

Present Realities

Week 7 in Our Weekly Study of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

Orchard Park Wesleyan Church

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Introduction

One of the things I love so very much about God is that, although He wants us to live according to His ideals, He doesn't ignore the reality of the struggle we might face to get there. He is all-powerful and holy, yet He is also merciful, understanding, and empathetic.

In this section of chapter 7, Paul continues to respond to questions and arguments that the Corinthian church had sent him in a previous letter. Although much of what we'll study this week will pertain to specific topics of error or confusion, together they serve as a perfect example of this broader concept of how God realistically tends to the flaws and hardships in humanity and the world. He doesn't just show us His standard of perfection; He helps us squarely face and overcome our imperfection.

We'll find several themes in our study this week, one of which carries over from last week: marriage. We will shift perspective, however, from considering the purpose, design, and blessings of the marriage relationship to gazing at it through the lens of two additional themes we'll study: (1) remaining as one was when called and (2) the imminence of Christ's return. The former runs throughout the entire second half of chapter seven; the latter is briefly mentioned but equally important. Let's get started.

Day 1

Unhappy Marriage: Separation and Divorce

“But for those who are married, I have a command that comes not from me, but from the Lord. A wife must not leave her husband. But if she does leave him, let her remain single or else be reconciled to him. And the husband must not leave his wife.”

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 NLT

We spent last week discussing marriage, intimacy, and all the blessings we can receive in that relationship. But as we move into verses 8-40 this week, we'll see that although God did design marriage to be the deepest and most intimate of human relationships, He also understands that in this broken world, we will have to contend with broken relationships. Marriage is seldom void of challenges. Thankfully, our God is *the* expert at repairing broken relationships and overcoming impossible challenges.

Please bear with me today as we study what God says through Paul, Malachi, and Jesus Himself about divorce. First, let me point out that anything I say today is meant for marriages that are not characterized by abuse or infidelity. Those are two very serious transgressions in the marriage relationship, and scripture mentions one as justifiable grounds for divorce. I am not speaking to those situations today.

Nonetheless, divorce is a hard topic, and please know that nothing I say today is meant to condemn. We've all been in situations where we've either knowingly or unknowingly transgressed God's commands. I spent the bulk of my twenties and the early part of my thirties there. However, we do need to squarely face what God says in His Word about subjects that can make us feel uncomfortable.

I realize that many of you will be on the opposite end of this spectrum and might be wondering even now, *Why are we spending time on divorce when that's never been an option for me/us?* Well, there are several reasons: First, God talks about it surprisingly often and very bluntly. For us to skip over it would just be foolish. Secondly, although we might have a good handle on the basics of what God says about divorce, I think we'll see a little more of His heart on the matter today. And finally, we're not just studying what God says about divorce for our personal lives. The church is here on this earth to influence the world around us for God's Kingdom, but too often, we're the ones being affected by the world. What we'll learn today will strengthen us and should affect our witness.

Let's start with what God says about divorce in His Word. Quite honestly, I never paid much attention to how much He addresses this issue in scripture. I always knew God said not to divorce, and I was familiar with some passages; but I didn't *really* pay attention to how much and how often He spoke about it. So let's pay attention together today.

Please review the verses above and also read Malachi 2:13-16, Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:3-9.

Divorce has been around almost as long as marriage has; It was as much an ancient problem as it is a modern one. In Leviticus 21:7, divorce is mentioned as an already-existent societal reality. In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Moses gave laws in response to the common occurrence of divorce and the abuses that often accompanied it. These laws were not intended to condone divorce, as Jesus taught in Matthew 19. By contrast, they were introduced to put some limitations on the amount of damage divorce and remarriage could cause.

Our fallen nature makes us imperfect as the lover and the loved in marriage. As the *lover*, we struggle to love steadfastly, selflessly, and

forever. As the *loved*, we wrestle again with that “s-word,” selfishness. Sometimes it makes us almost impossible to love. The result? Some couples just don’t want to be married anymore. God knows this; He understands it; but He’s not OK with His people acting on it. So, as we read in His Word, God tells us how He feels about it many times.

