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TEACHING THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD

1 Corinthians (2013) - Lesson 7B

Chapter 7:12-24

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- Chapter 7 continues our examination of the first question the church posed to Paul
 - Their question must have revolved around the nature of marriage in a Christian context
 - On divorce and remarriage, on marriage with unbelievers and on the value of singleness
 - Paul is patiently teaching through these questions, helping the church understand God’s expectations for marriage in the church
 - Last time we studied through v.11, which established three basic truths about Christian marriage
 - First, Paul taught that singleness is an acceptable, perhaps even preferred lifestyle, for Christians
 - But it is reserved for those who have been gifted in that way
 - For without the gift of singleness, we will be tempted to distraction by our passions
 - Secondly, Paul taught each may have one husband or wife
 - Marriage has a one per customer limit
 - Thirdly, marriage requires we relinquish sole authority over our bodies
 - We share our bodies with our spouse
 - But we have only covered about 25% of the chapter, so Paul still has plenty left to say on this question of marriage
 - In the next section, beginning in v.12 Paul addresses the difficult situation of a believer married to an unbeliever
 - What should happen when one member of a marriage comes to faith while the other remains in their sins?
 - Paul now gives counsel to such a couple

1Cor. 7:12 But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her.

1Cor. 7:13 And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away.

1Cor. 7:14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

1Cor. 7:15 Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.

1Cor. 7:16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

- Paul begins this section saying “to the rest...”
 - The rest refers to those who are not the unmarried (v.8) or a believing married couple (v.10)
 - By process of elimination, the rest would have to be a married believer with

an unbelieving spouse

- What obligations does a person have to their spouse should that spouse be an unbeliever?
 - Paul also prefaces these instructions by saying *he* gives these instructions, not the Lord
 - Paul doesn't mean these instructions are optional
 - After all, Paul's writings are inspired instruction, so by definition they are from the Holy Spirit
 - Instead, this comment is intended as a bookend to his earlier comment in v.10
 - In v.10, he said what I am about to say came directly from the Lord's teaching when He taught the apostles in person
 - So now Paul makes clear that he has moved on to new teaching that Jesus never stated personally
 - Think of these two statements as the equivalent of saying "quote" and "end quote"
 - Nevertheless, this instruction is still inspired
- Looking at his instruction, it's fairly straightforward
 - If a believer has an unbelieving spouse who is willing to continue in marriage, then the believer must continue in it as well
 - Paul is speaking about a situation when one person in an existing marriage comes to faith
 - Leaving the spouse on the outside of salvation
 - Obviously, the arrival of faith in any marriage is going to create friction
 - Faith in Christ fundamentally changes our view of the world and of our eternal future
 - The changes created by faith are incredibly profound, leading to countless opportunities for disagreement with an unbelieving spouse
 - From how we handle finances, to raising the children, to our entertainment choices
 - To the kind of friends we keep and the places we will visit
 - And especially to our life's priorities as we begin to live for Christ
 - All of these things can place a serious strain on the marriage, leading to a possibility that the unbelieving spouse may choose to leave
- Paul says if the unbelieving spouse is content to remain married even as we endeavor to live as a Christian, then we have no grounds to divorce
 - This counsel is completely consistent with the one-flesh principle we learned last time
 - The bonds of marriage transcend faith
 - God established the sanctity of marriage for all humanity, not just believers
 - So we must honor that commitment
 - Paul says there are clear benefits from remaining in the marriage despite the

difference in faith

- When one member of the marriage is a believer, the other is “sanctified” through the relationship
- The word sanctified means to be set apart for a blessing
- Paul is simply pointing out that the unbeliever can be blessed through their association with a believing spouse
- Likewise, the children of this marriage will be blessed by having both parents in the home
 - And especially by the presence of a believing parent
- Most importantly, if the Lord has moved to bring faith to one member of a family, then it gives hope that He intends to extend that testimony to more members of the family
 - And if that is going to happen, then it stands to reason that the believing spouse will be catalyst for that purpose
 - If we give up and walk away from that family, we may be running away from a miracle God intends to work through us
 - So we stay married, first because of our commitment to our spouse, and secondly because we sanctify the family through our influence
- But as we pursue an unequal marriage, we must also have a sober understanding of what we’re likely to face
 - Things are going to be difficult at times
 - The believer is going to find himself or herself forced to choose between pleasing God and pleasing the unbelieving spouse
 - And really, that’s no choice at all, for we should always seek to please the Lord
 - Unfortunately, times will come when we choose to appease our spouse rather than follow the Lord, simply to maintain peace
 - This is why an unequal marriage is always a difficult situation
 - I came across a story of a woman who experienced this very situation in her own marriage
 - Her name is Nancy Kennedy, and she wrote:

