

Living for the kingdom of God

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Date: 03 August 2025

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[0 : 00] Let me pray and then we'll look at God's word together. Father, we come to your word now, eager for you to teach us that we might walk rightly in your paths.

! So give us minds to understand, bend our wills to yours, that we would know the joy of a life where Jesus is at the centre. In his name we pray. Amen.

Now I don't know what you thought about that reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 7. We're at the end of our mini-series. But maybe you think it's rather a strange one to have for a baptism service. Or maybe as you heard it read, you thought it was simply a strange reading altogether. After all, there are lots of issues there that aren't really things that we worry about too much now. Are there? Slavery and circumcision are not contemporary issues in the church.

The way that singleness and marriage are spoken about here doesn't really fit with how we find partners these days. Not only that, Paul has some rather odd things to say, doesn't he?

[1 : 01] Especially in verses 29 to 30. From now on, he says, those who have wives should live as though they do not. Those who mourn as if they did not. Those who are happy as if they were not.

Those who buy something as if it were not theirs to keep. What do we make of these things? They are a little strange to our ears, aren't they? Not just for a baptism, but for all of us.

Maybe that was your reaction. Well, that might be our first reaction. But actually, I think this is a perfect reading for today. I think it's a perfect reading for Juniper as she begins her life of faith. It's great for those of us who are maybe not yet Christians, but are interested in the things of God and want to understand something more about what following Jesus would be like. And for those of us who have been following Jesus for many years, this passage gives us a very helpful reminder of something that we can easily forget.

Because this passage helps us to see what being a disciple of Jesus looks like on a day-to-day basis. What is that? Well, it isn't simply a weekly commitment to a special club or a new twist on how to live a moral life.

[2 : 14] It is an all-encompassing commitment that can and must shape every area of our lives. So just look at the areas Paul talks about here.

In verses 17 to 20, he speaks about ambitions and spiritual practices. Verses 21 to 24, he's talking about our position in life, our status, whether it's financial or in terms of employment.

He deals with the issue of marriage and family and singleness. And then in 29 to 31, just to complete the set, he talks about death and mourning, pleasure, possessions, talent, opportunity, and the good things of the world.

Is there anything that we spend time on that isn't on that list? I don't think there is. Paul has something to say to us about everything. And his point is this, that there is no area of human existence that following Jesus will not affect if we are serious about being his disciple.

There is no area of our lives where following Jesus will not and should not have an impact. And that sounds like a huge deal, doesn't it?

[3 : 22] Something that is wholly encompassing. But it was there in the declarations that we heard out here a few moments ago from Juniper's parents and godparents. And if you're a Christian, you have made them too.

We renounce sin and the wickedness of evil. We turn to Christ as saviour. We submit to Christ as Lord. And we come to him to walk with him who is the way, the truth, and the life.

That is a radical view of the Christian life. It's not just, oh, I need some help to be a better person. This is something that shapes every part of our lives.

That's what Paul is talking about here. So when Jesus becomes our Lord, he becomes Lord of all. Of our money and our family.

Over our work and possessions. Over our time and our talents. He has an impact on our hopes and fears, our dreams and ambitions. Our joys and our sadnesses.

[4 : 23] Paul wants the Corinthian Christians to know, as God wants us to know, that because Jesus is their Lord, Christians should be seeking to please God, living in a way that brings him pleasure in every area of their lives.

And he says this to the Corinthians because, frankly, they are doing a lousy job at it. And so often do we. In the preceding six chapters, we've seen what a mess the Corinthian Christians have been making of things.

And it's largely, I think, because they are making two contradictory mistakes. One of them we've seen a lot of already. And there's a second one that starts to pop up here and in the chapters to follow.

See, in some areas, they had decided to reject God's commands altogether. Somehow they'd started thinking that because they were now in Christ, they had come to God and been rescued by Jesus.

The Old Testament law now had no effect. And the penalty of breaking God's commands now didn't mean anything to them either. Jesus had dealt with it all. So that meant, so they thought, they could live exactly as they liked.

[5 : 32] And that's what they had done. The levels of immorality in the church were worse, in some cases, than the very immoral culture in which they were living. The church was worse than the world.

What a terrible thing. There's a modern version of that idea as well. The idea that because God is love, he accepts us as we are and doesn't require that we change anything about our character or how we live.

That's just as wrong-headed as the church in Corinth. But strangely, in some areas, they were kind of uber-liberal over here, but they were starting to build up extra laws for themselves in other ways, becoming increasingly legalistic, making up extra rules about what it meant to be a Christian.

That's what Paul is speaking about in the first part of chapter 7. And I have to say, there are parts of the church that try and do that today. Whether it's banning certain types of music, or if you're a Christian, you can't listen to that genre.

If you're a Christian, you can't go there on holiday. If you're a Christian, you need to dress in a certain way. It's making up extra laws that they felt good about following, but they weren't necessary.