Now we have to ask, *Why?* Why does God hate divorce so vehemently? We could list obvious reasons to such an obvious question: because it destabilizes and breaks apart families; because it hurts everyone in its wake; because, as Jesus said, divorce was never part of God’s plan. All of these are true. Let’s look at two additional reasons:

1. Because just as marriage is a reflection of the intimacy Christ wants with His church, so the lifelong promise of marriage mirrors God’s covenant with His people. We talked about the marriage relationship being designed for intimacy and to reflect the type of relationship Christ wants with His church at length already last week. Today, as we talk about why God considers marriage a nearly unbreakable bond, we can’t ignore its covenantal nature—and how seriously God regards covenants.

Please read Genesis 17:7 and Deuteronomy 7:9.

When God enters into covenant, it is forever. In fact, according to Hebrews 8:7-13 and 9:15, though Israel abandoned God’s covenant, God remained faithful and instituted the new covenant through His Son. This new covenant was designed to be far better than the first because it redeemed Israel (and us, too, as those who are grafted in) from its transgressions under the first. God’s covenant with His people doesn’t depend on perfection or performance from us. Its fulfillment rests on God Himself, and He never fails.

Because marriage is reflective of God’s relationship with His people, the vows we make to each other in marriage are also representative of God’s promise to us. No wonder He never wants to see those broken! There is nothing that can break God’s covenant love for His people. “Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love” (Romans 8:38).

2. Because God is a part of marriage. Keep in mind that Paul is talking to the church in verses 10-11. He is specifically speaking to those marriages in which both spouses are believers; he addresses spiritually mixed marriages later.

Please read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.

- Fill in the blanks for Malachi 2:15 that you read earlier:

“Did he not make them _____, with a portion of the _____ in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.”

- What does Ecclesiastes 4:12 suggest to you, based on your understanding of Malachi 2:15?

God weaves His Spirit into this special human relationship. Not only does He bless marriage because it represents our relationship with Christ, but He is actually *in* it—in each spouse individually and in the completeness of their union. If we try to break such a union, we’re attempting to remove God from a relationship He ordained and considers worthy enough to enter into. He can’t condone that decision. It’s contrary to His steadfast nature; and it’s contrary to how much He loves us.

Now what? We, Christ’s church, are still here on earth instead of in heaven with Him because He wants us to reflect His glory to a world that needs Him. We are supposed to affect society around us on His behalf. Believe it or not, displaying unending love and commitment in our marriages is one way we can do that.

When I was researching some statistics on divorce for today’s study, I came across a few surprisingly encouraging reports. First, divorce in general has declined by about 18% over the past ten or so years. Before we high-five, part of the reason for this is because the marriage rate has also declined; you can’t get divorced if you don’t get married. When adjusted for the declining rate of marriages, the divorce rate has decreased by about 8%, which is wonderful, but the national average still hovers between 40-50%.

Within the church, divorce rates are dramatically lower. Let me qualify what I mean by “within the church,” though. Among those couples who regularly attend church, read their Bibles, pray together, and seriously follow God, divorce rates are low. Among those who occasionally attend church and don’t demonstrate an active pursuit of a relationship with Jesus, divorce rates are near the national average. Authentic followers of Christ look different than the rest of the world. We should be encouraged; this is as it should be!

Let’s wrap up today by reminding ourselves that in this world, divorce is a reality. Although God doesn’t want it for us, He approaches it candidly in His Word. Likewise, we should be authentic in how we approach our marriages. The reality is that sometimes, they’re really hard. If that’s where yours is right now, you don’t have to hide behind a pretty facade, but you do have to remember that God can restore and strengthen what is weak or broken. Just as He loves you with an always-and-forever love, He wants you to do the same for your spouse. Your marriage may be the only example of unending love in the face of imperfection that

some people see—and that points the way to the Unending One.

If your marriage has already ended in divorce, please remember that God still loves you steadfastly. Divorce is not His intention, but it also doesn’t exclude you from God’s love and restorative grace. He never gives up on you but rather waits expectantly for you to turn your heart toward Him. He can heal what is broken and even bring good from it.

Consider: God says—and has demonstrated—that when we are His, there is nothing we can do to make Him leave us. Have you considered that your marriage may be one of the ways you show God’s unfailing love to a world that desperately needs to know that it’s lovable? How might this change the way you view your spouse and your relationship?

Pray: Thank God for His commitment to you. Ask Him to strengthen your commitment to your spouse. If your marriage is in need of repair, lay that confidently at the feet of the One who brings life from death and beauty from ashes.

Day 2

Spiritual Inequality in Marriage

Now I will speak to the rest of you, though I do not have a direct command from the Lord. If a fellow believer has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to continue living with him, he must not leave her. And if a believing woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to continue living with her, she must not leave him.

