

Times of Upheaval

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

This morning we will be studying the second half of 1 Corinthians 7. So far in chapter 7 we've been looking at Paul's response to issues related to marriage that they brought up in a letter they wrote to him, and in our passage for today, Paul addresses a new but related topic. It still has to do with marriage, but it's evident he's addressing a different question or issue brought up by the Corinthians. The hard part for us is that we don't know what that question is – we just have Paul's answer – and his answer is difficult to understand. There are several interpretations and we don't have time to go over them, so I'm going to present what I think is the correct interpretation.

What I think was going on behind the scenes is that there was some kind of upheaval going on either in Corinth, or that part of the world, and it was leaving the Christians in Corinth with a lot of uncertainty about the future. Something happened, something changed, and it was causing a lot of concern, and one of the questions the people had was whether or not they should get married in the midst of those circumstances. I think of the Jews in Germany in the years leading up to World War II, there were major things happening that were very concerning and those who were of marrying age were probably wondering if they should get married during that time or not.

It appears something like that was going on in Corinth based on what Paul says in this passage. When I did some research about what was going on at that time I learned that there was major upheaval in the Roman Empire. **(Picture)** They had an Emperor named Claudius, who had been reigning for almost 13 years when he was suddenly poisoned, and the most likely scenario was that his wife Agrippina had murdered him so that her teenage son, who we now know as Nero, would become Emperor. That happened in October of 54AD, and Paul wrote this letter within months of that. Anytime there was a shift in power in the Roman Empire, it was a big deal, especially when it happened by assassination. Just think about what happens in America when there's a change in the Presidency. Rome was much worse. So things were very uncertain and people were fearful. It could be that was the major cause for concern for the Christians in Corinth that was leading them to ask Paul whether or not their young, unmarried people should get married at that time.

How would you answer that question? Is it a good idea to focus on getting married during a time like that? Or, let's make it more general than that – when you're facing a time of major upheaval in your life, what's the best course of action for you to take moving forward?

When things are out of control in our world, one of the things that most of us do is to try to regain some sense of control again. We try to control the things that are within our ability to control in order to feel more stable and secure in the midst of turmoil. Is that the best approach to find stability and security?

In Paul's answer to the Corinthians he shows them the direction they should go and I believe it's the same direction we need to go during times of upheaval. It's a direction we all know about, but often gets thrown by the wayside in other efforts to try to regain control and find stability. So let's see what Paul has to say.

The ESV translation is frustrating to me in this passage because they use the word "betrothed" several times, but if you look at the original language and basically every other translation, the word isn't "betrothed," it's "virgins." Betrothed gives you the idea of someone who is engaged to be married, but for most of the passage that's not who Paul has in mind, which makes the ESV translation even more confusing. Most other translations use the word "virgins" and what they mean by that is young, unmarried adults. There is one place where I think Paul does have the betrothed in mind, but with the rest I don't think he does, so in order to minimize confusion, I'm going to use the word "virgins" sometimes.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:25-28.

²⁵ Now concerning the (virgins) ~~betrothed~~, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a (virgin) ~~betrothed~~ ~~woman~~ marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.

So you can see in verse 25 that Paul is now addressing something the Corinthians brought up that had to do with virgins – or young unmarried people in their

church. Paul admits that he doesn't have a direct command or teaching from the Lord that applies to their specific question, therefore he is giving them his own judgment.

His answer to their question is in verse 26, that in view of the present distress (whatever that may have been), it is good for a person to remain as he is. So he's telling them to wait things out before making any changes related to marriage. If bound to a wife (whether betrothed or married), don't seek to be free from her because of what's going on. Likewise, if not married yet, they shouldn't seek a wife either. Don't make any big changes. Wait, and see what happens. I don't think he's telling them generally that it's best to never get married; I think he has their current situation in mind. Not a good idea to get married at that time because of what was going on.

Then in verse 28 he clarifies that he's just making a recommendation, not a command, and if they do choose to get married, they're not sinning. But if they do, they will face greater worldly troubles. Getting married by itself can be difficult, but getting married in a time of upheaval can be that much more difficult. So Paul wanted to spare them those troubles by recommending they don't get married at that time.

I found quote by the scholar Leon Morris that I think is helpful: *"Some pressing constraint lay hard on the Corinthians at the time of writing. Whatever the precise meaning, Paul's friends were at that time in unusually difficult circumstances, and in view of the troubled times Paul felt it best for them to stay as they were. When the high seas are raging it is no time for changing ships."* When the high seas are raging it is no time for changing ships. I think that's good advice and that's what Paul was trying to tell them. He expounds further on that idea in the next few verses.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.

