

# Imperfect Church, Perfect Saviour: To Wed or Not to Wed...

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I'm going to start this sermon in the middle of the chapter, verses 17 through 24. I encourage you to keep your Bibles open.

We're going to do that because Paul, in that passage, that section of it, states a principle, a rule, that he says he lays down in all the churches. And I believe that this principle interprets the rest of the teaching in this chapter.

So let's have a look at it first, and then we'll see how it would lend some understanding to the rest. So what is the rule? Well, he states it three times, verse 17, 20, and 24.

17, let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him and to which God has called him.

Verse 20, each one should remain in the condition in which he is called.

Verse 24, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. That's the rule. And what examples does he give to illustrate what he means?

[ 1 : 01 ] Well, he uses two, circumcision and then a slave. Circumcision. Now, circumcision, the markers carry religious and ethnic weight.

If you're a Gentile, i.e., uncircumcised, then there's no need to be circumcised. If you're a Jew, there's no need to hide or direct the fact that you have been circumcised, something which apparently was tried to be done.

And why? Well, he says so. Because in verse 19, neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Now, the issue of circumcision was a hot topic in the early church.

It was vitally important in the administration of the covenant with Abraham and his descendants. If Abraham had circumcised the males of his household, he would be deemed a covenant breaker. And another example is when Joshua finally leads the Israelites that have been wandering in the desert for 40 years and finally gets them across the Jordan.

[ 2 : 04 ] What's the first thing he does? He circumcised the males who have not been circumcised during the 40 years of their wandering. See, this is an important marker of Abraham.

But circumcision served as a marker, as a kind of placeholder of that covenant. But now that the one who was the subject of the covenant, our Lord Jesus, now that he was the subject of that covenant with Abraham and Israel, the right, that placeholder, was no longer needed.

What does Paul say in Galatians? When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

So what's Paul saying? Remain as you are. That is the state in which God called you. The fact that you were or were not circumcised will affect God's call upon you, so there's no need to change.

Such physical markers do not a faithful Christian make. Rather, faithful keeping of the commandments of God. That's one example. The second is, we might say, social status.

[ 3 : 18 ] That's verses 21 and 22. I'm going to get my paper back. 21 and 22. Now, the status of slaves in the Greco-Roman world was very hard to transpire in the United States in the 16th through 19th centuries.

Slaves, as someone notes, slaves served as doctors, teachers, managers, musicians, artisans, barbers, cooks, and shopkeepers, and even owned other slaves. And in some instances, slaves were better educated than their masters.

And in fact, they could save enough money to buy their freedom. But a slave is a slave. He still owned by someone else, and many of them did live lives of misery.

So would their status of slave, with all of its restrictions, affect their ability to serve Christ? Would the fact that they were a slave, affecting the relationship, the binding that they had to serve Christ? Well, Paul says, were you a bondservant when called? Don't be concerned about it. He was called in the Lord as a bondservant, as a freed man in the Lord.

[ 4 : 41 ] See, the social status of a person, slave or free, all of God upon them. He says, if you can get free, all the better. But the fact that you are a slave is nothing to worry about.

So again, the principle, remain and are. That is the state in which God called you. The fact that you were or were not a slave did not affect God's call upon you, so there's no need to change.

The state that you were in did not prevent God calling you, so there's no need to change your state now that he has called you. But there's even more to consider under this.

In verse 18, he says this. Only let each person lead the life, or more literally translated, walk in the life. Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him and to which God has called him.

If in the sovereign state you were in a state, the state that you were in, when he called you, then you need to consider that the state in which you were called is where God wants you, that he is assigned or apportioned.

[ 5 : 56 ] Now that's something different. If we are in a state of slave, married, unmarried, and yet that's where God calls us in that state, it might just be that God has called you in that state because that's where he wants you.

He's assigned you that. It's a calling. However, given the ability that Paul offers in the states under consideration that we'll see as we go forward, I don't think that remaining exactly where you are when the Lord called you is set in stone.

But it's certainly worth considering that if he called you when he called you, it's because he has a purpose for you in that state. Now, why would there be the necessity of this principle?

Why would Paul feel the need to lay down this principle, remain as you are when called, not only here, but he says in all the churches. This is a standing principle that Paul has.

Well, I wonder if it has something to do with when Paul says, for instance, elsewhere, anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation. Become new. Some have argued, for instance, that the language in Romans 13 about the rulers is due to the fact that some Christians now felt like, well, I've got King Jesus, I don't need to listen to the king on the earth.