1 Corinthians 7:12-13

Although we’re considering marriage and divorce again today, these verses specifically address those whose marriages were spiritually unequal, and the conversation falls under the greater context of “remaining as one was when called.” (We’ll talk about that more tomorrow.)

As we’ll discover momentarily, Paul needed to specifically address “the rest of you—” those who were married, but not in a believer-to-believer marriage. Because Paul founded the church in Corinth only a few years prior, and because the city was primarily pagan, many of the Corinthian Christians found themselves in a confusing situation. They accepted the saving grace of Jesus, but their spouse did not.

Thank goodness Paul spoke to this issue. The believer-unbeliever marriage is still a common union today. Sometimes it occurs similarly to what we’ll find in Corinth—where God calls one half of two married unbelievers into relationship with Christ before the other half. Sometimes one of God’s children willingly chooses to marry outside of God’s boundaries. In either case, a spiritually unequal marriage can be a source of loneliness, confusion, frustration, conflict, and sometimes even self-condemnation and hopelessness. If you’re a Christian married to a non-Christian, I hope today’s devotional brings you some encouragement. If that’s not you, I pray that God will still take you deeper in your relationship with Him as we study His tenderness toward the believer—and the unbeliever—in this type of marriage.

Please read 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.

The Corinthian church had demonstrated some confusion concerning marriage when it involved spiritual inequality. In chapter 5, Paul corrected the misconception that he (in a previous letter to them) meant that believers should abstain from close relationships with “unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols.” Instead, as we read, he meant that the church should not associate with fellow *believers* who practiced such unholy behavior. Since at least some in the Corinthian church held to the belief that all sexual intimacy was sinful (7:1)—even within a Christian marriage—how much more defiling would those believers consider sexual intimacy with an unbeliever? So much so that some wanted to end the marriage so that they weren’t in a constant state of sin and defilement. Thankfully, that’s not how God sees the relationship.

- What is the instruction given to husbands and wives who have an unbelieving spouse?

- Why? (v. 14, 16)

First, the Corinthian church needed to understand that God did not look on their spiritually mixed marriages as sinful. When God decides to call one spouse to Himself before the other, we can trust the sovereignty of His decision and the intentionality of His method. He never causes us to sin, nor does He tempt us to it. So if God ordains that one partner in a marriage gives his or her life to Him and the other does not, the believing partner is not thrust into sin.

Now, let me take a brief moment to address the elephant in the room: knowingly choosing a spiritually unequal marriage. When we, as God’s people, purposefully choose to marry one who does not follow the Lord, that *is* sinful. Can we do it and still love God? Absolutely. Is it unforgivable? Never. But it is, nonetheless, contrary to God’s design. Throughout the Old Testament, God warned His people against marrying those who worshipped other gods. In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to avoid partnering with unbelievers. All the commentaries I read on this passage agree that Paul’s prohibition pertains to marriage (as well as other relationships that would develop any sort of intimacy). I cannot overemphasize, though, that God’s love and protection are the driving forces behind the requirement that His people marry someone who genuinely loves Him. God’s rules are always for our benefit and to keep us free—not to put unnecessary restrictions upon us.

If you’re not married but considering marriage to an unbelieving spouse—no matter how wonderful he or she is—I encourage you to humbly seek God’s heart for you. He knows what lies ahead: the hardships, the pain, the struggle. He wants His way for you because He loves you. If you’ve chosen this road already and willingly married an unbeliever; if you have never been honest before God about your choice; run to Him. He’s not condemning you; He loves you with an unstoppable love. But He does want you to acknowledge that you chose outside of His boundaries for you. He will bless you as you confess before Him. He’ll even bless your spouse. If you already have dealt with this with God, please do not let my word reopen old feelings of guilt. You are clean before Him, and you have enough to handle without adding self condemnation to your plate.

Now, let’s move on and understand what Paul told the Corinthian church to do in the case of a spiritually mixed marriage. First, let’s note that this applies to all who are in this type of marriage; it applies whether the believer knowingly chose an unbelieving spouse or not. First and foremost, Paul says *don’t seek*

to end the marriage! As we studied yesterday, all marriage is valuable to God, and the holiness of our spouse does not tip the scales in one direction or another concerning our commitment to him or her. God is completely holy, and we certainly are not; yet He chose to bring us into everlasting covenant with Himself. He will not cast us away based on our lack of holiness but instead commits to us and makes us holy through the transforming power of His Spirit. So, too, should the believing spouse's level of commitment to his or her spouse remain steadfast.

