

The Mind of Christ: Undistracted Devotion to Christ
1 Corinthians 7:25-35

Sometimes preachers wake up on Monday morning thinking about the things that they said the previous morning – or the things they wish they’d said differently – or the things that they didn’t say and wish they’d said. Last Monday morning I woke up wishing I had said more than I did about the issue of slavery. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul challenged slaves to remain in the condition they found themselves in; Paul told them to gain their freedom if they ***could***, but to recognize the sovereignty of God if they couldn’t. You can be a slave and walk with God. That’s the point Paul made in 1 Corinthians 7.

I wish I’d said more about a Christian response to slavery and other forms of oppression in our day. Since I’ve “got the floor” now, I’ll say now what I wished I’d said last week.

You may have wondered why Jesus and Paul didn’t confront the institution of slavery directly. After all, Paul preached that both slaves and free have the same standing before God. Why didn’t he call for an end to slavery, demanding the same equality here on earth? It’s a complex issue, but one key fact is that Christianity was in its infancy and slavery was an established institution throughout the Roman world. Opposing slavery directly could have made Christianity just another political “cause” that sought to change society. The essence of Christianity is not our activism; the essence (and power) of Christianity lies in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But having said that, it is also true that the gospel itself sowed seeds that would eventually threaten every type of oppression. One of the distinguishing marks of the kingdom of God is ***justice***. When we pray, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we’re not only asking for personal holiness; we’re also asking for justice to come to the social structures of this world.

When people come to Christ and experience the love of God in the depths of their being, they begin to notice the condition of others. Compassion compels us to care about those who are helpless in this world. Compassion compels us to call governing authorities to fulfill their God-given mandate in relation to justice: to reward those who do good and punish those who do evil. And so Christians have often been at the forefront of anti-slavery and civil rights movements: William Wilberforce in 19th century England, Frederick Douglass here in the United States during the Civil War Era, Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1960’s.

The same is true in our day. It’s estimated that some 27 million people are enslaved today, many of whom are children: the sex-slave trade flourishes in many parts of the world; people from developing countries are brought against their will to large cities (including US cities) to work in kitchens and factories, etc. (see www.notforsalecampaign.com) Slavery is certainly still an issue in our world today. Christians are at the forefront of anti-slavery efforts.

This semester our youth group is studying and discussing this very topic. Students and their parents are reading the book, “Be the Change” – written by a modern-day abolitionist, a 15-year-old young man who is working to end human trafficking around the world. I look forward to seeing how God leads our students (and parents) through this study. It’s right that we work to

oppose slavery and other types of oppression in our day.

That was a footnote to last week's sermon. Now on to this week's message. Beginning in 1 Corinthians 7:25, Paul addresses yet another question that the Corinthians had asked him. As we've said before, we're only hearing one half of the conversation, so we have to piece together the question that had been asked. Apparently, the Corinthians had wondered about the advisability of getting married. Should those who have never been married (i.e., "virgins") get married? Paul's response to this question challenges all of us – regardless of our marital status – to consider the lifestyle we're leading, specifically whether or not our lives allow for undistracted devotion to Jesus Christ. As we'll see, that's his motivation for writing what he does: he is challenging believers to a lifestyle that encourages undistracted devotion to Christ.

Paul begins his response in an interesting way:

25 Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.

Here Paul acknowledges that he wasn't basing his comments on a specific command he'd received from Christ (compare with 7:12). But this didn't mean that his teaching/opinion was any less authoritative. Paul writes that he is "one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy"; in other words, the Corinthians should trust his counsel here.

26 I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is.

Paul returns to the principle that dominates all of 1 Corinthians 7: the importance of remaining in the condition in which you find yourself. Paul writes that it is good for those who've never been married to remain unmarried "in view of the *present distress*." We wish Paul had been more explicit about the "present distress" that he had in mind. Perhaps the church was about to endure severe persecution; some have suggested that famine was impending; we simply don't know. Whatever it was, their "present distress" demanded a type of single-mindedness that was best achieved by remaining in one's present condition. Leon Morris commented, "When high seas are raging, it is no time for changing ships." In this case, Paul encourages the Corinthians that were unmarried to remain unmarried.

The fact that Paul is addressing unique circumstances means that his teaching here needs to be applied carefully. In other words, remaining unmarried may or may not be the will of God for you in your circumstances. We'll come back to that point at the end of the passage.

27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

If you're married, stay married. If you're not married, remain unmarried. Notice how Paul qualifies himself in verse 28:

28 But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.

Paul acknowledges that getting married is the general pattern for life. Paul had warned against those who forbid people to get married (see 1 Timothy 4:3). And so Paul mentions up front that getting married is no sin, obviously. “Yet,” Paul writes, “such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.” When two people get married, they enter into the possibility of heightened joy and blessing (intimacy, children, love, and security), but they also introduce the possibility of additional “trouble” into their lives (conflict, childlessness, weighty responsibility, grief associated with sickness and death, etc.). The term “trouble” is often translated in the NT as affliction or tribulation. When you get married, you are taking a risk. You may look back and realize that because you got married, you’ve had more trouble in your life than if you remained single. Paul’s motivation was to “spare” the Corinthians this trouble, especially in light of their “present distress.”

In verses 29 through 31 Paul makes another vague reference to the circumstances of his day; in light of those circumstances, Paul argued for heightened spiritual intensity.

29 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none;

It’s not obvious what Paul means by the statement that “the time has been shortened.” Some think Paul believed that the return of Christ is soon, and therefore the amount of time the Corinthians had on earth is short. Others understand Paul’s statement in light of the general perspective that after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the “end times” have begun; however long until the return of Christ, we’re living in the last chapter of history. This last explanation rings true with me: the kingdom has been inaugurated, and the next major event in salvation history is the return of Christ. This reality demands a type of spiritual intensity that we might not otherwise have.