[ 7 : 16 ] The reality is that just because we are free in Christ, he is now our king, that doesn't render us anarchists in the middle of society. So there's a principle that Paul is dealing with because possibly it is that some people felt that now that Jesus is king, now that I'm free, now that I'm liberated from the law, then I can just do what I want.

I can choose what I want. But Paul says, no. No, you need to pay attention to when you were called, where you were called, how you were called, because it has nothing to do with what God has for you in his kingdom.

One commentator says, the main point of 17 through 24 is that conversion, while altering moral and spiritual life, does not necessarily alter status in life.

And I think it's this principle that forms a discussion in the rest of this chapter in the various states of the people in Corinth. Are you married? Are you single? Are you betrothed? Before we forget that, before we look at those, let's put a little context from the contemporary situation that's going on in Corinth to put our understanding a bit clearer.

So, for instance, in verse 26, it says this. I think that in view of the present distress, it is good for a person to remain as he is. So it's the idea of remaining as he is, but he's got a reason, a rationale for it.

[ 8 : 46 ] And I think that in view of the present distress, it is good for a person to remain as he is. And then in verse 29, this is what I mean, brothers. The appointed time has grown very short.

Both of those are the condition why Paul is saying what he is saying. What does that mean? Well, the two statements have provoked a range of interpretation.

It does mean that he expects Jesus to return soon, and the troubles that are said to accompany his second coming, anticipated second coming. So it was the encouraging Corinthians to keep things simple.

Just stay as you are, because it's all going to be really rough pretty soon. Some scholars have noted that from extra-biblical materials, that a severe famine had threatened or was threatening the

stability of the city.

This would bring hardship on everyone, Christians or not. And so not changing our current state, keeping a relationship as uncomplicated as possible would seem preferable. So if a man marries, he's not responsible for his wife.

[ 9 : 49 ] It's not sinful, but it does add to the tension of an already stressful situation. Perhaps it's a mixture of the two. The famine is a sign of the end.

Well, in my humble opinion, the fact that he encourages people in some circumstances to marry suggests that the immediate return of Christ is not in view. Marriage is a state that has future written all over it.

One fellow says, However one understands the phrases, it's important to note that Paul's instructions are conditioned by some pressing constraint. And that's true.

All the time. What's going on in the world? Where am I? What's happening? What am I supposed to do? Well, Paul says, Remain as you are.

Let's look at the very things that he's talking about, though. Marriage, divorce, or more particularly sex within marriage, divorce, and betrayal. So again, the principle.

[ 10 : 52 ] Remain in the state in which one was called. That's the principle. That's the rule that Paul communicates to this church in Corinth and all the churches that he has influence on. And again, he says, Now about the matters about which you wrote, as I said earlier, this is something he's responding to something that they have sent.

And he says this, Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, quote, this is something that they would have said, it is good for a man to not have sexual relationships with a woman. The sexual relations, excuse me, with a woman.

Now, what motivated someone to think that abstaining from sexual relations was demanded of them is open to speculation. There's all kinds of things that might have fed into the past.

There was an ascetic contingent among the Corinthian church that believed that all sexual activity, including in marriage, suggested that sexual activity was just of a piece with sexual immorality that Paul has already spoken about previously.

Well, what's not open to speculation is Paul's opinion. In the remaining in the state in which one is called interpretive framework, Paul teaches that for those who are married, the attendant obligations and what Paul goes on to say is extraordinary in his culture, that culture is reflected in how the issue is stated.

[ 12 : 13 ] It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. That statement involves only the sexual privileges of the man. But Paul introduces, quote, a healthy perception of the woman's sexuality and an understanding of the complete equality that exists between a man and a woman in the most intimate area of relationships.

Three things to note about what he teaches about sexual relations, the monogamy of the intimacy, the mutuality of the intimacy, the intimacy for the sake of intimacy.

Monogamy. Each man should have his own wife. Now, in the Roman society, a man, despite being married, might have multiple women, multiple women with whom he would have sex, either consensual or frankly non-consensual on the part of the woman.

And that was for his own gratification. The sexual relationship with his wife tended to be only for the purpose of pro- So Paul is arguing, said no, each one should just have his wife.

That's it. Monogamy. Multiple marriages, not multiple partners. Monogamy. But there's also a mutuality in the relationship. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband.

[ 13 : 37 ] For the wife does not have authority over her own body but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body but the wife does. So do not deprive one another.

