

PREFACE

We are so accustomed to treating most passages from God's word as authoritative, as the final word on how we are to live, that sometimes, with other passages, we need to deliberately reorient our receptors to hear not a command, but fatherly advice. Let's read the paragraph before us, beginning with v27.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:27-31.

In our last session I pointed out that at least on this topic of betrothed women (*parthenos*, "virgins"), the apostle Paul does not cite a command from Jesus, nor does he issue a command based on his apostolic authority. Rather, he expresses a pastoral concern for that which is best for them in that time and place. In v27 he succinctly issues his counsel: Are you betrothed? Then follow through on that commitment. Are you not yet betrothed? It is better that you not seek to be.

v28

But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.

This is a topic that, in one respect, has not changed from the first century to the twenty-first: The issue of whether to marry or remain single "lies totally outside the category of 'commandments' to obey or 'sin' if one does not" (Fee). Some are called to marry; some are called to singleness—and celibacy. The moment when disobedience and sin enter into the equation is only when one chooses the latter (singleness) *without* celibacy.

The difference between the two centuries is revealed in the *need* for the statement itself. I cannot imagine a preacher today including the line "if you marry you have not sinned" in one of his Sunday sermons. I'm sure that not one person seated in the pews would have even entertained the thought that marrying might be sinful. But for the Corinthian church it was necessary for Paul to point this out. Their perspective on all this was skewed, and it was necessary for Paul to bring them back to reality.

Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.

The plain truth is that we don't know what "trouble" for those who are married Paul is referring to. The phrase literally means (as the KJVs have it) "tribulation in the flesh." It doesn't mean that those who are married will suffer from some malady in the flesh, but that they will have tribulation or troubles while they are in mortal flesh, on earth—that is, "flesh" refers to "the physical sphere in which our weakness and mortality are so evident."

I was amused by what an ancient, sardonic rabbi wrote, quoted by Garland:

A young man is like a colt that whinnies, he paces up and down, he grooms himself with care: this is because he is looking for a wife. But once married, he resembles an ass, quite loaded down with burdens.

We will revisit this when we get to the paragraph beginning with v32. Now, in vv29-31, Paul launches into an “explanatory digression,” fleshing out what he has just said by arguing broad counsel for the Christian mindset and worldview. In v32 he will return to specifics for the sake of the Corinthians. If this were to be blocked out for two actors on stage, vv25-28 would be face-to-face dialogue; vv29-31 would be where the dominant actor would turn out toward the audience to wax philosophical; then for vv32-35 he would turn back to the other actor for more specific face-to-face dialogue.

v29-31A

But this I say [ESV: this is what I mean], brethren, the time has been shortened,

It is important for us to understand what Paul means by this, for our conclusion will color how we interpret the rest of the paragraph. First, he is *not* saying something like, *You have only a few short days before Christ returns!*, or, *You never know when the end will come*. As David Garland puts it,

Paul is not concerned about the duration of time, but the character of the time. He is talking not about how little time is left, but about how Christ’s death and resurrection have changed how Christians should look at the time that is left.

Here we have a wonderful truth for believers. The Greeks at the time would have seen the future as either nonexistent, or off in the vague, murky, unknowable distance. Just as many do today, they would have answered the question about their eternity with a shrug: *Who can say*. For them the future was little more than an ellipse (...), just something that fades away into silence.

But Christ—His coming, His gospel, His death and resurrection, His salvation—has now “compressed” time “in such a way that the future has been brought forward so as to be clearly visible, not so much with regard to its timing as to its reality and certainty” (Fee).

Believers who apprehend this view, that they have a definite future and see it with a supernatural clarity, live in the here and now with radically altered values as to what counts and what does not (Fee). In Romans the apostle offers a picture of what this might look like.

Read Romans 13:11-14.

This is not unlike the individual who learns that he has terminal cancer. Suddenly he sees the future; no matter how long he has, he sees the end, and in one stroke his values change: some things that were not, are now very important; some things that were, are now suddenly unimportant. Knowing our end changes the way we live in the present.

Or consider another way to imagine it: The rest of the fallen world sees eternity as if through the wrong end of a telescope: far, far away, tiny and insignificant. Christians, however, see eternity as if through the correct end of binoculars; because we can see and know the eternity before us in Christ, it seems closer to us—as if we can reach out and touch it.

so that from now on...

