

The Life that Counts
1 Corinthians 7
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Well I feel really privileged to be here this morning at Rosie's dedication. Rosie really looks lovely. Of course, I'm afraid to say that she won't always be like this. There is always the chance that this cute little girl will over time metamorphasize not into a beautiful butterfly but into something very different... a teenager (no offence to any of that breed here). Do you remember Harry Enfield's character Kevin the teenager. Of course he wasn't always like that. In sketch we saw how Kevin became a teenager. There he was a lovely boy saying please and thank you to his mum, bright eyed, bushy tailed, straight-backed and then the next morning it had happened – voice croaking, slouching shoulders, weird secretive behaviour. Now many people, egged on by the media think that the same transformation happens when you become a Christian. There you are an ordinary person and then suddenly you get God, get Jesus and suddenly you become *weird* – you start doing different things, your clothes change, your voice changes, your taste in music changes.

Ned Flanders is a fair estimation of what people think happens - born again Christian you know. Unfortunately this is a caricature based on a half-truth that is not truth at all. But where do these misconception come from? Unfortunately they come from us Christians who often misunderstand what a being a Christian means for our lives. In our passage this morning Paul is answering the questions of some Christians who thought they had to change certain aspects of their life to be better Christians and Paul basically tells them that in terms of their life situation when they became Christians in a sense nothing changed and in a sense everything changed – the key is understanding what changes and what does not.

Now what has this got to do with this long passage that was read to us earlier, a passage you might think is a little strange for a dedication service. You might feel a bit embarrassed because it speaks about three big societal taboos sex, divorce, and death. Perhaps some of you think – a bit of Christian moralism – list of instructions. Perhaps in view of such a long reading you have just switched off and are not listening at all. Well I would encourage you to come with me as we look at this passage.

In our passage Paul is answering questions that the Corinthians had written to him about. We see this in verse 1. It must have been a long letter because we can identify ten situations that Paul has to deal with in turn.

1. Sex in marriage
2. Widows and widowers who may or may not be able to control their libidos
3. Married women who may want to separate from their husbands
4. Husbands who may want to divorce their wives
5. Christian men married to non-Christian women who might want to divorce
6. Christian women married to non-Christian men who might want a divorce
7. Christian men and women married to a non-Christian who do leave a marriage
8. Unmarried who might want to get married
9. Married people who might want to divorce their wives
10. Men who are courting as whether they should marry or not

Now I would think that there is a fair chance that every situation I have just read out might be reflected here this morning, I want to encourage you that the Bible is sufficient to speak into all of these situations however tangled and complex and emotional they are – and boy are relationships complicated. I realise that everyone of these are very sensitive issues requiring time to talk through and apply to specific situations – and even this morning if I gave just each 10 minutes we would be here for about two hours – PLEASE forgive me if I do not go into detail on every situation – please don't think that these issues are not important – they are crucially important. However I am not here to give some marriage guidance counselling session, less still is this a daytime chat show 'open surgery'. If you have specific questions then please come and speak to me or one of the elders afterwards in confidence. The other thing I should note is that while this passage is so practical and relevant to us, it is also one of the most difficult to understand in the New Testament and interpreting what is going on requires a lots of blood, sweat and tears. Please feel free to compare what I have to say with what you read in you Bible and ask me more detailed questions after the service.

What I want to do this morning is what you might call a bit of 'glue sniffing' – what is it that holds all these instructions together, what is the thread that ties these pearls of wisdom, what the message in this huge stick of rock. As I have already hinted I think the issue is to change or not to change and that's the question we are going to look at.

STAY AS YOU ARE AND LIVE YOUR OWN LIFE
(1-24)

Now as you have already seen in your studies there were some in the church at Corinth who wanted to make a sharp and very wrong distinction between the physical and the spiritual. At one end of this spirit level, some said that your physical life was not important so you could do what you wanted with your body. But at the other end of this spirit level it was not that the physical was unimportant but that it was sinful and evil – physical pleasure was to be avoided, in fact by having pain over pleasure you could improve your spiritual life. You could call them SUPER-SPIRITUALS. You could say they were into a bit of DIY, some spiritual home-improvements and in particular they went for 'the minimalist look' cutting things out. It was stuff to do with this that prompted some to write to Paul. This is slightly ironic looking at some of the things the Corinthians had been up to – incest, using prostitutes and they are writing to him about cutting stuff out.