When I first came to faith in Christ and Barry hadn’t, I thought God had made a huge mistake. After all, two following God together made more sense than one. But I now know God never makes mistakes. Since I’d been an unbeliever when we married, I hadn’t willfully disobeyed God by marrying Barry. My situation is by God’s sovereign design. Reminding myself of that enables me to relax my spiritual chokehold on Barry.

The way I see it, God has a plan for each life. And no matter how hard I try, I cannot transform someone else’s heart. I can’t coerce, sweet-talk, or plead my husband into being a Christian. In fact, when I do try, it only drives him away—sometimes literally. If I start nagging him, he’ll get in his truck and

drive for hours.

I decided long ago to accept that it's God's job to change hearts. That decision frees me to pursue my relationship with God without the added burden of having to bring my husband to faith. All I have to do is love and enjoy him. That's God's plan for me, and he gives me all the grace I need to accomplish it.

That doesn't mean I'm not lonely at times or that I do everything right. The other day I grabbed Barry by the shirt and yelled, "Don't you see Christ in me?" Struck by the irony of the question, he laughed—and to my surprise, said yes. It helps to remember that Barry's not my enemy; he's my husband. I'm just as much a sinner as he is—maybe more so because I have the power to say no to sin and often don't.

- Her advice to a woman caught in such a marriage is powerful
 - Live in the now, don't pine for a "happy-ever-after someday"
 - Live out your faith – let your spouse see you stumble and struggle as you live by grace alone, rather than living by a set of rigid rules
 - Honor your marriage; don't talk negatively about your spouse; Enjoy your spouse as God's gift
 - Pray, pray, pray and talk often and openly and freely about God
 - Find a support system and study the Bible with a friend or small group; Attend church as often as you are able
 - Never give up hope; God knows what he's doing
- As you can see, an unequal marriage is a trial, which is why Paul warns a believer elsewhere never to enter into a marriage with an unbeliever in the first place

2Cor. 6:14 Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?

- Up to this point, we've been talking about a situation where a member of an existing marriage comes to faith while their spouse remains an unbeliever
 - It's one thing to be faced with the challenges of an unequal marriage involuntarily, but it's another to knowingly enter into such a situation
 - If we choose a spouse knowing they do not share our faith in Christ, we are acting very foolishly
 - We are signing up for a life of unnecessary spiritual struggle
 - We are shackling ourselves to someone who can never understand what we understand
 - They will have different values and goals

- So they will act as a spiritual weight, dragging us down and holding us back in our effort to mature and please the Lord
- Why would we ever want to do such a thing?
 - Whatever earthly joy or benefit we might find attractive in a relationship with an unbeliever will be greatly overshadowed by the eternal loss we may suffer as a result of their influence
 - And there is simply no turning back from such a choice
 - Paul says it is not cause for divorce
- However, in vs.15-16 Paul gives one option to end the marriage
 - He says that if the unbeliever leaves the marriage, then the believer is to let that one leave
 - We are not under obligation to chase after that person in a futile attempt to hold the marriage together
 - And we can immediately understand why it's better to avoid the chase
 - If we pursue the unbeliever, we're inevitably going to feel forced to make concessions in order to hold the marriage together
 - Whatever made the unbeliever upset in the first place will have to be rectified if we are to rescue the relationship
 - And those concessions will likely to lead to even greater harm to our spiritual maturity
 - What if the believer objected to our time spent at church or in prayer or in Bible study?
 - What if he or she demanded we stop speaking about Jesus to the children?
 - What if he or she objects to our desire to support a ministry financially?
- If they make these demands a condition for the continuation of the marriage, Paul says we are to let them walk
 - We are not in bondage to their demands
 - When Paul says we are not in bondage in such cases, he isn't talking about the marriage vows themselves
 - The word bondage means slavery, and the marriage covenant is never called slavery in scripture
 - Paul is referring to a bondage to the demands of our unbelieving spouse
 - We have been called to follow Christ in freedom
 - So we are not expected to submit to the demands and decrees of an unbeliever, even if such a person is our spouse
 - In v.17 Paul raises the obvious question: how do we know if our spouse will ever become a believer?
 - Since we can't be sure of such an outcome, we can't use that hope as an excuse to submit to conditions or demands that conflict with the Lord's instructions