[6 : 49] And so rather than living the life in all its fullness that Jesus came to bring, the Corinthians had allowed themselves to become slaves, both to immoral behaviour and to unnecessary laws.

So I wonder if there are some areas of your life when you think you know better than God. Well, you know what God's word says, but you refuse to submit to that because somehow you think, actually, doing it my way will bring me more joy.

If so, this passage is a huge challenge because Paul says in verse 19, keeping God's commands is what counts. Obedience to God's commands is an important sign that we belong to Jesus.

On the other hand, it could be that following Jesus for you is so rule-based that when you come to church, you just want an extra rule to add to your list. So you can work your way through it, obeying as well as you're able so that, so you think that by obeying God's commands, God will like you better.

You'll be in his good books. And because you are obeying, you'll therefore have eternal life. If so, there's a challenge for you here in this passage as well because Paul often doesn't give a straight answer to things.

[8 : 05] Sometimes when it's necessary, he will say, this is what God's word says. But in other areas, he doesn't do that. He doesn't do that here, does he? Should an engaged person go through with marriage? Maybe. Maybe.

It's up to them. Should a single person seek a spouse? Perhaps there are pros and cons. Should a slave worry about their position? No.

But if you can become free, then do that. It's kind of either or. There's not a tight line here. In some areas, and some big areas of life too, the Christian faith, for some people, can seem frustratingly vague.

And this is where the Christian faith is different from every other religion. Because obedience to God isn't something that we do to achieve salvation, to get into God's good books, to earn our way into heaven.

No, we're called to obey God because of what he has already done. He has already rescued us. He's already given us eternal life. We don't obey God to get his rewards or to get closer to him.

[9 : 12] We obey God because he's already brought us close to him. Because he's already given us all things when we trusted in Jesus. We obey God because we love him.

Because we trust that he is the one who knows best. You see, because God is good, his ways are always good. His laws are always good. And because as a Christian, we have the Holy Spirit in us. We have the wisdom and the freedom to live as we choose within the framework of commands that God has established. So for example, what kind of clothes can a Christian wear?

Bible doesn't say. It doesn't say. It does speak about modesty, about not causing offence or scandal. It does speak about the importance of being beautiful on the inside rather than worrying about what we look at on the outside.

But the choice of clothes is up to each of us depending on our taste, on our culture, our body shapes, comfort levels, all those kind of things. There's not one Christian way to dress. What kind of job should Christians do?

[10 : 17] The Bible doesn't say. It doesn't say. It does say that all Christians should work and not rely on the generosity of others. It does require honesty in all things.

It does command us to have days off. It warns us about making our jobs more important than serving God. But the choice of career is up to us depending on our talents and opportunities and qualifications.

There is no Christian job. And what about who we marry or whether we get married? Is one state more blessed than another?

No. Actually, the Bible is really clear that there are joys and struggles both in singleness and marriage. And we are to weigh up the options ourselves. And one way for one person isn't the best way for someone else.

And whilst the Bible is clear that a believer should always marry a believer, the Bible doesn't say anything about age gaps or looks or having shared interests. There's no list of approved names to watch out for.

[11 : 20] There's no list of ways that you should find a partner. You want to use internet dating? Go ahead. You want to have an arranged marriage? That's your culture? That's fine too.

With marriage, as with many other things, the Bible sets out some principles for those following Jesus and there says, be wise. Work it out for yourselves. If I can use this illustration, obedience to Christ is more like living in a large walled garden than walking a tightrope.

In a large walled garden where there are boundaries, there are some areas that are marked off, but there is huge freedom within those boundaries to go and move and decide what we eat and drink and wear and watch and how we live as long as we stay within those boundary markers.

But here is when we come back to Paul's main point. There are no parts of that garden as there are no areas of our lives where following Jesus will not shape the decisions that we make.

I said this earlier, but let me say it again. If Jesus is our saviour, then he is our Lord. And if he is our Lord, he is Lord of all of our lives, not just a part.

[12 : 35] So there should be no parts of our lives, no aspects of our diary, no hobbies or occupations where being a follower of Jesus will not affect us one way or another.

As Christians, we are not free, as the soup dragons once sang, to do whatever we want any old time. Some of you are old enough to remember the soup dragons. I am not free as a Christian to sing the song of Frank Sinatra and live life my way.

No. If we're disciples of Jesus, we belong to him. Body, soul, mind and strength. As Paul will write in the letter to the Romans, we are to offer ourselves daily as a living sacrifice.

Saying, here I am, God, I belong to you. How do you want me to live? So how do we do that? How do we work out how we should live as a disciple of Jesus in our day, in our situation, in our family and with our job, in our homes?

