

The Village Church – Rancho Santa Fe
Week #9 – Adult Bible Study

I Corinthians 7:1-40

November 5 & 6, 2024

Opening Observations

1. With chapter 7, there is a major transition in the letter. Paul will now begin to answer specific questions contained in a letter that they wrote to him. (Wouldn't it be wonderful to have their letter!)
2. Chapter 7 deals with sex and marriage – matters about which Paul has been grossly misunderstood and misused in the history of the church
 - a. Let's remember that Paul is addressing specific questions and is not writing a general view of these topics
 - b. The phrase "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" is not from Paul, but from the Corinthians
 - c. There is nothing here to suggest contempt for women or for sexual intercourse
 - d. Paul describes here a vision of mutuality in marriage
 - e. All of Paul's advice & teaching is grounded in his belief that the Day of the Lord was coming soon
3. Generally speaking, Paul will advise that people remain in whatever social condition they find themselves currently because the End is coming soon
4. Paul engages in pastoral conversation and theology on topics about which scripture allows room for various decisions, and he even moves beyond any specific teaching of Jesus to address matters that Jesus did not address

7:1-7

5. Sexual relations among those who are married is the key topic
6. "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" is a quote from the Corinthians' letter
 - a. This reflects both Stoic and Cynic philosophy
 - b. It also reflects Jewish ideas promoted by the Essenes and the Therapeutae
 - c. The general idea is that abstinence from sex promotes greater spirituality
 - d. It is a logical question from those (pagan, Gentile) Christians who are trying to make sense of the new world they are in, a world of following Jesus
7. "To touch" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse
8. In brief, Paul counsels that those who are married should continue to have sex
9. Perhaps the earlier problem discussed – that of Christians going to prostitutes – was brought on by the decision of one partner in a marriage deciding to abstain which then left the other without a normal or good form of sexual expression
10. V4 – Paul expresses here a profound new idea: that the woman has authority (owns, possesses) the man just as much as the man has authority over the woman – the principle of mutual submission
11. Temporary, short-term abstinence for purposes of spiritual discipline/expression is acceptable if both agree (eg symphonou – in 'symphony' with each other)
12. V7 – evidence that Paul himself is now unmarried
13. Both those who counsel absolute freedom (and anarchy) in sexuality and absolute abstinence from sexuality are acting outside the design of God's creation, which is spiritually unhealthy
14. Of particular note: Paul sees sexual relationships as key to the totality of a marriage relationship and not only about the business of procreation – later Roman Catholic teaching would limit the value of sex to procreation

7:8-9

15. Advice for widows and widowers
16. Here is a hint that Paul is now a widower – "as I am"
17. Basically, Paul counsels this category of believer to remain in their current state unless to do so invites sexual promiscuity, in which case it is better to marry again

7:10-11

18. On divorce
19. The general norm, that Paul supports by an appeal to Jesus' teaching, is that divorce is not acceptable

- 20. In Judaism, only men could initiate divorce, but in Roman law women also had this prerogative
- 21. Paul provides advice here that understands that some people will divorce: if they do so, then remain unmarried to anyone else
- 22. Note here that Paul does not call on those who divorce to be expelled from the community!

7:12-16

- 23. The question of “mixed” marriage – believer with unbeliever
- 24. This possibility was not contemplated in Jesus’ teaching, so here Paul speaks on his own authority – here is an example of the continuing development of Christian morality and ethical teaching arising from new situations in human life – this is huge – it gives scriptural precedent to the continuing responsibility of the Church to apply Jesus’ teaching in ever-changing contexts
- 25. Paul counsels the couple either to separate or to remain together
- 26. The new thing: The continuing relationship of believer with unbeliever holds the hope that the faith of the one will have a positive impact on the faithlessness of the other
- 27. Holiness is more powerful than impurity! (Earlier, Paul has warned against the power of bad leaven to ruin the whole batch, the opposite of what he says here)

7:17-24

- 28. Paul’s general rule: remain as you were when you became a believer because this prior status has very little meaning or impact in light of the coming Day of the Lord
- 29. Paul’s immediate concern is to ensure that believers are set free from past “categories” in order to serve Christ
- 30. Circumcision – a commandment of Judaism, now reinterpreted in the light of Jesus as having no definitive or controlling impact
- 31. Slavery
 - a. Ancient slavery was quite different from modern forms such as chattel slavery in the antebellum South or sexual slavery as still present today
 - b. Paul believes that soon the world will end, so leave the social order as it is – but if you can achieve freedom, then do so
 - c. And Paul reaffirms the principle that will one day lead to the end of slavery – that all are created equal and that all are seen as equal in the new sociopolitical order as envisioned by Christ

7:25-38

- 32. Engaged couples
- 33. They are free to choose to marry or not – again, pastoral and practical advice
- 34. Of note:
 - a. The present order of the world is soon going away, so why bother with getting married?
 - b. And...being married is/can be a distraction from things of Christ (and spreading the gospel)
 - c. Being single will be easier for folks as the world transitions to rule of Christ
 - d. Paul affirms here the equal value of singleness along with marriage

7:39-40

- 35. Wives & Widows – essentially a recap of what Paul has previously said

Questions for Your Life Today

- A. In this section we see that Paul continues to affirm core teaching about Christian morality/ethics, and at the same time applies the principles to situations that are new and/or unique in the Corinthian Christians’ lives. How do you and I remain true to the teachings of Christ in ever-evolving situations of life?
- B. Paul’s ultimate concern is about the faithfulness of disciples: How will people continue to reshape their lives to accord with the teachings and work of Christ? What parts of your life are under “current review” to ensure that you are becoming or remaining faithful?

- C. What practices do you engage in order to deepen in your holiness? What practices might actually be unwise or unhealthy?
- D. How does an anticipation of the end of history – the Day of the Lord – and the coming Christ inform your walk with Jesus, even as you realize that this Day may be a long way off?
- E. Paul relied on the guidance of the Spirit to help him make moral decisions and then to teach about them. How do you rely on the Spirit? How does the Spirit speak to you?

Notes by The Rev. Dr. Jack Baca, Senior Pastor, The Village Church, Rancho Santa Fe, California

Resources:

- Interpretation Commentary on First Corinthians, Richard B. Hays, John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1997
- Interpretation Commentary on Second Corinthians, Ernest Best, John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1987
- The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of 1 Corinthians – Life in the Local Church, David Prior, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1985
- The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of 2 Corinthians – Power in Weakness, Paul Barnett, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1988
- The Communicator's Commentary, 1, 2 Corinthians, Kenneth L. Chafin, Word Books, Waco, Texas, 1985