For example, “from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none.” You don’t often hear this passage taught in marriage seminars. We should assume that Paul isn’t contradicting what he and others have written elsewhere. He’s not saying that husbands don’t have the responsibility to love their wives (Ephesians 5) or live with them “in an understanding way” (1 Peter 3:7). Paul’s point is that husbands shouldn’t become so preoccupied with marriage and family that they neglect their walk with God and their influence in their world. Just because you’re married, you’re not exempt from the responsibility to live with God and for God in this world.

Paul urges us to see other everyday circumstances in this same light:

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

If you’re weeping/mourning in some way, the temptation is to turn inward and to feel justified in not seeking and serving God. In the same way, rejoicing/celebration can be used as an excuse for being self-centered. Shopping (“those who buy”) can also be a consuming activity (many of us confirmed this in December). Paul’s point is that each of these normal conditions and activities have their place, but they shouldn’t be all-consuming.

31 and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away.

This is another way of talking about being “*in* the world” but not “*of* the world.” Even though we make use of the structures of this world (e.g., legal, political, and commercial structures), we shouldn’t become “engrossed” (Thiselton, p. 585) in this world. We cannot forget that this world is passing away; it is not permanent. Therefore, we need to live as citizens of heaven – as people who experience God in all of life and help others do the same.

Notice how Paul applies his argument to remaining single:

32 But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; 33 but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. . .

Paul’s simple point is that when you get married, you enter into a commitment that requires your attention and your energy. If you are married, you have concerns in this world that you didn’t previously have; in addition to thinking about how to please the Lord, you now need to think about how to please your spouse; your interests are “divided.” I know it sounds like Paul had a rather low view of marriage (as in verse 9 where he said if you lack self control that you should get married – “better to marry than to burn with passion”). In other places he extolled the virtues of marriage and parenting. Earlier in the chapter Paul said that some people have the gift of being married and some have the gift of remaining unmarried; in both cases it is a matter of God’s grace and leading. If you are married, your relationship with your spouse should be an expression of your love for God. But here Paul is making the very practical point that the unmarried person *can* be more single-minded toward the Lord than if s/he were married.

Paul himself would be a great example of this. As a single man, Paul was able to go wherever God called him without being concerned about providing financially for his family or being a loving husband or being a father who trained up his children (things he commanded others to do). Paul simply didn’t have those concerns. Paul restates his point in verse 34:

34 . . . The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.

Paul communicates his motivation for writing all of this in verse 35:

35 This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.

Paul wrote what he did for their own benefit, not to put a restraint upon them (lit. “to put a noose” around their necks). He wasn’t trying to impose burdensome regulations on them. Rather, he wanted to “promote what is appropriate” in light of their circumstances and “to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.” He wanted them to be able to live their lives as fully as possible for the Lord.

As I said earlier, Paul's counsel here obviously isn't the norm for all unmarried people in our day. But remaining unmarried is the will of God for some. If you are unmarried, it is worth considering what Paul has written here. You may or may not have the desire to be married. Again, the desire to get married is good and normal and God-given. But the reality is that you may be single for a short time or for a long time. Since you don't know when or if you will be married, it makes sense to take full advantage of the spiritual benefits of being unmarried. You have a type of freedom and mobility that married people may not have. This is not to imply that you don't have serious responsibilities and demands on your time. The point is that you can channel the energy that others devote to family into other spiritually beneficial directions.

God may lead you to devote yourself to Christ in prayer; the time that others might spend with family responsibilities, you might invest in prayer and seeking God. God might lead you to invest in spiritual friendships. People with family responsibilities often don't have (or don't invest) as much time as they'd like in befriending people outside the body of Christ. I'd encourage you to see the sovereignty of God in the flexibility you might have to develop such relationships. As an unmarried person, God might lead you to go to another culture to serve in some capacity. Families are – generally speaking – an asset on the mission field, but some situations are best suited for unmarried people.

I would simply encourage you to take full advantage of the spiritual benefits of being unmarried. This may be a step of faith for you because you've seen your singleness primarily as a huge disadvantage. But consider the possible advantages of being unmarried.

As I suggested earlier, this passage challenges all of us regardless of whether we're married or single. Every person has a finite amount of time and energy. It is quite common for people to fill their lives with so many things – mostly good things – that there's very little room for seeking and serving God. We have cluttered, busy, distracted lives (which is what Paul was concerned about). We tend to think that we're victims of our culture and victims of our circumstances. But most of us have a lot more control over our lifestyles than we realize.

I honestly don't know what the implications are for you. For myself, I have a pretty good idea of what this means. I need to work hard as a husband, father, and pastor. But I need to leave some margin in my life to seek, enjoy, and love God *and* to be available to love others. I am a "joiner" – I love to jump into activities that I'm interested in. Those activities often provide opportunities to serve others, but I can tend to overdo it. Occasionally somebody will ask me if I play golf (or if I want to play golf). I decline because the only time I played golf (about 25 years ago) I got one solid hit, and it felt so good that I knew I could become "hooked." If I didn't have other time-consuming hobbies/interests (i.e., woodworking), I'd probably play golf. But right now, it would be a distraction; it would clutter my life. I intentionally have to limit the things in which I'm involved to avoid crowding God and others out of my life (even as a pastor).

Let me encourage you to evaluate your own life. Is there anything you need to do differently in order to be more single-minded in your devotion to Jesus Christ? Are there things in your life that are distracting you from loving God and loving others? We only have one shot at this life. We need to be able to look back and know that we've filled our lives with the right things.