

Paul's Ethics: Lecture 5

Continued Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7

Vs. 17 Again Paul is stating a basic principle from which his particular ethical positions derive. "Each should live according to the gift the Lord has apportioned him." Paul is trying to point out that no change the Corinthians can make in their own status or station in life can further their salvation, except the change from not living out to living out their gift. Paul is obviously not asking people to stop changing, his examples show he is not trying to make people static. But he is asserting that the place in which they find themselves according to the world's assessment of who they are, does not determine who they are before Christ. Paul is attacking the notion that circumcision and uncircumcision, slavery and freedom, maleness and femaleness, all these things that determine one's position in the world have relevance in determining one's position before God. Therefore, in the final analysis, such considerations do not determine what one is really worth.

One of the more profound distinctions between people, and one that deeply influences how humans see each other's worth, is the distinction between different human communities. In the ancient world one of the more radical distinctions was between Jews and Greeks, the circumcised and the uncircumcised. The other classical splits were between slaves and free people and between men and women. The disabilities and differences of treatment that stemmed from these differences in community were seen as being a part of the natural order, the way of the world that is accepted as just because it is "the way things are." One was born into one or another of each of these classes. They determined who you were, what you could hope for, and how you lived your life. Paul is saying that these divisions are not ultimate, they do not determine who you are either before God or in the body of the church. Therefore one does not need to put any great effort into changing them. Furthermore, to seek to change one's worldly status because that status counts for salvation before God is to lack faith in God's gift to us and to fall back into a dependence on salvation by works. To see even the work of achieving justice as the means of salvation is still to see a work as a substitute for God's saving grace.

The problem of circumcision is a good example of how all this works. For many of the earliest Christians Paul's comments on circumcision would be the most amazing sort of paradox. Circumcision was a command of God, plainly given in the Old Testament and obligatory for all who would belong to the Holy People. So note, whatever commands Paul is talking about here are not the Old Testament law, for circumcision is central to that, but probably the commandment of faith in Christ and love. Romans 13:10 "love is the law in all its fullness." Remember that for Paul each person is responsible for working out the

realities of love in his or her own life. Furthermore, the division between the circumcised and the uncircumcised was the most basic possible: that between those acceptable to God and those who weren't. How does Paul set all this aside? By grounding a person's life in obedience to the "law of Christ" and discovering that it is our relation with Him that is central in determining who we are. One may be circumcised and disobedient to God in other things; it is impossible to be centered on Christ and disobedient. Therefore, one's relation to Christ is the central, and indeed the only, real determiner of who one is before God.

There is a very difficult problem of translation and interpretation in vs. 21. The text can be read either as instructing those who were slaves when they were called into the church to remain as such or it can be interpreted as instructing them to become free should the chance arise. Both interpretations have their scholarly defenders. Vs. 22-24 make the point clear, however, that Paul is reducing these distinctions to insignificance inside the church. We all have the same relation to the Lord, not because we are all sinners, or all do the same things and occupy the same station in life but because Christ has come to all of us and given us the gift of himself. Notice how Paul changes slavery and freedom from descriptions of one's state in the world to descriptions of one's relation to God. In that process they shift from being exclusive to being inclusive categories. In Christ we are made free from real slavery, to sin and death, and are made slaves in that we owe Christ our service. Our presence in the church is determined by the fact that Christ has come to us somehow, through parents, experiences of worship, outreach and community, through something. It is this being the ones to whom Christ has come that creates who we are, that makes us now members of Christ's body, not the physical, moral, social or even religious status and skills we bring with us into the church. Paul says that our unity is in the coming of Christ to us, not in ourselves; it is in the fact that we are, all of us, the recipients of his gifts.