I love what Paul says next. (I actually love a lot of what Paul says in these few verses!) He gives several reasons why the believer should stay in this marriage.

- 1. Your holiness affects your spouse.** Friends, in the midst of a relationship that the Corinthians feared was defiling them, Paul tells us that God regards it in the opposite way. Instead of looking down on the believer as tainted by the unbelieving spouse, God looks with favor on the unbeliever because God's own child is joined with him or her. Instead of guilt by association, God blesses by association. The unbelieving spouse is said to be "sanctified" (ESV) by the believing spouse. When God sanctifies something, He sets it aside for His holy purposes. The unbelieving spouse is separated from the rest of the unbelieving world and joined in holiness to God's community, experiencing many of the blessings that God bestows on His own. This doesn't mean that the unbeliever is saved through marriage (v. 16), but it does put him or her in a regular position of experiencing God's grace, mercy, blessings, and love because of—and sometimes directly from—the believing spouse. Oh, how I love our God. He loves us without limit!
- 2. Your holiness affects your children.** God is ever tender toward the children of His children, promising that He will bless the children of His people to the thousandth generation (Deut. 7:9). Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:14 that the children in a spiritually unequal marriage are *holy*. Doesn't that bring you such peace? The holiness that a believing spouse brings into the marriage is so pleasing to God that He extends that to the believer's children. And don't think for a second that He won't also use your faith to affect the kids, train them up, and draw them to Himself.
- 3. God will change you.** Oh, you can be sure that God never wastes an opportunity. The refinement that happens to the believing spouse in a spiritually mixed marriage may be painful, but it is profound. When you realize that God is the only One who can change your spouse's heart toward Him and release yourself from that pressure, God uses it to build a stubborn trust in His sovereignty, power, and plan for you and your spouse. I could go on and on about the ways God will grow and refine the believing partner in this marriage, but that's not our whole study goal today. For now, please be encouraged and reminded that He always has plans for His people; God is for you, even though circumstances may be hard. He has plans to prosper you even in a mismatched marriage.
- 4. God may use you to save your spouse.**

Please read 1 Peter 3:1-2.

First, let me be clear to say that I am not contradicting what I stated above—that God is the only One who can change your spouse's heart toward Him. That holds true. But God may, in His sovereign plan, *use you* to accomplish His salvation plan. Commentators are torn between two interpretations of 1 Corinthians 7:16. Some interpret Paul's question to mean that the believing spouse should make

every effort to live in peace with the unbelieving spouse because the believer may play a role in the unbeliever's journey to salvation. Others assert that Paul anticipated a negative response to this question, saying essentially that the believing spouse should peaceably let the unbeliever end the marriage because he or she may never come to salvation. In light of 1 Peter 3:1, I tend to agree with the first interpretation. But regardless of which Paul intended (or perhaps he meant it to be ambiguous), we can readily see the staggering generosity of God. He releases the believing spouse from bearing the responsibility for a spouse's salvation, but He reserves the right to bless the believer by using him or her to affect His plan for salvation in the unbeliever.

Paul offers one last instruction concerning spiritually mixed marriages: the believing spouse is released from the unbelieving spouse if the unbeliever wants to end the marriage. Why? Because God calls us to peace. The peace that is always connected with our God—the Prince of Peace—is *shalôm*. In its most general sense, *shalôm* is the sense that everything is well; it's an overall feeling that all is right in the world. When we consider Paul's call to peace for the believer in a spiritually unequal marriage, we can make two solid assertions:

God calls the believer to act peaceably toward the unbeliever. By living peaceably in the marriage and keeping the family together, the believer institutes an overall sense of peace—of well-being—within the home and family. Will there be conflict? Surely. But in a general sense, the family remains in tact, and the believer (if he or she is submitting to God's authority in his or her life) treats the spouse with respect and love, keeping marriage and family functioning as God intended. All is as it should be.

God calls the believer to experience *His* peace. By releasing the believing spouse from the marriage if the unbelieving spouse initiates its end, God removes any responsibility to *make* the marriage work and the guilt if it doesn't. The believer, having done all to live in peace with the unbeliever, is not responsible for the unbeliever's decision. There is no need to scratch and claw to hold together a marriage that an unbelieving spouse wants to end. The believer can let his or her spouse leave peaceably and experience God's peace in knowing that he or she is not responsible for the end result.