Don't abstain but keep having sex (1-7)
There are few examples of this. Look with me at vv.1-3. What some married couples seemed to be doing was abstaining from sex, thinking that to have sex was in some way sinful and not very spiritual. Now what Paul says is the opposite – if you are married then it is good for Christians to have sex and have it regularly. You see for the Christian sex matters and Christianity sees sex very positively in its right setting. Now this may be a surprise to some here because it is sometimes assumed that sex and Christians don't go together – in fact a lot of Christians throughout history have taken this view – but they are completely wrong because the Bible says sex is an amazing gift from God. God is passionately concerned about his physical creation.

You might also think that because we live in a sex obsessed society Paul fits right in here. Wrong – Paul would look at our sex obsessed culture and say that for all the talk, the world does not value sex at all. Paul would say that many have a *pub snooker view of sex*. Let me illustrate. I am a bit of a snooker geek – it is a beautiful game but must be played under the right conditions. Look at your average pub snooker table – misused, abused, ripped, torn, biased, it causes a lot of frustration, its used by anyone, a service that you have to pay for – try to patch it up – but we don't treat it well, we spill our beer on it – if it gets damaged we don't care. And this is how many mistreat sex.

Compare that to the match table at the Crucible Theatre Sheffield – snooker heaven. In that arena and on that table. We don't say everyone have a go – its special – I was there big stewards protecting it – its valuable, its beautiful, it is true, it is to be looked after.

Now I don't want to be flippant but In God's eyes the physical joining of a man and women in marriage is like the green baize of Sheffield – valuable and beautiful. And just because sex is universally abused does not mean it is more spiritual to avoid sex.

And Paul says this to married couples – the only arena for having sex as God intended. And what a wonderful thing it is. Compare the Bibles understanding with the 'what I can get attitude of today.

Ideal in sex is to meet each other's needs, to satisfy their desires – its about giving. Vv. 3 and 4

Indeed, far from improving your spiritual health, Paul says that if you are married and not having sex regularly then this will lead to problems, in fact probably the sexual problems that were happening in the church at the time.

Don't divorce but try to be reconciled (10-16)
Paul moves onto another issue. Look with me at v. 10. apparently not only did the super-spiritual think sex in marriage was a no go, they thought that marriage full stop was hindering their spiritual life and certainly marriage when one of the partners was not a Christian which is what Paul addresses in vv.12-16. What Paul reiterates here is the teaching of Jesus on divorce. I could spend lots of time on this and I said before I would be happy to talk to you afterwards. In summary marriage is a covenant commitment which pictures the biblical picture of salvation and divorce cannot be a part of it. Only in extreme circumstances, adultery or desertion with its implication of adultery, can be allowed to break the marriage bond.

What's going here? Well look with me at verse 17, 20, 24 – Paul's point is that every person should remain in the place where God has called them – call meaning here the call of salvation. Now to illustrate what he is on about, Paul suddenly shifts from sex and marriage to, well not to put too finer point on it some sexual anatomy – If you were circumcised before you became a Christian – you don't need to be uncircumcised after you were called by God and vica versa. Why? Look at v. 19. whether you are circumcised or not does not mean anything – what matters is keeping God's commandments. Were you a slave when you became a Christian and it this troubling you – don't let it. Paul's point is this – the quality of our relationship with God is not determined by morally neutral circumstances – being married, being single, being circumcised, being a slave. We know this because God saves people in those circumstances. We should not look to change our situation rather what matters is how we serve God in the situation we are in. This is

the Corinthian problem – they think that to be more spiritual, they have to change status to move up the spiritual ladder by abstaining from sex or leaving their marriages. And Paul says remain in the situation you are in. You don't have to change anything which is not sinful.

Let me ask you this, do you ever think you could live for God better if just your circumstances were different, your marriage, your singleness, your job, its hold me back – Paul says you should not think like that – stay as you are and live your life for God in the situation you are in.

not such thing as a spiritual status theory of evolution – in terms of marital status, in terms of class status – you will not be a better Christian –

I'm an Essex boy – I will always be an Essex boy –

You see the super-spiritual DIY which some of the Corinthians DIY will lead to disaster – precisely because it is DO IT YOURSELF – it forgets that we have everything we need in Christ and that God gives us the grace to live as Christians in the situation he has called us. To think we have to add to this is to act as if God's grace was not enough and as if we know better than God when he called us.

