

Paul's Ethics: Lecture 3

Application of Principles to 1 Corinthians 7

In this lecture we will look at how Paul's general principles work themselves out when applied to a concrete situation. The problems dealing with sexuality, marriage and the proper place of these things in the Christian life were serious concerns to Paul no less than to us. He examines some of these problems in 1 Corinthians 7. We shall take that chapter verse by verse, attempting to discover places where the general principles we have asserted to be at the base of Paul's ethics are visible in his application to these concrete issues in the specific situation to which the Corinthian correspondence is addressed.

Paul's views on marriage are conditioned, in general, by the following considerations.

1. His expectation of the immanent parousia. That is, Paul looked for the final return of Jesus, the end of this world and the last judgement to happen in the near future. Therefore, marriage became much more an emergency measure in the face of natural instincts than if he expected the world to continue in the same old way for a long time.

2. The position of women and the views of sexuality commonly held in the ancient world. One must be cautious here. Paul sometimes reacts against traditional views, sometimes uses them to prove his points. He does not have a pre-determined stance towards contemporary mores. In more concrete terms, some of his parishioners in Corinth seem to wish to move beyond sexuality by denying the rightness of intercourse altogether; others seem to wish to move beyond sexuality by saying that the nature of one's sexual life is irrelevant to one's stance as a Christian. (See the discussion of fornication in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20.) Either way, the Corinthians do not wish to consider sexuality as a part of life with God, but as something to get beyond. To them, it is physical and irrational and therefore not part of the core of one's being. This Corinthian position runs counter to Paul's notion that our use of our bodies has an eternal dimension; that one does not get beyond the body, that the meanings we create with our bodies are part of our true selves.

3. Thus Paul's position on marriage and sexuality in his letters to the Corinthians is conditioned by these pre-existing splits in the Corinthians community that come from either an ascetical denial of sexuality or an undisciplined indulgence. The terms of the discussion are set not in the generality of academic ethics but in the fire of concrete historical

circumstance. Paul claims that Christ is central to who you really are in the community; the Corinthians wish to make a getting beyond sexuality, in one way or another, central to who you are. Because it is Christ, rather than the law, that is central for Paul he refuses to lay down particular rules for individual members of the Corinthians church, rather he tells them to consider their behavior and the order of their lives in the light of the gifts God has given them. But he does set conditions that inform their concrete behavior. His ultimate principle in these matters is expressed in 1 Corinthians 7:35 -- to act so that one is able to give the fullest attention to the Lord. Other sets of conditions are found throughout the passage: "If you marry, here is how to conduct yourself..., if you are not married here is how to conduct yourselves..." Paul does not say a Christian is to be married or single, he does not say that one is to remain married to an unbelieving spouse or divorce an unbelieving spouse but he does talk about norms and guides for our actions in each situation. In each situation, how do we conduct ourselves so as to be able to give our fullest attention to God?

4. Finally, we must remember the nature of Paul's letters. First, they are fragmentary. We probably do not possess his complete correspondence. We do not have any of the letters addressed to him that have provoked his replies. Since we do not know exactly who and what circumstances Paul is addressing, it is difficult to get some of his answers to make sense. It is like listening to one half of a telephone conversation, several interpretations may make sense. Second, his letters are very pastoral, very concrete and personal. He was not laying down, in a self-conscious fashion, the law for the next 2000 years of church life -- he was struggling to solve concrete problems in his situation. He may, therefore, allow compromise made necessary by the conditions of his time and the people he dealt with that he would not allow in the abstraction of a perfect world. We learn from the integrity and the spiritual depth of his struggle -- and from the fundamental principles to which he appeals. These principles make the use of the gifts of God the determining element in a Christian's ethical life. These principles lead us to see the outside world not merely as a threat to our religion. They point to the proper use of sexuality as determined not by its own inherent nature (That Greek idea again!) but by what our sexual actions and beliefs do to our relation with God. Are they an expression of love and thanks or are they something else?