I am overwhelmed nearly to tears when I think about the care God took by having Paul address these very real, very difficult situations in marriage. God is perfect, good, and beautiful; but He doesn't ignore the sometimes ugly realities that His children may face. He meets us there, provides for us, and pulls us out and up to Himself.

Consider: God's feelings for you are so much greater than you can imagine—so much so that He sanctifies and blesses others because of you. There is not one detail of your life, marriage, or heart that He doesn't know intimately and care about deeply.

Pray: Thank God for His generosity today. Tell Him you love Him, too. And ask Him to enable you to love when it's difficult.

Day 3

Living as Called

“Each of you should continue to live in whatever situation the Lord has placed you, and remain as you were when God first called you.”

1 Corinthians 7:17

The Corinthian church was called out of and existed in the midst of an extremely pagan society. They had lots of questions about what to do about some old situations in light of the fact that they now belonged to Christ. We talked about divorce and marriage already, and we'll discover a couple more unique situations today. Any of us who have been called by Christ later in life may have wondered similarly.

Please read 1 Corinthians 7:17-24.

- What religious, social, or economic factors did Paul address in these verses?
- What are some of the religious, social, or economic backgrounds some of us come from now?

Admittedly, I have struggled with this passage in the past because, on the surface, it can sound like God doesn't care much about our circumstances. Quite to the contrary, God cares about our circumstances so much that He calls us while we're in them and tells us to stay there because He is the One who designed our calling *within* those circumstances for the express purpose of affecting the other people around us.

Please read the verses below.

“Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet

there was none of them.” (Psalm 139:16)

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10)

- In your own words, explain what these verses have in common.

Before you were even a thought in your parents' minds, God knew you. He not only knew what you would do, but He planned and prepared it all for you. When we consider our lives in this light, we can't help but feel pretty special—and rightly so! But let's turn our gaze slightly....Instead of focusing on how special we each are to God, let's take a moment to be awed by how infinitely great God is.

Like we learned at the outset of our study in 1 Corinthians, God's wisdom is higher and greater than we can comprehend. We know that He crafts the details of our individual lives, but how often do we consider that He has woven those details together with billions of other lives? That's a staggering thought.

When we consider that God loves and values the details of our lives but that those details are only a small part of His enormous Kingdom agenda, it realigns our perspective concerning present circumstances. This is what Paul is getting at when he tells the Corinthian church to "remain as you were when God first called you."

The Corinthian believers had so many situations from which they were looking to escape. Their focus was on the minutiae of their present situation instead of on God's power to affect His purpose within it. Essentially, Paul was saying, "Stop paying so much attention to what you're doing and where you're doing it, and start focusing on Who does it with you, in you, and through you. God can use you no matter what your circumstances are!" Sometimes we need to be reminded of the same, don't we? This world is full of dark places and lost people. Thankfully, there is no dark place that Christ can't light up. As His hands and feet, we help reach those dark places—but we can't reach them unless we're in them.

I'm not suggesting that we never work toward personal goals, and neither is Paul. In 7:21, he tells anyone who was called to Christ while a slave to attain their freedom if it's possible. Neither am I saying that we should remain in an obviously sinful situation. But if God calls us to salvation or to go deeper with Him while we're trudging through a job we don't love—and there is no other immediate prospect—we can take joy and have peace knowing that God even has plans for us there.

Finally, let's take another look at 1 Corinthians 7:23-24. Paul already spoke to those who were bondservants when they became Christians in verses 21-22. Now he makes a point as he talks to those who are free: Christ bought them for a "high price." They belong to Him now. What follows is profound: "so don't be enslaved to the world." What does this mean? How could someone become a slave to the world when he or she is already free from human slavery and even free from slavery to sin because of Christ?

I think **Galatians 1:10** will help us understand. **Please read it.**

Don't give up the freedom you have in belonging to Christ by following after the world and trying to please people! The world tells us that circumstances and achievements give our lives meaning, but Christ tells us that circumstances are secondary to our real purpose: displaying His glory. He doesn't require us to find the perfect situation in which to accomplish this, and so Paul cautions the Corinthian church not to become

enslaved by that pursuit.

Consider: What circumstances in your life now seem unimportant? If you don't feel like God is specifically telling you to move out of that situation, trust Him to use you where you are now.