That mutuality, the acknowledgement that both the man and the woman in the relationship would desire sexual intimacy is again something that's radical in the context of the writing.

But nonetheless, that's what he argues. Monogamy in the relationship and there's mutuality in the relationship. Monogamy and intimacy. Mutuality and intimacy. And then, there's intimacy for the people who do not deprive one another.

So again, the idea behind it was the only time I'm going to have sex with my wife is when I want to make sure that she's in a place within her cycle that she can become pregnant and then we can

have another child.

In the meantime, I'm going to go over with this woman and that woman and that woman. Paul is saying, no, that's not the way it's going to work. The reality is that you are with each other and you are mutually seen as God as both viable, wonderful image bearers of God.

[ 14 : 44 ] God has brought you together and part of what's brought you together is your sexual desire and that sexual desire is something that is perfectly fine to exercise but it's with that partner, the one who is together not one forcing upon the other or only wanting to do things that the other person doesn't want to do.

It's a mutuality that exists and that can be done because it's pleasurable among them. So what's Paul saying? The fact that you are now Christians does not change your marital status or the conjugal rights each partner has towards the other as far as regards physical intimacy.

There's one exception for an agreed upon time of prayer but he says don't let that be an open door for Satan to tempt sexual immorality. Don't let it be so long that it leads to that kind of temptation and make sure that it's something you're both agreed upon.

And then he goes on and says this. Now as a concession not a command I say this and I think that's referring back to what he just said about giving this time for prayer the abstinence for a time of prayer.

He doesn't command that married couples do this but acknowledges that it might be the case that they would agree such an arrangement but again as he teaches he's mindful of temptation for the state in which they were called was as married with the conjugal rights.

[ 16 : 13 ] You know there is why when you look at most of the lists of sins that show up particularly in Paul's letters that sexual immorality is at the top of the list. It's always like right up there or it's expressed in several different ways and why is that?

Because there's this capacity in human beings this sexual capacity found. It creates another image bearer of God. It creates another image bearer of God.

But it why it exists within the married company is to create physical intimacy emotional intimacy spiritual intimacy with one another. It is part of the married relationship.

It shouldn't be denied by either partner towards the other and yet at the same time because of the mutuality that's involved that there is love that governs it.

Care for the other that governs it. So he says it's a concession not a command that I say this but he also recognizes just the potency this this in profound capacity that human beings have recognizes that that can go very wrong but yet within the context of a marriage it's blessed.

[ 17 : 29 ] Well he goes on to state his preference certainly right? He understands that this is this is something that needs to be controlled and so it wants to be something that's done within the right with the confine that God has designed it.

But he says in verse 7 I wish that all works I myself am but each has his own gift one of one kind one of another to the unmarried of the widows I said it's good for them to remain single as I am but if they cannot exercise self-control they should marry for it's better to marry than to burn with passion.

So in this section what does Paul affirm? One that marriage state or condition of life is a good two that it's monogamous mutually enjoyed sex within marriage is blessed by God three while advocating for remaining single is a good option and he'll expand on this later but to be married is not a sin.

So say as you are if you're married you're married and with that comes all the conjugal expectations rights comes with that that's the state that you're in you shouldn't say we don't have sex divorce the next application right it remains in the condition right with the principle remain in the condition in which you recall he now deals with divorce verse 10 and 11 verse 10 give this charge not I but the Lord the wife should not separate from her husband but if she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband and the husband should not divorce his wife this principle applies first he says to Christian marriages that's what he's dealing with secondly married that has one partner after they've been married but to those married couples he charges the woman and the man to not divorce and in doing so he cites on the matter and Paul doesn't offer a comprehensive acquisition of Jesus teaching in which divorce is possible if the spouse commits adultery but he does point out that Jesus says that unlawful divorce followed by remarriage is forbidden let the party be reconciled or remain unmarried in what follows

Paul offers an additional legitimate ground for divorce but here the principle to Christian couples and what we've just considered but now the next situation is different verses 12 through 16 to the rest I say not the Lord if any brother has a wife who is an believer and she consents to live with him he should not divorce her if any husband who is an unbeliever he consents to live with her she should not divorce him but if the unbelieving partner wants to leave the person is not bound see in this scenario one of the couple become a Christian after already being married and one can imagine that in that situation the believer now wonders if they're staying with the unbeliever sharing conjugal rights with the unbeliever unbeliever should they be sinful should they not free themselves from such possible contamination but here remain as you are when you recall principle of willing to remain in the marriage that's good and any concerns about uncleanness are unfounded the believing partner is in a relationship with the unbeliever by reason of their faith renders the relationship holy set apart and that the children produced from that also set apart now that's not to suggest that the unbeliever is somehow doesn't need to repent of their unbelief but the union itself is sanctified because of the presence of faith in one of the partners but Paul goes on to add an exception the unbeliever wants to depart then the believing spouse is not bound now just for your information