THE TEXT OF 1 CORINTHIANS CHAPTER 7

7:1 Paul says he is responding to a set of written questions sent him from Corinth. This is a salutary reminder

that we have only parts of a once much more extensive correspondence. Reading this whole chapter is like listening to 1/2 a conversation and trying to guess what the unheard person is saying from the 1/2 you do hear. We do not have the Corinthian's letters to Paul; I wish we did. This verse also reminds us that in his comments that follow, Paul is responding to specific questions. He is not enunciating general law, but giving pastoral guidance, in response to a series of specific question and problems that are disturbing the Corinthian community

7:1b This is a quote from a previous letter of the Corinthians to Paul. It has frequently been misunderstood as an unvarnished statement of Paul's position and as implying that he valued virginity more than marriage and was against all sexual contact whatsoever. There are several problems with this interpretation.

1. There was no punctuation in these early texts. So there is no way to determine, from the grammar and form of the manuscript itself, if this is a quotation or not.

2. In the very next verse Paul allows sexual contact in marriage without moral condemnation. The meaning of his words is that marriage may be inconvenient, but that it is not evil. Consequently, if virginity is to be preferred to marriage it cannot be on the grounds that the expression of sexuality, within marriage, is itself immoral.

3. Paul's language. Paul distinguishes carefully between "anthropos" and "aner," two Greek words that might best be translated "man" and "male" respectively. 7:1b uses "anthropos" to mean male and that usage is strikingly uncharacteristic of Paul. The rest of chapter 7 uses "aner" to refer to male. The implication of this distinctive usage, not proved, but strongly supported, is that 7:1b is by a different author, one not so finicky about the meaning of words. (Paul uses "anthropos" when he wishes to talk about the whole human race. He uses "aner" when he wishes to talk about a male in distinction from a female.)

4. 7:1a tells us that Paul is responding to a Corinthian question. If the question is not whether sexual intercourse is to be permitted at all, then what is it? To what other conceivable question could the rest of this part of chapter 7 be a response? Paul must be trying to establish the legitimacy of sexual intercourse in marriage against Corinthian objections to it, or there is no way to account for the rest of the passage. Notice that Paul even seeks to limit the occasions of abstinence, which makes no

sense unless he is arguing against an extreme ascetical position.

5. If Paul means it is morally superior to remain unmarried then he is asserting the moral superiority of virginity, but he later in the chapter specifically denies that marriage is sinful at all, and he gives only prudential reasons for celibacy, not moral ones. He is not interested in exalting virginity, but in allowing marriage to those who need it.

For these reasons I conclude that this passage, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." is the position of those against whom Paul is arguing.

My reconstruction of the sociological background of this passage is that there is a faction of extreme ascetics in the Corinthian Church who wish to make sexual abstinence, even in marriage, an identifying mark of the Christian community as a whole. This is not strange either in the light of later Christian values where abstinence from sex was given a positive moral value, or in that of the ancient world in general where sexuality was seen as a bar to the philosophical and spiritual life and relations between the sexes were perceived mainly as a problem filled with mystery and fear. The ancient world was filled with groups that either saw sex as so dangerous that one must totally abstain from it or as of such minor consequence that one might do what one wished. It all came from the same root: fear of sex and the consequent desire to empty it of fundamental importance in human life.

Now here Paul is a moderate speaking against these extremes. He wishes to allow an expression of sexuality in the life of each person that depends on that person's needs if he or she is to concentrate on the Lord. Some people need marriage, he implies, if they are to be able to concentrate on the Lord rather than burn, and some have the gift to get along without sexual expression. (Note that abstinence is a gift, not a moral achievement.) Consequently, it is again the gifts of God to us that determine the form of our moral lives. (vs. 7) Thus Paul is speaking as one seeking to keep the Christian community more open and broader than these Corinthians desire it to be.

7:2 Again, be careful to grasp what Paul is really saying. He does not say that avoiding the danger of illicit sex is the only purpose for marriage, but that marriage serves that purpose. (I consider the claim questionable.) Notice also that this verse is phrased as an objection and an answer to the assertion in the previous verse. Paul often argues like this, starting with his opponent's position and then building a ring of exceptions around

it that finally vitiate the original statement.

7:3-5 These verses stress the mutuality of responsibility in marriage. Three times Paul emphasizes, through a strict parallel construction, the equality of responsibility between husband and wife. This is decidedly not typical of his own time and represents a Pauline reaction against the standards and presuppositions of the culture of his time. This equality is a new note. The thrust is not toward either indulgence on the grounds that sexual activity is ethically irrelevant or toward denial on the grounds that it is inherently evil. It is toward the ordered use of sexuality as an element in one's whole life. The whole position is a very advanced one for the ancient world where the wife was often seen as the chattel of her husband. Such views constitute a moral breakthrough that would have required immense imagination to initiate or even comprehend in that ancient world.