This happens all the time – I am a full-time paid Christian worker, the amount of times I wish I wasn't married because I think if only I wasn't, think of all the great gospel work I could be doing – look at those single Christian workers – look they are doing gospel work while I am at home with Elly, they are preparing for Bible Study while I am clearing up kid puke and kid poo. – comparison – works back into my marriage – resenting Elly. And this passage teaches me, I am not to think like this.

Or if you are single perhaps you think you have to get married and have kids – sign of Christian maturity. Are you unhappily single – no difference from unhappily a slave – God using this to make you more like Christ – you may get married – don't waste your life and mope thinking of greener pastures – get on with it – serve God, Be holy – God is in control.

Well perhaps there are some of you this morning who would not call yourselves Christians. I would like to say this you. Firstly you may think that when you become a Christian, everything changes – like Kevin the teenager, you become weird and everything changes. I want to say to you that at many levels nothing changes, same sex, same societal status, same job – you are still a normal person. However as well as saying nothing changes I want to tell you that from another perspective everything changes because you

now belong to the Lord – you are the Lord's freeman and Christ's slave- he is the master of your life because he paid for your life and he gives you the grace to live in the situation you are in and to serve him.

Perhaps you feel trapped in your circumstances being married, being single, being working class because this is what identifies you, there is nowhere for to turn– can I tell you that you do not have to be in this state – turn to Christ – find your identity in Him. If you want to find out more about this then please come and speak to me afterwards – I'm normal, honest!!

Stay as you are and live your own life.

STAY AS YOU ARE BECAUSE TIME IS SHORT
Paul continues by giving another reason why we should stay as we are – marrieds as marrieds, singles as singles – v. 26 – this present crisis.

We don't exactly know what this was, but I think it links to what Paul says in v. 29 when he explains that time is short.

What is the present crisis? I think it is LIFE between the first coming and second coming of Christ where we see suffering, death, frustration all around us – everything under the curse – this side of the second coming it does appear 'life is often a bitch and then you die'. And Paul is reminding us of this, giving us a framework – the Christian should have his eyes fixed not on temporal things, and temporal relationships because this world in its present form is passing away (v.31) but on eternal things – this is where his security and prosperity lie, not this side of Christ's second coming but on the other side. Now with that framework in place, Paul makes two important points.

Marriage has its complications

Paul states clearly that it is not sinful to marry (v. 28) but he does say that those who marry will face many troubles and Paul wants to save us from that. Now let's get away from the stereotypes here, he is not saying this because women give men a hard time with there nagging and men give women a hard time with their laziness. This is serious. The Bible puts a great emphasis on looking after your family, marriage and the family unit are one key building blocks of society and the church. We learn throughout the Bible that marriage is wonderful picture of Christ and his salvation. But we know don't we that marriage and family bring there own complications – children get ill, they require constant attention, think of the sorrow of a child who dies, a spouse who dies. Think about all the added family factors you have to add in when making financial decisions, moving decisions, job decisions. And Paul is saying that those who marry will be burdened by these troubles that can cause so much pain and sorrow in a sinful world.

Singleness has its benefits

For Paul, on the other hand, singleness brings its own unique opportunities and service that marriage takes away. The single person's interests are not divided – they do not have the marital or parental commitments which can mean they can serve God in ways which married people cannot. They can give undivided devotion to the Lord v. 35.

Now we need to be careful how we apply this. Paul is not saying we should never marry, remember in v. 35 not to restrict us, but rather that we should not set our hearts on marriage – Jane Austen *Pride and Prejudice* and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones* are wrong. Where are our eyes fixed, where are our priorities. We are not to seek marriage first but to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness. We start as single people, Paul is saying that because the time is short and there are so many opportunities to serve God as a single person, why would we want to change our status and get married with all the complications?

If nothing else Paul's teaching here goes against some Christian thinking which thinks marriage to be esteemed over singleness and that a perfect church is full of married people with children. Single people in the church can be patronised and pitied, either marginalized and ignored or at the opposite end fussed over and 'match-made'. I think that single people should feel a particular liberation from these verses. I think on balance the Bible shows both singleness and marriage to be wonderful pictures of the kingdom of God – diversity – not tend towards a uniformity here. Both reflect God's will and exhibit God's nature and community.