Vs. 26-28 are an extension of this principle to celibacy and marriage. Paul does not think that marriage or celibacy determines one's status in the Kingdom. In fact, his preference for celibacy is based, explicitly, on his belief that the end of the world and Christ's second coming are in the immediate future. ("On account of the present necessity.") Take away this belief and his reason for favoring celibacy is gone. Notice, and make this emphatic, that Paul does not favor celibacy because it is, in itself, a more holy state than marriage. It is essential to notice this in order to interpret the first verse of this chapter correctly and realize that verse 1 does not represent Paul's unvarnished opinion. Let me repeat, as Paul does so often; celibacy is a more convenient state in a world that is about to come down about one's ears. Paul recommends celibacy to spare people trouble. Note that he says firmly and directly that marriage is no sin and that he states this for both the man and

the woman independently. I also believe that the fact that Paul emphasizes this supports my contention that he is dealing with a batch of people in the Corinthian church who wish to deny all marriage. In a basically pastoral letter you do not emphasize that something is innocent unless someone is claiming that it is not.

Vs. 29-31 Again, we see the danger of taking a single verse of Paul's out of context. It is easy to assume, on the basis of vs. 29, that Paul is pushing abstinence in marriage. That is, of course, impossible on the basis of vs. 1-7. So what does he mean? Let me use a rather complex argument.

In vs. 31b Paul says that the outward form of the world is passing away and in vs. 32 he contrasts the unmarried man whose thought is concentrated on pleasing the Lord with the married man whose thought is concentrated on pleasing his wife. Two further points. The married man must recognize that the institution he has allowed to shape his life belongs, notwithstanding its divine appointment in Genesis, to an order which is passing away and, since the time is short, will soon be passed away. His preparation for existence in the heavenly realm now is not to divorce his wife or cease to cohabit with her or enjoy her company, for that would be acting as if the kingdom had already arrived, and it hasn't. His preparation for existence in the heavenly realm is to recognize that their relations will soon be on a very different basis. Furthermore, the married man must wait on the Lord in a single minded fashion, as if he didn't have a wife to distract his attention. These verses have a tremendous sense of expectation, of potential movement, and Paul's directions cannot be seen as rules for the conduct of normal human life when they are plainly and explicitly a preparation for its ending.

The point here and in the following verses, is that neither marriage or not marriage, laughter or tears, buying or selling is the last word in a person's life. As vs. 31b shows, Paul does not deny people the use of these things, but he denies them any finality; he denies the Corinthians the right to become completely absorbed in them or to see themselves as determined or made by them. These things are all forms of this world that is passing away and the ethics that relate to the maintenance and the good that comes from them is beginning to lose its force. The real thrust of Paul's writing here is to encourage the Corinthians to get their priorities straight and not waste time on things that really don't matter.

Here I want to stop for a minute and just ask the question, "If Paul is heavily influenced by his expectation of the closeness of the end of the world, what relevance does this teaching have for us?" Most of us do not expect the end of the world soon. Again, social ethics, especially, might be different if the institutions that such an ethics works with are about to go out of existence.

First, I think that some of Paul's ideas do have to be moderated. His reasons for advising against marriage for instance, have no value if marriage can be a form of life contributing toward a Christian's growth to God. (Here Martin Luther completes Paul.) It is possible to see marriage as a strengthener rather than a weakener of a Christian's commitment to God. But the one thing that Paul's views can teach us, where his expectation of the end does touch our situation, is that in both cases the final standard of judgement is how an act affects one's openness to God, one's ability to accept God's gift of salvation and one's ability to express that gift in the world. Paul is more desperate in his rhetoric than we; but we, too, are in a situation that is marked by endings. In fact, Christianity is a religion very interested in helping people deal with endings -- the endings of broken relationships, of sins, the ending of our own lives and that of others, the ending of our participation in the world in an unreflective way. The moral choices we make in relation to these endings have all the finality of the end of the world. Anyway, the principle in Paul's and our lives needs to be the same: that one's relationship to God determines the form of one's ethical life, not the principalities, forms and structures of the world. The behavior advocated may be the opposite, Paul does discourage marriage, we do tend to support it, but the end is the same: that one may be open to God in dealing with all the utter endings we deal with -- some of them small, some large.

