

1 Corinthians 7:1-24 PM

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 November 2023

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Hello everyone. If you're brand new, my name is Aaron. I'm one of the ministers here at St. John's. I'd love to meet you afterwards. So, did you hear that reading? Were you guys listening? Did you hear that? Gee, that's a cracker, isn't it? Isn't that a good one?

It's brilliant. Let's ease into it. Let's ease into this one slowly, all right? Okay, so, there's a church in Corinth 2,000 years ago, and they were really zealous. By the way, you probably should have your Bibles open.

Probably should grab some Bibles. They'll probably be helpful to you. 1 Corinthians 7, 1-24. Okay, so there's a church in a place called Corinth 2,000 years ago, and they were really zealous. Like, they were really into Jesus. They loved the gospel.

But man, they had some really wacky ideas as well. And Paul has been addressing this wackiness for a few chapters now. And we've got a couple of doozies today. So, even like just right at the start, like straight out of the gate, verse 1, Paul says, Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, it is not good for a man to have sex with a woman.

It's talking about married couples. Yep. So, what do we know? So, we know that Paul started this church, and we know that he left to start other church plants. And then, people wrote to Paul and said, stuff's going on. Also, we've got some ideas. And this letter, Corinthians, is Paul's response to their letter that they wrote to him. And here we actually have a reference to that. Verse 1, hence the phrase, Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, that they wrote to Paul.

[1 : 5 8] So, Paul addresses this idea that developed, that married folks shouldn't have sex. And then, he goes on to talk about divorce, and slavery, and circumcision.

And as you read it, it does feel a bit discordant, doesn't it? Like, it's just jumping around. Like, just a whole lot of stuff. But trust me, there is actually a unified, idea behind everything he talks about. Behind everything he talks about, there's one big idea.

And that big idea is actually right at the end of our reading. Three times, Paul says, three times, he says this line, and it's quite similar. So, it must be important. Verse 17, 20, and 24.

Verse 17, only 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, she, was called.

Verse 24, so in whatever condition each was called, let him or her remain with God. So, that's the big idea. So, I'm going to come back to this married couples shouldn't have sex thing later on.

[3 : 2 5] But first, what does he mean? What's this line all about? What's this kind of idea? Verse 17, 20, and 24. What does that all that mean? I think what's happening here is Paul is addressing this kind of, the spiritual restlessness we can have.

That we can have that they had, where we think, if only my life was a bit different, I'd be a much better Christian. I could be so much more spiritual if my circumstances were different.

You know, if I was out of this unhappy marriage, or if I was single, or if you're single if I'm married, or from a different race, or if I have a different heritage.

If my environment would improve a bit, man, I'd be a really, I'd be a great Christian. I'd just be, I'd be killing it. It's kind of a bit of a grass is greener kind of situation, I think.

I remember hearing about a very wealthy, generous Christian couple, and I remember thinking, man, if I was wealthy, if I was wealthy, and I know in the world I'm wealthy, but if I was Western wealthy, I'd be so generous.

[4 : 43] That's what I thought. But would I? I mean, would I really, though? Would I actually be generous? And that's not, God hasn't called me to that life.

God has called me to actually be generous right now with the life He has for me, with the resources I have. He's called me to this life, and I can be generous in the life God has for me now.

I'll give you another example. I saw my brother recently, and he was telling me that someone in our family had done some ancestry work. And it turns out I come from a long line, generations and generations of peasants.

Like, just nothing. Like, nothing. So, I have a friend of mine who's a pastor, and he comes from generations and generations and generations of upper class educated pastors and missionaries and bishops.

And he tells me stories sometimes about this. And I have to admit, I get jealous. And I have thought, when he's telling me these stories, I have thought to myself, man, if I had that kind of pedigree, you know, if I had that pedigree, I'd be such, I'd just be a way better Christian.

[6 : 08] But it's, thinking like that, it's such a joy-sucking exercise, isn't it? Because that's not my pedigree.