And I want to say something to those who are not Christians here this morning. Perhaps your whole life is the human relationships you are in, all you value in life are your family, your husband, your wife, your children, your grandchildren – they literally mean everything to you. Perhaps you being here this morning in a school on Sunday morning is testimony to that. Now if that is the case then I have to tell you that all these relationships that you invest in heavily will in Paul word's pass away – they are temporary. The only telling relationship is your relationship with God. What is that like? Is he your Lord or are you his rebel?

STAY AS YOU ARE BUT DO THE WILL OF GOD
Well lets quickly finish this passage off. We have seen so far that Paul's argument throughout our passage is that if we can, we should stay in the situation we are in, if single, single, if married, married. We then saw that because time is short, we start off in life as single and that

marriage brings its complications, Paul argues that singleness brings its unique opportunities for kingdom service.

In this last little section vv. 36-38, Paul deals with people who are basically courting or engaged. Paul has a lot of wisdom that we can learn from here especially on the whole issue of guidance in relationships. Again I would love to spend time on this as the issue of who and when should we get married is a much asked question among Christians. However the point I want to draw out from this last section is a principle that has been running throughout our passage together.

Better to marry than to sin

Yes, Paul is arguing you should stay as you are, yes you are free to marry or free to be single, what you are not free to do is to sin, to not be holy, to not keep God's commandments. And on this Paul offers wise advice which is realistic and practical. Let me illustrate. Come back with me to v. 8, a little section we passed over earlier. Paul, I think is talking to widows and widowers. When we immediately read this we think that here are some people sexually bursting at the seams and so have to get married. I wonder if this is correct (no passion in original) Rather the sense with these widows and widowers is that if they are not exercising self-control they are to marry, for better to marry than to burn (the image is one of sin to do with sexual shame). This is a image of judgement. Perhaps the super-spirituals were saying that they should not re-marry for this was more spiritual. What we do know is that Paul says, it is better to marry than to sin.

And this same principle is here in this last section. The instruction is to courting or engaged couples. The phrase to look at is what we have in our translations as 'getting along in years'. Literally 'over the top'. Now I don't this has anything to do about age and being left on the shelf but rather is about 'going too far'. It is about sex and sexual activity. He is talking to couples who are 'going too far'. And Paul says to these couples – Get married. Marriage is not a sin and you are free to marry but sinning is a sin and you are not free to sin- Again better to marry than to sin. It's the principle of v. 19 - marriage or singleness is nothing – what matters is keeping God's commandments. So how do we know when we should marry? Well we don't have to sin to know, but perhaps when sexual attraction in a relationship becomes an issue. As one person puts it 'The time to marry is when sex becomes an issue but before it becomes a problem'. And very quickly it can become a problem as with sex, one thing can quickly lead to another.

Better to be single than to marry

But of course says Paul bringing together the two major points he has stressed throughout this passage, you don't have to get married and Paul says this again in v. 38 as if to re-iterate his earlier teaching. If you can keep things under control – if the person has settled in his own mind, has control over his will, and has decided in his heart not to marry then this person does the right thing. – If you don't need to marry then why should you. As we have seen earlier marriage brings its own complications and singleness offers its own opportunities for service. Why would you want to get married – STAY AS YOU ARE!!!!!!

Now as a very happily married man, I find this a really hard thing to say but sometimes we do find God's word hard – but we have to obey it because it is God's word. I want to close by saying this.

If you are married – Paul is saying as you are – God called you in this situation and you can serve God in this situation. Also I would want to note that elsewhere in the Bible has wonderful things to say about being married – it too is beautiful picture of the kingdom of God. But don't think marriage is 'happily ever after' be realistic about the complications and put into perspective the nature of human relationships – they are only temporary.

If you are single then make the most of the opportunities to serve God as a single person. Don't set your sights on marriage but set your eyes on the kingdom. You may get married, you may not (just as you may die young or live to a hundred). And if you decide to get married don't think that the grass will be greener on the other side, be wise in your thinking, prioritise the kingdom, obey God's commands and be holy.

And finally whether you are single or married, serve God – focus on the kingdom, obey the will of God and be holy – this kind of life is the life that God wants and the life that counts.

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