²⁹ This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

A lot of people think that Paul is talking about how Christians should act in preparation for the return of Christ in these verses, but I don't agree. If that were the case, Paul would say that Christians should stop paying attention to their marriages, to mourning and rejoicing, to financial growth and expansion, and to business dealings. It's the same idea as those who sell their homes and possessions, quit their jobs, and go sit up on a mountaintop waiting for Christ to return. I don't think that's what Paul has in mind.

Instead, I think he's telling them that there is going to be a time of turmoil in the world, and during that time they shouldn't focus all their attention on the things of the world – marriage, mourning, rejoicing, accumulating possessions, or expanding business. There is a time and a season for all these things, but not when you're facing major upheaval in your life.

I think we can relate to what he's saying here because of our tendency to try to regain a sense of control in life when things are out of control. We try to gain control by focusing on things like our marriages or occasions to mourn and rejoice, or spending money, or doing business, and Paul says "that's not the direction you should go. That's not where you're going to find stability and security." When you're facing major upheaval in life we need to focus our attention on something else. What's that?

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

³² I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. ³³ But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴ and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or (virgin) ~~betrotted woman~~ is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. ³⁵ I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

So in the midst of their troubling times Paul points them toward greater devotion to the Lord. When you're in the midst of distressing times, he tells them getting married is not a great idea. He wants them to be free from worldly concerns, and if they get married, they are adding more concerns to their plate. When you get

married, you no longer have the freedom to just focus on your own needs, you are obligated to meet your spouse's needs as well. So when life is in turmoil it's a good idea to wait to get married. That's not the time to focus your attention on a new spouse. Paul says he isn't telling them that to restrain them, but to promote what's good for them and point them to the Lord.

What should you focus your attention on during times of turmoil? Paul points us to the Lord. When times are uncertain and your world is in turmoil, that's when you especially need to focus your attention on the Lord. Focus on being devoted to him. Easier times will come when you can also focus on marriage and other things again, but for now, you need to focus on the Lord.

Those are such life-giving words. If we apply this to our own situations I think what Paul is getting at is this: When life gets turned upside down and you feel like focusing more attention on the things in life that you can control to give you a sense of stability and security, that's not going to do it. When you do that, you often push God farther away when he's what you need the most. You're not going to find a solid foundation by controlling things in this life, whether that's marriage, financial growth, business dealings, or whatever. You're not going to find what you're looking for. Your solid foundation will be found in Christ. So don't ramp up your focus on the things in this world, ramp up your devotion to Christ.

For the Corinthians, Paul was specifically talking about getting married, so he finishes with a few more recommendations related to that.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:36-38.

³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. ³⁷ But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. ³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

Here is the one place where I actually do think Paul has betrothed people in mind, which is why I left it the way it is. In that culture there was a betrothal period where a man and woman were legally bound to one another, though they

weren't living together or fully married yet, and I think Paul gives these specific instructions to them. There are problems again with the ESV translation here that can make it sound like Paul is telling young men that if they can't control their passions and are getting too frisky with their fiancés, they should go ahead and get married, but if they're staying under control they should refrain from getting married. But the original language doesn't say anything about strong passions, and points to something much different than that.

What I think Paul is saying is, after the advice he's just given, if certain young men who are already betrothed to a young woman are delaying their marriages because of the distressing times they were in, they might feel like they are behaving improperly toward their future wife by bringing disgrace upon them. In that culture there was an understanding that there was a marriageable age for young women and if they didn't get married during that time they felt shame. So I think Paul is telling the men who felt like they were bringing disgrace upon their betrothed women to go ahead and get married in spite of the troubling times they were in – it is no sin to go against his recommendation. But for the young men that didn't feel that way, and had strong convictions to wait to get married, Paul tells them to wait. The one who gets married will do well, but the one who continues to wait will do even better because of the reasons already mentioned.

Paul adds a final comment for those whose spouses had died and were considering getting married again.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:39-40.

³⁹ A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

So to widows Paul says, "You're free to get married, but you'll be better off if you don't right now."

I'm guessing that some of you have felt some confusing while reading this passage in the past, and I hope this brings some clarity. To me, this whole passage is about where our priorities need to be when our world gets turned upside down. Should we strive and scramble and do whatever we can to try to regain some semblance of control? Should finding our own stability and security be our highest priority?

Paul says, “No. Our highest priority should be our devotion to Christ. There will be times when we can focus on other things in this world again, but not when things are in upheaval. During those times what we need most of all is Jesus. He will give us stability and security because he’s in control, and nothing that’s going on in our world can change that.”

Pray.

Benediction: Numbers 6:24-26