

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Church and the World - 1 Corinthians 7 and 8

In thinking of our subject today, the illustration from the Acts of the Apostles 18:24-28 comes to mind. We see three people, all living their lives for the Lord and desiring to honour Him. Aquila and his wife, Priscilla, were visitors to Ephesus yet anxious in their own way to serve the Lord. Apollos, apparently a single man, also came there. He was an excellent orator and spoke in the synagogue teaching that Jesus is Christ, the One sent by God. But his knowledge was limited and there is the gracious meeting together where the married couple were able to give Apollos much more of the truth. What harmony there was in the things of the Lord when they all worked together, whether married or single.

Before we look in a little more detail at the verses of our chapters today, we need to clarify some statements made by the apostle Paul, all in chapter 7, concerning his right to speak. In verse 6 Paul says, 'I speak by permission, (that is, I consent to it) and not by commandment'. Paul did not command what he had just been saying but he agreed with it. In verse 10 the apostle says, 'unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord'. Here he is referring to the words of the Lord Jesus who spoke about matters concerning marriage in Matthew 5:31 and 32 and Matthew 19:3-12. As the Lord's words, they have the force of commandments to the apostle. In verse 12 Paul comments, 'to the rest speak I, not the Lord'. What he has to say here are not matters on which the Lord has spoken. In verse 25 we read, 'I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment'. It is not right to suggest simply that Paul admits that what he is saying does not come from the Lord. He does claim that some things relate to what the Lord has said in the Gospels but others are not quotations from the Lord's words. Let us always be clear that Paul was writing as an apostle, inspired by the Holy Spirit, 2 Timothy 3:16, and the Holy Spirit has been pleased to include this letter in the whole canon of Scripture. We are not able to pick and choose what we will from the Scriptures.

As we come to the subject of these chapters, let us remind ourselves also that Corinth was one of the foremost cities of the day. Greek civilization flourished but so did open and very gross immorality of various kinds such as drunkenness, gluttony and prostitution. The first chapter of the letter to the Romans was written, we understand, from Corinth. The shame and vileness described in chapter 1 could be found in this city. Therefore, there is a specific reason for Paul writing as he did. How helpful it has been to many in different generations.

As we look at chapter 7, **the relationship between man and woman**, Paul begins answering questions they had sent and this subject follows from the previous chapter.

In verses 1-9 we have **the single and the married life**. He is, of course, speaking to Christians, those who wish to maintain a testimony in their lives to the Lord Jesus, who saved them.

He describes first the **need for care and self restraint**. 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman', verse 1. This is not advice for discrediting marriage but rather that care must be exercised to avoid actions which can lead to immoral behaviour. We well know the power of the senses in various ways. Sight is very powerful and imprints on our minds what we have seen, with lasting effect. Touch is another powerful sense and much care is needed that wrong indications are not given or that we allow a touch to escalate into behaviour to be avoided. In the previous chapter, 6:18, Paul says, 'Flee fornication'. These are not the circumstances in which a Christian should be.

Conversely, the **freedom of marriage is for all**. 'Let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband', verse 2. There is every reason for both man and woman to marry so that careless behaviour between the sexes becomes unnecessary. We know very well how illicit sex has become much publicised and how little care is exercised today. The Christian is warned against this. 'Keep thyself pure', the apostle writes in 1 Timothy 5:22. Marriage, based on love, will avoid error but it is just as important to realise that both husband and wife have rights and responsibilities, verses 4 and 5. Also, the writer to the Hebrews, 13:4, reminds his readers that 'marriage is honourable in all'. So let us in our day realise that there is purity before the Lord in marriage but not in illicit and careless liaisons between partners. One more thing with regard to the Christian: right at the end of this chapter, speaking of the liberty to get married, Paul says to the Christian contemplating this, 'only in the Lord', verse 39. How important this is for the believer.

The apostle then goes on to point out that there are **reasons to stay single** and we will come to more verses later. However, Paul's point here is that God has given a proper place to all, he calls it a 'gift', verse 7, and we should be happy to fill that position. Some like Paul himself, remain unmarried, like the athlete preparing for the games, and some live wasted lives unless they get married. 'It is better to marry than to burn', verse 9, that means, to continue letting an unsatisfied desire burn on like a fire. It is vital that we keep in our minds what the Lord has purposed for each of us.

Next the apostle speaks of **separation and divorce**, verses 10-16. The Lord had declared that marriage should be regarded as indissoluble. 'They are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder', Matthew 19:6. The Lord proceeds, 'Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her that is put away doth commit adultery', verse 9. In our chapter, the apostle also refers to this declaration of the Lord, 'Let not the wife depart from her husband', verses 10 and 13; to the husband, 'let not the husband put away his wife', verse 11. So Paul reinforces the same words of the Lord. This is why he regards it as a command, verse 10. There is, however, one qualification. It may be that the unbelieving partner is not prepared to remain with a believing partner. Then, the apostle says, 'let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases', verse 15. It is important that peace is maintained.

How should we proceed if circumstances arise for those who feel that they cannot remain in the state of marriage? Well, says the apostle, the only answer is to remain unmarried or be reconciled, because God still sees you as 'joined together' as one in marriage.

Then a further question arises. What if one of the parties is not a Christian? An Israelite would be breaking the law by marrying a Gentile and would be regarded as unclean. There was a requirement to put away such an one, Ezra 10:3. For believers in the work of Christ, the position is reversed. The believing partner will want to honour the Lord and not to put away, or leave, the other, 1 Corinthians 7:12. The apostle gives a special reason for this. The unbeliever is 'sanctified' and the children are 'clean'. From this we understand that the unbeliever was no longer only in the darkness of the world but surrounded by the light of Christianity, with a Christian partner. Only the work of Christ can save from sin, but the testimony of the believing partner could lead to the blessing of salvation. It is, however, important to maintain peace within the home.