[ 21 : 43 ] I am of the opinion shared by the venerable John Murray there has been a legitimate divorce meaning that is by reasons the unoffending party is free to remarry as Paul says as much in this scenario in such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved God has called you to peace the Christian after being married is to remain as they were called married to an unbelieving spouse if the unbelieving spouse is willing to remain married being married to a non-believer does not change the marriage state that is the state in which that person was called remain as you are when you were called betrothed so let's take that principle again remain when you were called and apply it to this category the betrothed starting in verse 25 so these are who we would consider engaged they are not yet married but they're engaged that's the intent in fact that word betrothed is actually the word for a virgin a female virgin but it's in this context they're not yet married the marriage has not come it hasn't been consummated they're just in that engagement state concerning the betrothed

I have no command from the Lord that is from Jesus but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy I think that in view of the present distress it's good for a person to remain as he is are you bound to a wife that is are you engaged to someone whom you're going to marry well do not seek to be free engaged then do not seek a wife but if you do marry you've not sinned and if a betrothed woman married she has not sinned now there's a rationale that Paul gives right encouragement to remain unmarried yet those who marry will have worldly troubles and I would spare you that he says so if you're in an engaged and you want to marry that person do it this do it but if you can remain single if you can do that he says that's better and he gives his reason for why there's another right there's a rationale that he has about how the nature of things has changed he says this in verse 29 and this is again some of this language might sound a little obscure if I can be helpful I'll try this is what I mean brothers the short from now on let those who have wives live 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 and the world as though they had no dealings with it for the present form of this world is passing away I think it's as if he's saying but though I counsel no things as important as earthly concerns may be believers should never allow such concerns to overshadow eternal realities and that seems to be what he suggests is a possibility a threat to one's devotion to one's willingness to persevere is that the things that we're involved in on our horizontal earthly level have the potential have the power to draw away our affections to draw away our energy our time so if you can keep those simple if you can keep the complexities of marriage as not part of parenthood not part of your life for this period of time he said that's better it's not sinful it's a strategic point of view as far as

Paul is concerned this idea that the time has grown short one commentator Gordon Fee who you might know as commentary on 1st Corinthians the picture is that of one for whom the future was neither non-existent as for most Greeks or often they're not thinking about it the event of Christ has now compressed the time in such a way that the future has been forward so as to be clearly visible Paul's concern is not with the amount of time left but with the radical new perspective the for short and future gives one with regard to the price comes and everything becomes Christian as it were where is history headed and he brings with him the kingdom we know already we're in the last days as it were and Paul is saying because that's the reality of it if you can keep things simple if staying

where you are now is where

God called you in the middle of that and if you can do that particularly for those that's a good thing it keeps you free it keeps you free in that complication it keeps you free in your devotion he says this in verse 32 I want you to be anxieties the unmarried man is anxious about the Lord how to please the Lord but the married man is anxious about worldly things how to please his wife and his interests are divided and the unmarried are but 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 I say this for your own benefit not to lay any restraint on you but to promote good order and secure your undivided devotion to the Lord but he acknowledges as he does elsewhere that in the state if there for that sexual intimacy that's allowed in the context of marriage if that's present then just go get married just get married and

[ 27 : 45 ] God blesses the spiritual and physical union of that marriage so clearly there's a preference on Paul's part the one who has the gift of remaining single has that much more time in their life free to devote to single mindedly the work of the gospel but it's important again to emphasize nowhere in Paul's teaching does he denigrate marriage nowhere does he suggest that sex enjoyed within the context of monogamous marriage is so dirty and moral and we should also emphasize that his comments have never been generated by particular questions coming from believers in Corinth and do not necessarily represent anything to be considered about marriage or divorce and at the end he kind of sums up what he says in 30 and 40 a wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives if her husband dies she's free to whom she wishes only in the Lord and in my judgment she's happier if she remains as she is and I think