But that doesn't mean I can't serve Jesus with the life I have. And that stuff, I think Paul is trying to say, it's kind of irrelevant when it comes to me fulfilling my role as a follower of Jesus.

So, that's a really big picture. We're easing into this slowly. That's what Paul is on about. And then he gives us these examples. So, all the slavery, the sex, the circumcision, those are all examples about this one point.

So, let's go through it. Okay, and they're quite extreme examples. So, let's start with the circumcision, I think. So, we're right at the end of the passage here. Verse 18.

Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Which was, there was some kind of thing you could do.

[7 : 15] Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything. But keeping the commandments of God. That's the main thing.

That's what Paul says. Keep the commandments of God. Remain in the condition in which you were called. So, when it talks about circumcision, it's talking about nationality. That's the thing. So, Jews were circumcised.

It was a part of their national identity as the covenant people of God. It was a really big deal. So, in this church, it seems like there were some non-Jews who were thinking, I don't have this stellar kind of heritage, being part of God's chosen people kind of thing.

I don't have that. I should be circumcised. I'm a Gentile. I should be circumcised. That will bring me closer to God. That will put me on some higher spiritual plane. And it seems like there were Jews who were thinking, I need to hide my nationality in order to move forward here.

And Paul says, stop it. Stop it. Just be cool. Just be cool. All right? Verse 19. Just keep the commandments.

[8 : 22] You don't need to be somebody else. You just keep the commandments. Just be faithful with your situation. The situation that God has, just be faithful with that.

You don't need another heritage. You don't need another nationality. My heritage is thoroughly working class. And it's not saying, and this is not the point, it's not saying I can serve God despite having this really working class background.

No. It's just your working class. That's the whole sentence, you know. It's a thing.

And I'm just going to put it right here. It's not unimportant. But it's a thing over here. It's a category that shouldn't impact your ability to serve God. Next example is slavery.

Verse 21. Now this hits a bit differently for us. It's a bit more loaded. Verse 21. Were you a bond servant when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.

[9 : 25] Verse 21. So bond servant just means slave. You're a slave. Don't let that trouble you. Now you can hear that and you can go, bro.

Poor. Honestly, read the room. You know. Like read the room. Some cultural context is a little bit helpful here, I think. So first century slavery was similar and different to North American and the British slave trade of the 19th century.

Different in that it wasn't race-based. Different in that slaves could buy their freedom. They could have lots of responsibility. They were doctors and business managers. People could sell themselves into slavery in the first century because there's no social safety net.

So if you're like completely struggling in life, you could actually sell yourself to somebody for a period of time, work for them, and then eventually work off your debt once you've gained a bit of money and stuff.

Right? So. Different. But similar. And then it's still thoroughly dehumanizing because it's a human being owned by another human.

[10 : 33] And there were lots of slaves who were in really brutal situations. But not all of them, but lots of slaves in brutal situations. Different as well, actually, because there were tons of slaves back in the days.

So like at least a third of the population were slaves. I just want to also add that Paul doesn't condone slavery here. Christians have used this passage here to support slavery.

But that's out of step with what the rest of the New Testament says. I'll give you an example. 1 Timothy 1, 9 and 10. It's got this list of sinful behaviors. And right beside murderers is slave traders.

So a bit of context there. Let's zoom in on Paul's point. Verse 21. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of this opportunity. So Paul is not saying, stay a slave.

That is the Lord's lot for you. That's all he wants for you. He's not saying that. He's saying that clearly. Like if you can be free, you should be free. What he is trying to tell us is this.

[11 : 43] He's saying is your status doesn't stop you from serving Jesus though. It doesn't stop you from being a faithful follower of Christ. Christ. Christ. Christ. And he tries to make this really big point by picking the most disadvantaged group back in the days.

And says even in your situation, you can serve God. You can experience transformation. The guidance of the Holy Spirit. Even in that situation.

Even with a life you didn't expect. And you don't want. And that's difficult. You can still walk in the Spirit.