Pray: Ask God to open your eyes to see your situation like He does. Ask Him to give you opportunities to serve Him where you are and to bless you with His peace as you trust Him to lead you. Thank Him that He designed and intimately knows every one of your days.

Day 4

Engaged but Not Attached

"Those who use the things of the world should not become attached to them. For this world as we know it will soon pass away."

1 Corinthians 7:31

We've talked about marriage a lot these past couple weeks, and you might assume from the devotional title above that we'll stay in keeping with that today. However, we actually have a different focus. Instead of moving right into verse 25 of 1 Corinthians 7 where Paul addresses the

young unmarried people and the widows within the Corinthian church, we're going to jump down to verses 29-31. We'll come back to the rest of chapter 7 tomorrow.

Please read 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.

When we first started this series, I mentioned that one of the major themes within 1 Corinthians is that we believers need to loosen our grip on this world and fix our eyes firmly on Christ. This passage is a prime example of just that. The Corinthian church was struggling with several things, as we've already studied. One of their struggles, if we were to try to succinctly describe it, was to rightly understand how their spiritual reality (Christianity) related to their physical reality. Some swung hard one way by claiming absolute freedom in Christ but used that to gratify any bodily desire; others would rather deny the importance of the physical (7:1). Neither approach was right, and much of Paul's purpose in 1 Corinthians was to teach this body of believers how to live intentionally in the present but not to be so attached to it that their focus was diverted from Christ. Isn't that our struggle, too?

- Fill in the blanks:

* "Those with wives should not _____."

* "Those who weep or who rejoice or who buy things should not _____
by their weeping or their joy or their possessions."

* "Those who use the things of the world should not become _____."

In some other translations, the wording in these verses makes a right understanding a little more difficult; it sounds more like Paul is telling the Corinthian believers not to completely pull back from any matters pertaining to this present life. We know, though, that that couldn't be Paul's intention because so much of the letter is spent teaching this church that their behavior and their holiness on earth matters to God. So the NLT (above) conveys this well with wording that clearly indicates that Paul is instructing the church not to become absorbed by or singularly focused on the things of earth. They matter, but they're not everything.

Why is this important to us now? Read verse 29 and the end of verse 31 again.

Please also read 2 Peter 3:3-16.

- In your own words, what will "scoffers" say?

- Fill in the blanks:

Some people think the Lord is being _____, but He is really being _____.

- Why?

- How will His return come about (v. 10)?

- How should this affect our lives on earth (v. 11)?

- What should our attitude be about His return (v. 12)?

I can't tell you how many times I've heard brothers and sisters in Christ say something like, *Every generation thinks it's the last generation; they all thought Jesus was coming during their lifetime.* The tone

and intended purpose for this type of statement is usually to discourage those who earnestly believe Christ's return is right around the corner, but it's actually a wonderful testament to every generation of believers. From the time Jesus ascended to heaven, each generation has lived joyfully anticipating His return. That's what Peter says we ought to do! That's what Christ wants us to do. And that is the key to engaging in our world without being absorbed in it.

If we believe that Jesus probably won't return during our lifetime, our lives likely won't reflect an urgency for His kingdom's purposes. We easily become absorbed in the here-and-now. The result is a sad, downward turn: we don't really believe He'll return during our lifetime, so we don't live like He will; so we hope He won't. But when we truly believe (and might I add, hope) that Christ might come back at any moment, our lives will be radically different. Jesus says so Himself in Matthew 24:43-44. In these verses, Jesus tells His disciples to keep watch for His return at the end of the age because they won't know exactly when He is coming. They had to be ready; so did the Corinthians; and so do we.

As we work our way through 1 Corinthians, we're learning so much about how to ready ourselves for the return of our King. I think, though, that Colossians 3 beautifully sums up how Christ's bride should ready herself.

Please read Colossians 3:1-17.

Let's take what we find in Colossians 3 and make ourselves a reference guide.

