

As I said last week, There are at least three things to remember from the historical context of this epistle that will help unravel the difficult parts of this chapter.

1. Corinth was a very loose, morally. In fact, to be called “Corinthian” in those days was to have the reputation of being a sexual libertine; one who lived without restraint. The Greeks also taught that that the body was the source of evil, as they defined evil. Because of this, the body was nothing, and ultimate peace would be attained when man is delivered from the body. These two ideas are not as contradictory as they may appear at first glance. The practical outgrowth of these ideas was that salvation came, not by restraint of the body, but by escape from it. The pervasive sexual immorality of Corinth had affected the church, and led to Paul’s strong statements concerning fornication that we find in Chapter Six. Our bodies are not given to us for fornication, but we are members of Christ; how can I be joined to an harlot.
2. There was a Jewish colony at Corinth, influential in the church, that taught that it was a person’s duty to be married—that it was sinful not to be married.
3. The church was under persecution. There was no advantage, materially, to be a Christian in the first three hundred years of Christianity, but Christians lived under the daily threat of arrest, confiscation of property, beatings, imprisonment, exile, or death. We must keep this in mind as we read the New Testament.

But let us look at the words. There is a great deal to be learned from this passage. Some of the material would not be applicable in our situation, but there are some timeless truths that are very important.

Vs. 17-20. Here is a timeless truth. God gives His gifts according to His own will. An important part of your growth as a Christian is to understand who you are and what God has given you. Paul is saying that you are not to be in rebellion against your past. Some people spend their whole lives never coming to terms with who they are because they are in rebellion to their past. This is what the Fifth Commandment is all about: Honor your father and your mother: This does not mean that a man cannot improve himself, but he will never do so before God until he comes to terms with who he is. Becoming a Christian does not change the natural gifts and abilities that you have; what it does change is the way you live and the way you use your gifts and abilities. A Jew could rejoice in his Jewishness; and the Gentile could rejoice in his non-Jewishness. The Jew was not to try to be a non-Jew; the Gentile was not to try to be a Jew. This is Paul’s meaning. There is much more that could be said here.

Vs. 21-24. The same could be said about social status. Christianity does not call you to chaff and complain about your status. There is nothing wrong with a slave desiring to be free, and if he has the opportunity, take it, for freedom is better than bondage. But the hard truth is that in the history of the world, most men and women have been slaves to others in some degree or another. Just as we would choose to live rather than to die, so it is better to choose freedom rather than bondage. But we are called to peace, and must recognize that God gives us our lot in life, and we are to make it beautiful by our faith and service. You should judge so: If I am a slave, but belong to Christ, then I am the Lord’s freeman—for being delivered from sin and guilt, no one can take that from me, but I belong to Christ and cannot be the servant of a man. If I am a free man, as we all are in this great country, then I am to consider myself a slave to work for the good of others, because I belong to Christ, and do not belong to myself—this is the will of Christ for me, that I serve the people of God, not according to my own will, but according to the will of my Father. I am to submit to God and not live in proud rebellion and discontent. He has called us to join the human race and to join the church, whatever our social status and condition. Seek to improve yourself, but don’t put on airs.

Verse 24 for is very important. We can abide with God no matter where we are—if we are a slave under the most terrible conditions, or whether we are a king on a throne, master of all we see. Most of us will never

know either of these extremes of human condition, but life is long, and it is good to remember that whatever our condition, we are to make our home in God not in the conditions around us. The rule is patience and continuing in well-doing to those around us, even if they be our masters. We are never exempted from the law of Christ, to love our enemies and pray for those who treat us badly.

Vs. 25-38. Remember the present distress, the persecution that accompanied the Gospel everywhere. The same rule applied to marriage in those times of distress. It might be better not to get married, because if the times are very difficult and trying, it might not be a good idea to get married and have children, for that will add to the cares and troubles. But don't abandon your responsibilities, and if you choose to get married or to give your children in marriage, you have not done evil.

Notice that in this passage, Paul is walking a very careful, biblical balance between the pagan idea that marriage in itself was defiling; the Jewish idea that marriage was commanded; and making accommodation to the present distress and trouble that the church endured. It's ok to get married and to give in marriage; it might be desirable to get married rather than be tempted with fornication; it might be smart not to get married; if you get married you will have other concerns and troubles because of the present circumstances; if you don't get married you might be able to give yourself to God's work in a way you couldn't being married, considering the present situation;

But remember this: The world is passing away. The time is short—the present condition is not going to last forever. Don't make decisions now in terms of the present situation, for that is changing. You belong to the Lord and His kingdom and that is forever. I want you to profit from what I say; I am not trying to put you into bondage, but to help you see the present situation, so that you can make wise choices, considering who you are and the circumstances under which God has give you to live you lives. It might make good sense to postpone some decisions about things like marriage, but you have not sinned, no matter what your decision is, if you abide in God, and live your lives in patience and doing good. This has to do not only in terms of your decisions concerning yourself, but also decisions concerning your sons and daughters in terms of marriage.