We now come to verses 17-24, a parenthesis, which encourages us to **abide in the calling wherein we are called**. For those in Corinth, there were a great many differences among those who believed. Some were Jews, some Gentiles, some were free men, and some were slaves. The apostle points out that there is no point in immediately making a change. It was not possible for a Jew to be uncircumcised but that rite made no difference to his Christianity. He need only take advantage of a situation into which he might be placed, such as being a slave who becomes free. Why is all this? It is because, with becoming a believer through faith in the Lord Jesus, we recognise that it has cost the Lord Jesus a tremendous price. We now belong to Him and wish it so. 'Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men', verse 23. We are therefore servants of God and now our mind is set on His interests to glorify Him in all things. Does the Lord direct your life? The Lord Jesus said, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God', Matthew 6:33, and we can be sure of every blessing thereafter.

The final section in the chapter, verses 25-40, **contrasts the married and unmarried**.

Several statements are made:

1. Those who are married: They should continue in marriage; there is nothing wrong in that.
2. Those that are single: there are very good reasons for staying single, too, but if you must marry that also is good. It may be easier to serve the Lord without restriction for the single person.
3. It also has to be said that marriage brings with it responsibility between the partners and that responsibility should be honoured. The responsibility to each other may easily keep each one in a greater or lesser degree from caring for the things of the Lord.
4. When all these things are said, there is one great matter in mind; 'the time is short', verse 29. We are reminded of the coming of the Lord. Soon He is coming. Our thoughts and actions need to be given to serving Him. We have little time for those many things which concern us in the world, leisure, pleasure, trade, possessions. The Lord is coming and, as we approach that time, difficulties will only increase. It is the Lord who should captivate our hearts. For those of us who are married, we together, can also put His interests first. How important it is to 'serve the Lord without distraction', verse 35.

5. Yet the apostle is most gracious even in his thinking. Although he sees the opportunities in serving the Lord as a single servant, he believes personal responsibility before the Lord is important. Be happy to marry if that is your will there is no sin, verse 36.
6. To those who are married, the apostle makes clear that the married state should continue, in the sight of God as 'one flesh', until the Lord calls one or the other to 'sleep'. Again we find in verse 39 the softer word is used for the husband dying, as in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 and 14. It is of very great comfort to know that every believer, when called from the body, is asleep in Jesus, to be raised again at His coming. In writing to the Thessalonians 4:18, Paul says, 'Comfort one another with these words'.
7. Let us note again the comment of the apostle to believers contemplating marriage, 'only in the Lord', verse 39. The apostle also writes in 2 Corinthians 6:14, 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?' Paul full well sees the difficulty of a marriage where God has joined together in one flesh, Matthew 19:6, two persons, only one of whom is a believer. Immediately the Lord has lost His place in being publicly welcomed to that home.

The subject of marriage is of such practical help and importance that the Lord has directed Paul to write on these matters, not only for our help, but so that we may better honour His Name while in the world. May we all accept these instructions as given to us by the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 8 we come to a new subject; that of **liberty governed by love**.

A further question has been asked and the first six verses bring us to the subject of **meat offered to idols**. This subject springs out of the fact that meat was offered in the sacrifices made to idols and was then sold in the market places where people bought it for their own consumption. Is it really right to buy such meat, knowing it has been offered to idols, and for a believer to consume it and be defiled by it? It may be that those who asked the question were saying, 'we know idols are nothing but all the same should we eat the meat offered to those idols?'

First Paul speaks of their knowledge. It has its problems. Let not those things we have come to know puff us up because any knowledge we have is small compared with what we will learn. Pride is dangerous and our first priority is to love God and, where this is so, He will know us too, verse 3. It is our love for God that must characterise us in all circumstances.

The Corinthians had the knowledge that the idol is nothing but the knowledge of some of them was incomplete. Paul sets out the position by making the statement 'there is none other God but one', verse 4: 'to us there is but one God, the Father...and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by Him', verse 6. As believers we recognise no other, for there is no other God. So it is not a matter of concern to eat meat offered to idols; there is no defilement.

Having dealt with that, the apostle gets to the point of our responsibility with that knowledge. We **have liberty** but we must also **be governed by love**, verse 7-13. For those who still thought that an idol was a reality, where meat was offered, it had a defiling character to all who bought and ate it. Their conscience was weak and defiled, verse 7.

First we are told that by eating meat, or not eating meat, we are unaffected before God, verse 8. But the principle clearly requires that we must be careful not to stumble another Christian by what we do. In all our actions, if another is weak, that is, he has concerns without true knowledge, when he sees us doing something which he believes is wrong, he may imitate us. Then his conscience is involved and he convinces himself that he has sinned and worse things can follow. Our thoughtless action has caused a brother to stumble, he has not acted in faith and the effect may well be disaster. He is the brother for whom Christ died and his Christian testimony has been damaged. However, let us also be clear that 'He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life', John 3:36. Everlasting life, once received, can never be lost.

The apostle calls this careless action to 'sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience', verse 12. When this is so, 'we sin against Christ'. We need to maintain humility and not let pride in our knowledge control our actions. In such circumstances, Paul says, 'if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend', verse 13. Today, we rejoice in the liberty into which our faith has brought us, through Christ. We may not face exactly the same problems which faced the believers in Corinth. Nevertheless we must use that liberty with the greatest love for our brethren in Christ, too, that there may be a building up of our fellow believers and not a puffing up of self.

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