I too have the spirit of God I think Paul is not thinking in this relationship to these things is not I mean there's morality certainly he's talking but he's not thinking morally he's thinking strategically given the nature of the way things are now what would best serve the moment and for that then is required the kind of sense of a person a place that God has put you there and because you're there then you live your life and particularly when it comes to the kinds of things that demand of us like marriage and children if that's something that doesn't have to be part of your life he says well that's strategically that's a good choice that's how I live and that's a good choice so this principle remain as you are in the state in which you were called what do we take away from well we can start with borrowing from the

Shakespeare the Bard of Avon to wed or not to wed that is the question the answer yes yes marry yes don't marry those are both viable options to the question should you be married yes to being married yes either state is perfectly acceptable in the eyes of the Lord if one desires a good thing if one wants to remain single that's a good thing and Paul in his strategic thinking says that's even better but having said that again there is no to draw from Paul's teaching that he thinks being married is somehow a failure or choosing to be single makes one more holy it will either state a gift and if it's a gift then it's nothing of which we can boast rather we are to be thankful is there any other way to apply this principle each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him which he has been called there's another way to think about this

I think one thing we might think about is our work our state as a particular job or something that we do see if the work we are doing is not inherently immoral like you're a hit man for the mafia or maybe you're a bank robber or a prostitute or maybe a teacher of a false religion those are inherently immoral jobs but if it's not inherently immoral then perhaps God has called you to the work that you're doing Tim Keller in his book Every Good Endeavor he includes a chapter called Work as Service and in it he draws upon the apostle Paul from this chapter let each person lead the life that God has assigned to him and to which God has called him and Keller asserts that the two words calling and calling are religiously freighted words and he observes elsewhere that Paul has spoken about calling people into saving relationships with him assigning them spiritual gifts and to do ministry and to build up the Christian community but in this instance he says in this instance he is applying them to common social and economic tasks secular jobs as it were and naming them God's callings and assignments includes that the implication is clear just as God equips Christians for building up the body of Christ also equips all people with talents and gifts for the purpose of building up the human community our daily work can be a calling only if it's received as God's assignment to serve others and that is exactly how the Bible teaches us to view work see when my brother I'm a Christian I need to give up my quote unquote secular work and I need to do sacred work but not everyone is called ministry an office within the church non-church work is not

denigrated by God it's celebrated by God he makes Adam and Eve puts them in the be fruitful and multiply till the earth cause it to grow take the potentials of all that I have put into my Christian put them to good use now under the same heading though a church needs to be careful to not of some work as inherently sinful that isn't in the arts for instance or creating wealth or pursuing academic interests right sometimes some people say oh you know that academic stuff ah that's just a bunch of waste of time or in the arts oh they're all a bunch of jazz that's all really ugly awful stuff we don't do jazz

[ 33 : 38 ] Christians don't do jazz and Christians we don't dance and we don't enjoy other things it's just so fleshly but the reality is is that these are things that are capable on the part of human beings because God has created them to do such things is it wholly more than an actor I don't think so not just because I used to be an actor there's plenty of ungodly farmers out there who go home and beat their wife and beat their children and kick them off and believe it or not they're actually godly actors so the church needs to be careful not to say certain kinds of work well that's just not allowed other work isn't some is not allowed but not everything sometimes we think so perhaps it is that Paul is saying you stay in the state in which you were called main in that and if that's your work it might just be doing right now is what God would have you to do or at least this period of time that's where you are and so you do it to the glory of God you give yourself to it you work hard in order for the benefit of others around us because that's our whole posture isn't it we love God with all of our heart soul strength and mind and our self so when we have our opportunity to work how can we do it in such a way that it isn't just about me it's also about everybody else around me so we apply it to marriage we apply it to divorce

Paul does he applies it to those who are in a kind of engaged betrothed state in all things the idea is is that just because we become a Christian everything just doesn't blow up everything just suddenly falls apart you know God calls you where he calls you when he calls you and there's a purpose behind that because God is sovereign he knows what he's doing he knows when he calls you that he's called you in that moment and there's something about that that's important for us to recognize and we again as you know if I'm a Christian now then that means everything's got to change I mean I'm a new creation everything changes but Paul says no that's not the way to think inside you're new you're completely new you're a different person than you used to be and you're going to experience that more and more as you give yourself to the means of grace and you grow more to be more like Christ but it doesn't necessarily mean that your status in life changes in fact God might have called you in that moment and he wants you right there your shining light in the midst of that dark place to his glory you're going to be