It also applies to widows. Some may choose to remarry; others may choose to remain unmarried. The principles that apply to the whole passage apply to widows also.

Vs. 39,40. This is the fundamental rule of marriage. It is for life, and can be broken only by death, fornication, or desertion. Paul does not give the whole doctrine of marriage here, but enunciates the basic rule from the creation of the world: God made man male and female and a man leaves his mother and his father and joins to his wife and they become one flesh. It is sin to rend apart a man and his wife. She is not to leave her husband, and he is not to leave his wife.

Christianity is not to become an excuse to doing stupid things. If you have come to Christ and you spouse does not have faith, you are not to use you faith as an excuse to leave your spouse; It is God who has placed you in this condition, and you are patiently to abide, if your spouse is willing to stay. Who knows whether you will win your spouse?

Become a Christian does not mean that you no longer have to serve your master, if you are a slave. True Christianity is the greatest enemy to the pagan orders that would enslave men and bring them into bondage to other men, but the issue must not be joined according to the flesh, as if rebelling against God could ever bring true freedom and peace. Christianity must not be abused as if it is a support and justification of slavery, for that would be to turn it against itself; but neither must it be abused to countenance rioting and mur-

der, for that is to turn it against God. Becoming a Christian does not mean that you are freed from the responsibilities of your job and place, but you are freed to bring glory to God in all things, in whatever you do.

I will close with some examples of those who lived beautiful lives in terms of the conditions under which God had ordered their lives. These examples will profit you and me, if we take them to heart.

1. There was a slave girl in Syria. She was an Israelite, taken captive during one of the raids upon Israel by the Syrian army. She was the slave of the Syrian captive, Naaman. We do not know this girl's name, nor what became of her. When Naaman contracted leprosy, it was she who witnessed of the true God, and told Naaman that there was a prophet in Israel who could heal Naaman of his leprosy. Naaman journeyed to Israel, saw the prophet Elisha, was healed of his leprosy and became a worshipper of the true God. What of this girl? How cruel to be snatched from your home and family and made a slave, but she did not live for revenge or murder, but did good to all those around her.
2. There was Joseph. He was terribly mistreated by his brothers, and sold to Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, the captain of Egypt. He angered Potiphar's wife when he would not commit fornication with her, and her lies sent him to prison. But he always did good, even to those who mistreated him. At Potiphar's house he was faithful and became steward of all that Potiphar possessed. In prison, he was faithful and became the actual ruler of the prison. He did not live for revenge, rebellion, and murder, although he had many injuries that he could have nursed and fed in his heart. But he lived with God and did good to those around him. The great enemy of those who are mistreated and persecuted arises in their own hearts: the enemy is cynicism and unbelief, so that they begin to doubt that God works all things together for their good; so they allow their hearts to be filled with anger, unbelief, and despair, and they seek revenge and hatred to their own destruction. Beware: your business is with God, and you must abide with Him.
3. There was David. Anointed as a young lad to be king of Israel by Samuel, he killed Goliath in the name of the Lord, and became son-in-law to Saul and a great warrior in Israel. But Saul envied his popularity and success, and plotted to kill him. David had to flee and lived as a fugitive in caves and among the Philistines. One day he pretended to be insane, and allowed his slobber to run down the gate of the city for fear of the Philistine king. What a terrible time this was for David. But he did not live for wrath, hatred, and revenge, but submitted to the will of God for his life. On several occasions he had opportunity to kill Saul, but did not, for his trust was in the Lord. He left his case in God's hand and did good to those around him. He would not have chosen this lifestyle, and several times he made his case to Saul; but he trust in God to perform the promises that He had made. When he had opportunity after the death of Saul, he became king of Judah, and later king over all of Israel, but he also made his home in God both in exile and as king of Israel, except in the matter of Uriah and Bathsheba.
4. There was also the story of St. Patrick. He was captured by Irish bandits from his home in Gaul and spent a number of years as a slave, working farms in Ireland. He escaped when he had opportunity, but he did not allow himself to be overcome by the injustice. He loved the land and people of Ireland. He became a priest and returned to Ireland with a man appointed to plant the church in Ireland and be bishop there. Patrick did not have the education to be appointed bishop, but when the bishop died, Patrick was appointed in his place. He was able by the power of the Gospel to transform the land of Ireland, the land of his slavery and labor.

These are all people who did not allow the conditions of their lives to destroy them, but rather, by faith, they lived for the glory of God, put away thoughts of revenge and anger, did not live for their own amusement and pleasure, but accepted the condition that God had given them to live their lives, did good to others, and transformed the conditions around them. May it be so with us. God bless you.