For example, consider the Old Testament laws against adultery. They make it impossible for a husband to commit adultery against his own wife; it may only be committed against the husband of the woman with whom he has intercourse. It is consequently a violation of property rights. Notice that the wife cannot divorce her husband but a husband can divorce his wife and so forth. The notion of mutuality as a moral principle determining relations between the sexes is quite radical.

Note also that the attempt of one partner to spiritualize the marriage by refusing intercourse is labeled robbery. Most translations soften this by translating "do not refuse each other" or something like that. But the Greek word is very strong and means to forcibly appropriate that which by rights belongs to another. Paul then gives one exception to his rule about the legitimacy of sexual intercourse in marriage. This exception is hedged around with safe-guards. Abstinence from intercourse is permitted for religious reasons. But --

1. It must be by mutual consent.
2. It must be for a limited time.
3. It must be for a specific purpose. The correct translation of vs. 5b is "in order that you may be together again" that is, being together is an object of the separation, the final good thing coming out of it. It thus becomes a precondition for the permissibility of the agreement to abstain from intercourse in the first place.

Now, what the separation of husband and wife and their abstinence from intercourse has to do with religion in the first place is a mystery to me. There are two common interpretations.

1. The prayer spoken of may be a continuous kind or the situation may be like a retreat. Thus the object of Paul's council is merely to free one from distractions.

2. Intercourse may be seen as polluting and thus one may pray more effectively when abstaining. This view was also common in the ancient world where many activities were hedged by sexual taboos. See the regulations in Leviticus.

The latter view is uncharacteristic of Paul and the former is, therefore, to be preferred. The same practice was common among the early Jewish rabbis with the following differences:

1. The wife was not consulted.
2. It was always assumed to be the husband who separated himself for the sake of prayer. That the wife might have a prayer life that would require this kind of nurture was never considered. The reasoning given by the rabbis for this practice was always to avoid distraction, never that of cultic uncleanness, consequently the former interpretation has the support of religious practice within early Jewish culture.

Vs. 5 is rooted in vs. 2. Paul seems to assume that a strong desire for sexual intercourse is the main reason for marriage. Remember the expectation of the immanent parousia. The whole of vs. 5 is a recognition that neither abstinence nor ordinary indulgence in marriage is the norm for the whole Christian community. One's actions in this regard are to depend on the specific gifts given one by God. (vs. 6-7) Note that this is an application of Paul's central principle that we are free from the law and are to determine the form of our ethical life by the gifts that God has given to us. He has insisted that several approaches to sexual behavior (or its absence) are legitimate in the Christian community, that variety is permissible. But he holds fast to the principle that what one does with one's physical nature is important to one's eternal destiny. Our relations with our sexuality are neither in the realm of hard and fast ethical law nor is it irrelevant to our destiny. It is in the realm of responsiveness to the gifts of God, different behaviors depending on different gifts. Therefore, sexual morality is the outgrowth of life in the community of Christians where one is taught to recognize that which has been given to one by the Holy Spirit.

Vs. 6a, "This" is obscure; what does the "this" refer to? There are three interpretations:

1. It refers to the whole of vs. 2-5. Paul is then saying,

"I do not command marriage, but I allow it.

2. It may refer to 5b, the resumption of marital relations after a period of abstinence.
3. It may refer to the whole of vs. 5, thus making it a concession to the ascetics who happen to be married. They may abstain for a while under the given conditions, but periodic abstinence is not a command.

Vs. 7 has often been misinterpreted to prove that Paul was a sexual ascetic or was single. This may or may not have been the case, but it is not what the Greek text says. At any rate, it is not immediately obvious how Paul would like all men to be as he is.

The grammar here is that of a wish which it is possible to realize. Now to wish that all be sexually ascetic contradicts the previous statement that some just do not have this gift and that, therefore, continence is not only dangerous for them but impossible. The implication may be that Paul wishes all to be like he is in knowing the gift that God has given to him and living his life in accordance with that gift, thereby freeing himself from disobedient and inordinate expressions of his sexuality. This freedom is achieved in different ways, abstinence if that is your gift -- or the measured use of sexuality in marriage if it is not. Neither condition is a necessity for the services of God and membership in the Christian community, but both are permitted. This is the key to the interpretation of the whole passage.