Be transformed by the Holy Spirit. Look at Paul's wonderful words in verses 22 to 24. For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freed man of the Lord.

Likewise, he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price. Do not become bondservants of men. So brothers, sisters, in whatever condition each was called, let him or her remain with God.

[12 : 48] No matter how low you are. Or think you are. Your Father in heaven thinks you are valuable. And bought you with a price. A very costly price. Christ on the cross.

Remain with him. Serve him. Enjoy your life with Jesus. So a quick summary here. Your social status is not a barrier to serving Christ.

Being a good Christian. Your heritage, your nationality, should not be a barrier to serving Christ. Now, if we jump now.

So we've done the bottom half of our reading. Where all the big points are made. A couple of examples. We're going to jump to the top now. Here's a few more examples. So, Paul says, Neither should your marital status be a barrier.

Verses 12 and 13. To the rest I say, if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he consents to live with him.

[13 : 51] She should not divorce him. So, here's what's going on. So, people were thinking, back in the days, they're going like, I've become a Christian. But the person I'm married to is not a Christian.

And they're going, do you know what? I can't do this. I can't do this. If I really want to serve Jesus, I need to get rid of this person. And then I'll be really about to focus on Jesus.

And the Bible says no here. Paul says, the situation you have is the situation you have. Let's see how you can be a Christian in this situation.

Now, just as an aside. There's a hundred things we need to say about divorce here. But I'm not going to say it. Obviously, abusive, violent situations, you need to get out of those.

But this is not what this is talking about. The problem that these people have here is they're thinking, my spouse is stopping me from being a proper Christian or something. So, I need to get shot of them.

[14 : 46] I need to get rid of them. That's the particular situation here, which is all I'm going to talk about. So, Paul says, this is your situation. How are you going to be a Christian in this?

A faithful follower of Jesus in this. And what he does, it's lovely. He gives them an imagination for what their ministry in that marriage could look like. And he says in verse 14 here.

For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife. And the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Slightly confusing. But basically, Paul is saying, God can use you to help the other person come to faith.

Now, I want you to hold that thought for just a moment. So, you just, what is this? Put a pin in it. Just put a pin in there. Just hold that for a moment. Okay. Verse 8. To the unmarried and the widows, I say it is good for them to remain single as I am.

But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. Okay. Really simply, Paul says this. If you're single, that's great. Serve God. That kind of, that's my gig.

[15 : 48] It kind of works for me. But if you can't be single, if you're just, if you're jonesing for physical intimacy, then it's okay. You know, get married. So, it's great, isn't it? He's like saying, so if you're married to a non-Christian, it's okay.

Just get on with being a follower of Jesus in that situation. I know it's tricky, but you can follow Jesus in that situation and cool things can happen. How are you going to be a faithful Christian in that situation? If you're single, he says.

If you're widowed, if you're unmarried, get on with serving God. If the single thing is really hard, get married. Get on with serving God.

Again, do you see what he's doing? He's taking all these really important categories, nationality, social status, marital status, and saying, none of these things are barriers to you being faithful.

And in these categories, some of you have been dealt a hard hand, a difficult hand to play. And Paul doesn't minimize that.

[16 : 50] But he says you can be a faithful Christian in that situation. Don't think you need to get out of it. Just to get on with being, you know, a follower of Jesus. I like John Piper on this.

He says it's quite a hard line, but I quite like it. It's been helpful to me. He says, occasionally, weep deeply over the life that you hoped would be. Grieve the losses.

Feel the pain. Then wash your face. Trust God. And embrace the life that he's given you. Okay. What I've been attempting to do is stay with this main idea and just keep hitting that drum and not get too bogged down with these lightning rod issues.

But let's go back to the start now for this final example. Because it's a really good one. Verse 1. Now concerning the matters for which I wrote, it is good for a man not to have sexual relationships with a woman.

It's talking about a married couple deciding not to have sex with each other. So what's going on here? Because it sounds wacky to us, I know. So some folks in the church had this idea that sex was unspiritual. It's messy. It's animalistic.

