Christian faith – so he writes about that in the first half of verse 35 –

Write that first half out.

But he does want them to do what is proper – and he tells them why in the second half of verse 35 –

Write that second half out.

It might be worth asking yourself “what distracts me from serving the Lord?”