Well, as well as dealing with the issue of marriage, and I'm not going to go into that too much this morning, Paul, I think, weaves into his letter here four principles, four principles that would be good to put in the back of our minds to help us shape our response when we are wondering how we live.

[13:53] Here they are. Remember you belong to God. Understand that being devoted to the Lord means devotion to the Lord's affairs. Consider the times in which you live.

And lastly, live with eternity in mind. Those are the four. We'll work through them in turn. Here's the first one. Remember you belong to God. It was there in verse 17.

Paul speaks about believers being called by God also in verses 18, 20, 21, 22, 24. And in verse 23, he speaks of believers having been bought at a price so that they are now, verse 24, responsible to God.

It's the same idea in both of those phrases. Christians are those who have been called out of darkness, as we said in the baptism liturgy, and into God's marvellous light.

That move was made possible by Jesus. As he died on the cross, he made it possible for our sin to be dealt with and for us to be adopted into God's family. So Jesus' Father, if we're trusting in him, his Father is now our Father.

[15:03] His Spirit is now our Spirit. His life is our life. His future is our future. It's very much a new life to live, even though it's in the midst of our old life.

But so much has changed. So imagine leaving your job and joining the Navy. You're still the same person. You may have a slightly different haircut now, but you're now under a new authority, aren't you?

New rules and regulations. There's a new way of living. Or think about marriage. The day I married Judy, old single Dave died. I was still the same person, same character, same astonishing good looks.

You weren't supposed to laugh then. But so much else had changed. I'd given myself to my wife. I now belong to her as she now belonged to me.

There was a new relationship, a new reality. I couldn't carry on living in the same way that I was living before and still fulfil my wedding vows. And that's true for the person who is drawn to Jesus.

[16:08] The believer now belongs to God. And whilst most things stay the same, we have the same name, we live in the same home, unless we've been a thief or something, we have the same job.

Now our greatest allegiance is to God. Our greatest love and devotion belongs to him. We've moved into his garden. He is the one who now sets the boundaries for how we should live.

And because we love him, we want to please him. So there'll be some things that we stop doing and there'll be some things that we start doing. All because we now belong to Jesus.

That new relationship changes everything. If we want to know how we are to live, it begins by remembering that as a Christian, we belong to God.

That means, secondly, that we need to understand that being devoted to the Lord means being devoted to the Lord's affairs. I often meet people who claim to be Christians and many of them are actually regular churchgoers, but in terms of their work for God, that is as far as it ever goes.

[17:16] They like Jesus' moral teaching. It makes them feel better as a person. They love the idea of his grace and the promise of eternal life. But for them, life is busy. The demands of family, of work, of their hobbies, means that, to be honest, vicar, I don't have any time to spend on serving within the church.

I don't have the time to be a children's worker or to go on the coffee rotor or to host a home group. And I can't do any outreach for the church. The gardening working parties are on a Saturday morning and I always play golf on a Saturday or there are children's swimming groups.

And actually, I'm sorry, but I won't be coming to church over the summer because we've got lots of family and family comes first. But hey, that's okay, isn't it? Because I love God, don't I?

Right? Well, what's Paul's response? He makes it clear here that being devoted to the Lord means being devoted to the Lord's affairs. So as well as being good parents and good spouses, good friends and colleagues, as a Christian, we also need to be involved in the Lord's affairs.

Will that be a draw on our time? Yes, it will. It will be costly. There will be compromises. Some things will need to stop happening because all of us have limited time and energy.

[18:39] But remember, we are not our own. We have been bought with a price. We belong to God. And so his work now becomes our work. And parents, if you're going to grow up with your children learning that lesson, they need to see you living that out for yourself.

Loving God means loving his people, being active in his work, both in the world and in the church. Being devoted to the Lord means devotion to the Lord's affairs.

We're wrestling with how we're to live. Those are two principles to bear in mind to start with. We belong to God and being devoted to him means being devoted to his affairs.

Here's the third principle. It's there in verse 26. Consider the times. Consider the times. Paul uses it in verse 26 as a reason why it might be wise for a person not to go through with marriage.

It's not entirely clear what the times or circumstances Paul was speaking about. But certainly the early church knew far more about times of extreme persecution where life expectancy for the Christian was vastly shorter than we do in our culture today.

[20 : 00] So perhaps Paul was speaking about that. So would it be wise in that situation to take a wife and start a family if there was a chance that standing up for Jesus might get you killed?

It's easier to be braver, isn't it, if we're the only one that we're responsible for. If we've got people who depend on us, well maybe we'll be less willing to take the stand that we might be called to.

Paul's clear that there are arguments both ways but from Paul's perspective thinking about the times, considering the times, he thinks, well in this situation it might be wiser to wait.

So what about the times we're living in? How should our times and our days affect our decisions?

I'm not sure I can give you a straightforward answer on that actually because all our times in some ways are very different, all our own circumstances are different.