How to Live in the World without Focusing on the World:

1. **Focus on the right reality.** In this world, physicality is nearly synonymous with reality. But "God is spirit" (John 4:24), and He created the physical world that we now see from that which cannot be seen (Hebrews 11:3). The spiritual world is indeed reality—and it is the right reality that deserves our focus.
2. **Put your sin "to death."** We are alive in Christ, no longer enslaved to sin but conquerors of it. So we must get rid of the sin in our lives that characterizes the unbelieving world and will bring God's wrath to the world. Where sin exists, a fear of Christ's return will also lurk.
3. **Clothe yourself in the righteousness of Christ.** We need to replace the sin we put to death with Christ-like attributes and action! When we take things like mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love into the world, we affect the world *for* Christ instead of being affected by it and becoming overly attached to it.
4. **Fill your life with the message of Christ.** This must be at the core of our hearts. It must overflow to believers by way of encouragement and to unbelievers by way of grace as Christ's representatives. When we take Christ's message out into the world, we're doing just as He asked us to do. Should He return while our hearts are full with Him and our actions proclaim Him, we'll be ready.

Consider: Take an honest look at how you feel about this world and Christ's return. Are you more attached to the plans you have than you are excited for His coming? Do you think He really could return in your lifetime? If He does, are you ready? Or are you so excited for His return that you've given up on some earthly responsibilities? Have you disengaged?

Pray: Ask God to minister to your heart about these things. Detaching without disengaging is hard for us. Ask God to help you love the world and also look forward to His coming.

Day 5

To the Singles

"So the person who marries his fiancée does well, and the person who doesn't marry does even better."

1 Corinthians 7:38

We tend to give marriage a lot of attention and spend no small amount of time discussing it. That's certainly not wrong, but sometimes I wonder if we do so at the expense of diminishing God's gift of singleness to some. Paul made the assertion on more than one occasion that he thought being single was a better gift from God than marriage (1 Cor. 7:7). Today, we're going to give special attention to this gift and find out why Paul thought it so preferable. Let's dive right in.

Please read 1 Corinthians 7:25-40.

- What would Paul like to spare those who are not yet married (v. 28)?
- About what things is the unmarried man or woman anxious?
- About what things is the married man or woman anxious?

In speaking to the young, unmarried Corinthian Christians and the widowed, Paul encourages those who might be inclined to stay single to seize the opportunity. While marriage is certainly a blessing from God, it also comes with some trouble and difficulty. We talked about a few of those troubles earlier this week, and here, Paul mentions one more: the normal obligations of daily life. The married person—and perhaps the married Christian especially—must devote time, energy, and attention to the needs of his or her spouse. To ignore a spouse’s needs would be to ignore God’s instructions for how to live in the relationship He designed and gave; it’s wrong.

The single person, however, has complete autonomy with his or her time, and can dedicate as much of it as desired to serve the Lord. Paul is one of the best examples of this in action. He had opportunity to go wherever God sent him. He established churches across Asia, brought the Good News of Jesus Christ to the lost and formerly excluded Gentile world, braved dangerous trips and territories, made deep relationships and serious disciples. The singular goal of Paul’s life was to know Christ more intimately than most knew their spouse. That goal fueled his ministry as he worked to make Christ known to all who would receive Him. Paul wouldn’t have traded this for anything; his singleness was truly an amazing gift.

But Paul is not the only person in whom we see God pour out privilege in singleness. The apostle John, in his old age, was sent to the island of Patmos. There, he likely experienced intense isolation, and in that aloneness—just John and God—Jesus revealed Himself in ways John could not have imagined. And from that time, we have been blessed with the book of Revelation.

Anna, the prophetess, is another example.

Please read Luke 2:36-40.

- Approximately how long had Anna been widowed?

- What unique privilege did she have?

Anna was an old woman at the time of Jesus’ birth. She had only been married for seven years before her husband died. Rather than remarry, Anna chose to remain single and to devote her life to the Lord. She never left the temple; she fasted and prayed constantly. Her commitment to God was unrivaled and uninterrupted by any other human relationship. And when it was time for God to send the Messiah, God gifted Anna with the ability to recognize Him right away—even as a baby. She prophesied and spoke to everyone who was waiting for Jerusalem’s redemption. What a gift! Anna’s singleness afforded her the time and singleness of mind to devote to God.

Consider: If you are single, how do you feel about it? Have you considered it a gift from God, or have you felt forgotten by Him? Please understand that if God has reserved you for Himself, He will not leave you without as much of Him as you desire. He’s just waiting for you to come to Him.

If you're not single, God sometimes chooses to pull you into a period of "alone time" with Him. When He does this, remember that this, too, is a gift from Him. This is where it's just you and Him, and He will deepen your relationship as much as you are willing to let Him do.

Pray: Thank God for His gift of singleness. Not everyone can receive it, Jesus said (Matt. 19:11). Ask Him to reveal Himself in the gift, not letting any of it go to waste.

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