[18 : 01] It hinders being a Christian. We shouldn't give ourselves over to these kind of things. So not even married people should have sex. Now again, it sounds wacky to us. But back in the days, the body, for some people, in some sort of more sort of pagan faith, the body was regarded as not a great thing.

Not a good thing. Spirit is good. Whatever this mysterious thing in us is good. But the body is not great. It's Gnosticism if you want to look it up. Right? The body was sort of looked down upon.

And when you think like that, you can make, when it comes to sex, you can make two opposing errors. And they're both errors. One of them is the bodies are not important, so you can do whatever you want with them.

And so that had seeped into the church. You could visit temple prostitutes. It doesn't matter. Who cares? It doesn't matter. You know, the other error was the body is not important. The body is bad. Only the spirit is bad.

So sex must be bad as well. So not even married couples should be engaging in it. And then there's another layer on this, which is patriarchy present in that society, which we'll come to in a moment.

[19 : 12] But these ideas, these errors had sort of seeped into the church. And that's why they're having these kind of wacky thoughts about such things. And Paul's trying to clear it up. And he simply says, look, you can be spiritual and sexual.

It's okay. The body is good. Sex is good. In fact, have sex with your spouse. And then he adds these other layers into it. And remember the big idea. What's the big idea? You've got the big idea, right? Is in this context, how do you be a faithful Christian?

How do you be a follower of Jesus in this particular context? In terms of sex in a marriage, what does Christianity look like in terms of sex?

And he's a great example in verses 3 and 4. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 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. Now to our ears, we say, oh, that's cool, that's cool, that's cool. I mean, of course, obviously. But back in the days, the ancient ears, that was a bongshau.

[20 : 10] Because do you hear the language of consent in that? To the men, it's not your body, it's hers. The woman, it's not your body, it's his. See, back in the days, sex, like men had all the power, and women were essentially property.

And around the sexual stuff, there's so many double standards. You know, the husbands could do whatever they want, they could be a lothario, sleeping with whoever they want. But the woman had to be chased. And Paul says, no, look.

And his words have such beautiful balance, don't they? Like, even when he says, you guys might decide to stop having sex so you can commit yourself to prayer for a period.

Even that example, he says, you both have to agree that that's okay. Consent, consent, consent. So he's saying, don't deny the sexual stuff in your marriage.

See it as part of the way you serve each other. It's part of being a faithful follower of Christ. Means consent is central.

[21 : 25] So Paul takes us there as well. And into a very particular situation. And says, there's no barrier to serving Jesus here. The sex stuff should be no barrier. In fact, it's an opportunity for you to serve each other.

So again, the big picture, just to close this. God has called you to follow him. And that happens in a context.

Rich, poor, fancy, working class, black, white, Asian, single, married. And these are all important parts of who you are. But none of these things should impede your ability to follow Jesus in those contexts.

You're young. Perhaps you don't think you're very cool. You can serve Jesus. You can be a faithful Christian in that context. You're old. You don't think you matter anymore.

I don't know. You can serve Jesus. You can be a faithful minister in that context. But sometimes we just get owned by this sort of restlessness, you know.

[22 : 32] This idea of, oh man, if things were different, I'd be just a better Christian. No. Changing circumstances will not make you a better Christian. Because you go with yourself into those new circumstances.

You don't have to be in the right situation to enjoy your faith and experience a transformation by the Holy Spirit. Folks, you know, and I just want to get that knowledge.

Your today might not be very good. But it's the only today you've got to serve your Creator. This is your day to serve Jesus.

And this day might last a long time. And if you start to get your head in this kind of the grass is greener thing, it's so brutal.

Because what you need is not this external change and everything will be okay. You change what you can. You know, if you're a slave, you can get out of it. Great. But it's our hearts that need to change.

[23 : 37] So presuppositions should be this. I am God's. I'm chosen by Him. At great cost. I am loved. And I want to give back to Him and serve Him how I can, where I am, whatever that looks like.

That's what Paul has to say. Amen.