But Paul's reasoning once again makes that okay. We have to wrestle with this question ourselves. So Paul again is allowing Christians to make their own call on some personal decisions.

[21 : 13] Have they considered the times? Is it wise for us to make this step now? Is it wise for us to make this call now? Think about the times. What does it mean to follow Jesus clearly right now and how does that affect the decisions we make?

But as he goes through, his clear teaching here is that at the forefront of these Christians' minds should be their responsibility to God. Whatever the times, believers must remember who they are and their call to be about their master's business.

The times might make living out those commitments harder, might lead to different decisions. But those two things are always at the same, are always the same.

We're to think about the times. Lastly, verse 31, we're to live with eternity in mind. Whatever the times and seasons we face, here is a principle that always helps us differentiate us as Christians from the world.

And that is that we need to live with eternity in view. See, very often we live as if this world will go on forever. That our lives will go on forever.

[22 : 30] That we're still going to feel as healthy and fit as we did when we were 35. I'm beginning to realise that is not the case. But at some point the Bible says Jesus will return.

And he will return as king and judge. And he will usher in a glorious eternal kingdom. And at that point it will be absolutely clear that many of the things we spend our time and energy on now were a complete waste of effort.

I'm sure that's as true for me as it will be for you. And as we're wrestling about how to spend our time and how to live as Christians thinking about eternity will help us see these things in their proper perspective.

And that's why Paul says those slightly strange things in those verses. When he talks about living if you're married and you have a wife living as if you didn't have one.

Now for Paul marriages and families are vitally important. He has made that point earlier in the chapter. If you go on to read some of his other letters there's lots of things there too about how important it is for husbands and wives to love each other well.

[23 : 38] To parent their children well. And to do it modelling Jesus all the way through. So his point in verse 29 is not that because of the times because Jesus is coming back if you're married just pretend you don't have a wife.

That's not what he is saying. He is saying that even our closest relationships should be thought of with eternity in view.

It's very easy to make our families or our marriages idols where everything revolves around them. Paul says don't do that. Don't do that.

Live with eternity in view. Don't let your closest relationships draw you away from Jesus. If you're grieving Paul says live as if you're not.

Well what is he saying there? He's not saying that mourning and grieving is bad. Death is always a terrible tragedy but he wants to remind us that Jesus rose again.

[24 : 36] He has conquered death. And one day when Jesus returns we will all be raised those who love him to eternal life. So we can't let our grief so overwhelm us now cast such a shadow over our lives that we don't live for Christ.

No, no there is life there is eternal life coming. Let's not worry about mourning. Let's not worry about our own death. Let's live for Jesus. And as for seeking pleasure or obtaining more possessions Paul's point is not that actually don't bother about any of those things.

His point is don't see those things as ends in themselves. Don't be so engrossed in them. Don't let the good things that God gives become God things that draw us away from God.

As Christians our greatest pleasures are still to come. As Christians our greatest treasures await for us in glory. And whatever opportunities this world affords are nothing compared to the wonder of being with Jesus in his perfect kingdom.

And remembering all this will save us from coming so engrossed in the world that our time and talents, our energies and resources, our families and friendships take God's place.

[25 : 55] Four things to bear in mind. Paul's framework. We remember that we belong to God. We remember that being devoted to the Lord means being devoted to the Lord's affairs.

When wrestling with the right thing to do we're to consider the times in which we live and we're always to live with eternity in mind. And if I can add one more don't wrestle with those questions on your own.

think back once again to the baptism liturgy and the promises parents and godparents made to bring juniper up. They were to do that within the life and worship of Christ's church.

That is the place we wrestle with these big decisions. This is where we find the wisdom to work out our way how we live. Because as we come together we praise God, we read his word together and so we get to know God better, his characteristics better and his commands better.

We do that together. We share our lives together and so we have a better understanding of the times one another are living in. And then we pray together and ask for God's help.

[27 : 09] And because we are all in Christ, like Paul, we too have the Holy Spirit in us to help us make sense of our days and our times, to remind us of God's commands that we would live out our faith in the light of all these different things.

Will we always get it right? No. Of course we won't. We all battle against sin, the world, the flesh and the devil. We have a new life to live but it is very much a new life in the midst of the old.

But when we choose unwisely and we stumble and fall, we can come back again and again to the God who saved us in the first place. We can be reminded that his mercies are new every morning and we can be confident in God's grace that he will pick us up from whatever thorn bushes or swamp we have driven ourselves into and he will lift us out and wash us clean and lead us back into his righteous paths again.

So there you have it, a guide to living the kingdom of God, living for the kingdom of God at home, at work, at church. Following Jesus is an all encompassing way to live.

But for Juniper, for all of us, it is the path that leads to fullness of life. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and he calls us to walk with him.

[28 : 38] Are we ready to follow? I pray God that we are. Amen.