In our day the divisions that are not to exist in Christ, that do not determine one's goodness would be black, white or red; rich or poor; man or woman (the one everlasting constant!) educated or uneducated. These are the sorts of divisions according to which prestige and power are divided up in the world and they have, says Paul, no reality for God. So Paul is really very radical; not that he demands the overthrow and abolishing of these distinctions in the world, but that he says for Christians they are irrelevant and we are free to act as if they didn't exist in making our friends, structuring our church, determining our viewpoint of the worth of others. God's gift of himself to us and love for us make us most fundamentally who we are, not the various standards and divisions into which the human family is constantly splitting itself. So for us, as for Paul, it is in terms of our openness to Christ that we are judged, and that, I think, is still relevant whether the world is about to end or not.

Vs. 32 This theme of freedom from anxiety is very common in the New Testament. We remember the lilies of the field. (Matthew 6:28-29) What Paul teaches is that people need no longer feel anxious before God. His criticism of Judaism and certain strains of Christianity including the Corinthians to whom this chapter is addressed, is that they make certain states of being that humans create prerequisite to salvation. One then engages in this constant hunt for a holy state out of a mistrust of God's grace. But the person whose life is wrapped up in the form of the world

that is passing away derives his meaning from that world and can therefore hardly hope to be anything else but anxious.

Paul then does a surprising thing, something that some of your Bibles may not notice. He rebukes the Corinthian unmarried men for being anxious about the things of the Lord. That is, they are trying to still their anxiety by their religious practices, like celibacy. The Jerusalem Bible says "...All the unmarried may need be anxious about is pleasing the Lord..." but strictly speaking, they needn't even be anxious about that. I believe this passage to be a rebuke of the Corinthian ascetics who were anxious, by means of their asceticism, to become pleasing to God.

Vs. 33 is plainer. The division here is not that the married man must choose either his wife or the Lord, but that he must choose both. Therefore, the division is at a fundamental level and cannot be resolved; it is a permanent part of his makeup. Paul does not here consider the possibility of pleasing one's spouse through pleasing God or pleasing God through pleasing one's spouse. The important thing is the misfortune of the married man is not his marriage and involvement in the material world as it would have been for an ascetic, but his misfortune is that his mind is divided and his single heartedness is therefore threatened. It is not the body that is evil, or even questionable for Paul. It is a confused devotion arising out of our possession of several concerns claiming to be ultimate.

Vs. 35-36 are so full of problems I don't even want to get into them. Suffice it to say that in the Greek I cannot decide whether we are talking about a father arranging marriage for his daughter or a fiance and the woman he is engaged to or any one of several other possibilities. The exact nature of whom is being talked about is more than obscure; it is absolutely convoluted. I notice in the notes to the various editions of the Bible that this section is generally presented with more certainty than the text warrants. Read the Jerusalem, the New English and the Good News for Modern Man to note the differences and discover how translation can present conjecture to us as if it were revealed truth.

Whatever this text means in detail, one point is clear. Paul is allowing more freedom of action in the Christian community than his hearers may have considered proper. Again, whatever class of people are being referred to, they are free to marry or not to marry depending on their personal situation -- the state of their own minds, their own moral perceptions about the demands of their gifts, situations, and callings.

Vs. 39 This is the last suggestion of Paul in the chapter and he remains true to his principle of freedom from a life ruled by ascetic principle. Widows are free to remarry, and furthermore, to marry anyone they may choose, providing she

remembers her own position in the community and as a Christian. Some translations take this to mean that she must marry a Christian, but that is not what Paul says. Remember, it would be unnecessary for Paul to write to the Corinthians telling that they may do something most of the ancient world allowed without question unless it were under question in this particular community. Later in church history there were fierce feuds over whether second marriages were permissible or not. Here Paul allows them with the one guideline that the woman remember the demands of her Christian calling.