

Sermon for Sunday, May 12, 2024

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As we start to think about today's text we are NOT going to think so much about Corinth: it's geography, culture, or religious practices. Today I want to focus on the apostle Paul.

- One of the personal characteristics about Paul is that he is fervent or passionate. When he takes a hold of an idea he's totally in. One good example is when he got letters of permission to arrest Jewish converts to Christianity. He was so passionate about the work that he started off on the road to Damascus.
- At the point at which he writes the letter to the Corinthian church he is long past that. Now he's been converted and he's "on fire for the Lord!" Paul is just an intense sort of guy.
- In the same way Paul fervently believes that Jesus will return soon. His belief in the imminent return of Jesus is reflected in the entirety of I Corinthians 7.

Now we didn't read the entire chapter. If you were to read it you would discover a couple of things.

- Beginning in 7 Paul starts answering various specific questions that he has received from the Corinthian church including what seem to be very specific questions about marriage.
- Most of the verses speak to the various marital states in which a person might be living
 - Married
 - Unmarried but old enough to marry or perhaps widowed
 - Married to a spouse who is an unbeliever
 - Divorced
 - What about those who are virgins—suggesting that they have not attained an age where they are considering marriage.
 - Engaged to be married
- Whew! As you can see from this list, there are many married and unmarried states of being. Paul understands

this. He probably answers these questions with specific persons in mind.

- All of these states of being are covered in verses 1 through 25. Then along comes verses 26-28 which give us a glimpse into why Paul teaches the way he does: "I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that." *"in view of the impending crisis,"* Paul thinks something difficult is going to occur and this is his hint.

We come now to the verses that Marcia read for us this morning. "From now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away."

Paul is convinced that the return of Jesus is imminent. For this reason he counsels the Corinthians sincerely about their marital status because he doesn't see that it is necessary for them to make big changes in their marital state. Not married? No worries, Jesus is coming soon. Married? No worries, Jesus is coming soon. Married to an unbeliever? No worries, Jesus is coming soon. Deeply desire to get married? Go ahead, but understand that Jesus is coming soon.

One extension to this idea that Christ is coming soon is that there was a statement by Jesus at the very end of the gospel of John. It says, John 21:21-23 When Peter saw [the disciple that Jesus loved], he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" (*Pause*) As a result some thought that Jesus would return during the life time of the twelve disciples—or maybe before all of those earliest witnesses died: meaning those who actually saw Jesus in his resurrected body.

As time went on these early witnesses started dying and Jesus hadn't yet returned. Now what were they to believe? Followers of

Jesus had to regroup. The author of 2 Peter had an answer. In chapter 3 verses 8-9 "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." With these words we have a comforting answer to all of the questions that were being raised by believers.

I think that Paul would be sincerely surprised to learn that here we are about 2000 years later and Jesus has not returned. The idea that we followers are still living here on earth without any sign of the Lord Jesus would probably give him pause and cause him to ponder carefully what he taught all those years ago.

We, living in the year 2024 perhaps don't think much about Jesus' imminent return; after all we have clothes to wash and food to prepare and children to care for and sporting events to attend and and and... our lives are filled with many activities.

So how are we to live? We are called to live ready. Over and over in Matthew 24 and 25 Jesus tells us to stay awake; to be prepared. We will not have time to change our lives or our minds when Jesus returns. We need to live ready. Living ready should not be a frightening thing because it means living as we have been taught since our youth: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Therefore do not live frightened. As the passage from 2 Peter said, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." God is patient. God is loving and kind. Remember always that you are children of God. You were claimed by God in your baptisms and you have nothing to fear; certainly not Jesus' return. If anything when Jesus returns it will be like returning to a safe home filled with love.

And in the meantime use the strengths, the gifts, and the skills that you have been given by God to make the world a better place. Not because you are earning a place in heaven—your place is secure. No, as followers of Jesus we are servants that are called to serve God by serving others. Amen.