That is, “therefore,” this is how you are to live. Paul follows this with five “as thoughts” (or “as if nots” [NIV])—five illustrations.

Sidebar: On a more personal level, normally I can read a passage a few times and glean from it, at least in general terms, the gist of what is being said. I confess that after reading these five illustrations a number of times I remained befuddled: What in the world was Paul getting at here? But with the help of those smarter than I, I finally came to understand.

These are not meant to be taken literally; if they were, some of them would directly contradict what he has just said about marriage—and what he will say later, in his letter to the Romans, about sorrowing and rejoicing. Fee describes these five statements as “the strongest kind of dialectical rhetoric.” Paul is employing the absurdity of opposites to illustrate his point; thus, these are not to be understood literally. Nevertheless, we need to figure out what Paul wants us to take away from this.

those who have wives should be as though they had none;

and those who weep, as though they did not weep;

and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice;

Paul is using dramatic, even absurd, rhetoric to get the Corinthians—and us—to live *in* this world without becoming controlled *by* it—to live as one so marked by eternity in Christ, that one’s relationship to the world is not the determining factor. Those who are followers of Christ Jesus are not to be under the dominating power of the circumstances or conditions that dictate the existence of so many others.

The point is not whether one is married or single, whether one is filled with sorrow or filled with joy, whether one rejoices or not. The important factor is, is any of that ruling your life?

The last two items in this list of illustrations lead us right into Paul's concluding reason for these illustrations.

and those who buy, as though they did not possess;

Once again, Paul is not denigrating commerce—buying and selling—but encouraging an eternal, an eschatological mindset that realizes we are all but mere stewards of the riches God has poured into our lives. Back in Chapter Three he said much the same thing, but came at it from a different angle.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.

All things belong to us because we belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. So who is the real owner? To Timothy Paul said it yet another way.

Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

It is not so much the idea of “you can't take it with you”; that is the worldly view of this. It is more the idea that it never belonged to you in the first place. As James put it, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (James 1:17). Earlier in this chapter Paul, using the word “authority,” made the point that my wife's body does not belong to her, but to me, and that my body does not belong to me, but to her (7:4). But the *true* owner of both of these aging bodies is neither one of us, but the Lord God.

I often take issue with the NIV for edging a little too close to paraphrase, but in this instance the NIV helps us understand what Paul is saying:

those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep;

That's it. Christians do not “possess”; Christians are mere stewards of what the Lord has entrusted to us.

and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it;

Paul's last rhetorical illustration before his concluding reason for all this is, as the others, at first glance confusing. What does he mean, that we are to take small helpings? No, once again the NIV helps us with

those who use the things of this world, as if not engrossed in them.

Sidebar: The KJV's “not abusing it,” and the NKJV's “not misusing it” are just wrong.

The apostle, far from advocating that all believers become separatists, tells us to go ahead and live in the world, use its resources, be a part of it, make use of what it has to offer because God has created it for us. But we are to always remember that this world is just a way-station for the Christian. David Garland offers a pithy interpretation of this:

Being engaged with this world is one thing; becoming enmeshed in it is another. Becoming wrapped up in the world is to become wrapped in a death shroud.

Why? Because,

for the form of this world is passing away.

This earth is not just a temporary home for the Christian, it is itself a stepping stone toward a “new heaven and a new earth” ([Revelation 21:1](#)). In that verse John goes on to say what Paul is saying in our passage: “for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea.”

Not just our use of it, but the very earth we now know is on life support. It is physically groaning ([Romans 8:22](#)) as it longs to be reborn just as each individual believer has been reborn. And by “form” Paul does not just mean the way the world appears; this idea includes “the scheme of things as they presently exist,” the ways of this world.

The tense of this verb (“is passing away”) means that this is not something that will occur in the distant future, but is a process that has already begun. Let’s close with another quote from David Garland:

Nothing in this physical world seen and experienced by our physical senses has any enduring character—including marriages, weepings, rejoicings, possessions, and business opportunities. The fabric of life is just that, a fabric, frayed and flimsy, and nothing eternal.