- We must follow the Lord, and if that obedience causes our spouse to leave, then so be it
 - We are enslaved to Christ, not to them
 - Now some in the church have taught that this statement opens the door for the believer to divorce and remarry
 - But take note Paul never says the believer can do either
 - He never says the believer is to divorce and he certainly never gives permission for the abandoned believer to remarry
 - He only says we are to allow the unbeliever to leave
 - In other words, the believer remains married to the unbeliever
 - But it's better to live a life of singleness than to fight for a marriage that brings us spiritual harm
 - Remember, we live with eyes for eternity
 - So the question we ask ourselves in all situations is what course of action is best for my judgment day?
- From this point, Paul now moves to teach on a general principle of Christian living
 - The church had asked him about marriage, concerning whether there was a requirement to stay married when one person becomes a believer
 - Paul has answered the question, but he wants to reinforce the point with a broader application
 - Not only should we continue in marriage having come to faith, but we should not seek to turn our lives upside down

1Cor. 7:17 Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches.

1Cor. 7:18 Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised.

1Cor. 7:19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

1Cor. 7:20 Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.

1Cor. 7:21 Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.

1Cor. 7:22 For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave.

1Cor. 7:23 You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

1Cor. 7:24 Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

- The greater principle Paul wants us to understand is to remain as God has called you
 - God called us into faith while we were living in a particular context, and self-evidently He chose that context when calling us to be His ambassador

- Paul uses several carefully chosen examples to prove his point
 - First, he mentions circumcision, but this is just a way of describing Jewishness vs. Gentile
 - So if you were a Gentile or a Jew, then remain in that state
 - Gentiles are not expected to become a Jew and neither are Jews required to renounce their Jewishness
- And if you were called into faith while in slavery, don't worry about it
 - If you can win your freedom, then it's good to do so
 - And if you are free, do not return to slavery
 - Paul reminds us that whether you are free or enslaved to men, you remain enslaved to God in either case
 - These distinctions make no difference to our ability to serve Him faithfully
 - We are to serve and please God in either situation
- The greater principle Paul is teaching is that there is no one universal condition for all Christians
 - The Christian faith doesn't prescribe a certain lifestyle or walk of life, except that we seek to please the Lord in holy living
 - In fact, if we entertain some romantic notion about how a Christian's life is supposed to look, we're likely to go chasing after the wrong things
 - Not everyone is supposed to sell everything and become a missionary to the other side of the world
 - Not everyone is supposed to go to seminary
 - Not everyone changes careers, lifestyles and the like as a result of coming to faith
 - The far more common outcome of coming to know the Lord is to remain exactly where God found us, doing what we were doing, though doing it without sin
 - He saved us while we were attending school, working in the factory or office building
 - He saved us while were living in a certain place, with a certain circle of friends, in a particular state of life
 - So it stands to reason, He called us to Himself while in that context so we might serve Him from that context
 - That's why Paul says in v.24 we are to remain in the condition the Lord found us
 - Literally in Greek, Paul says "as he was called, in this let him remain with God"
 - There is a purpose for where and how you were called into the faith
 - And it would be a shame if we allowed romantic notions of what it means to be a Christ follower to lead us away from our appointed mission field in pursuit of some idealized mission field
- We must give careful consideration to the realities in which we come to know the Lord while at the same time being willing to follow God anywhere He calls
 - Obviously, few of us will remain in the same place forever

- So Paul isn't saying we can never change our circumstances
 - In fact, God will usually call us to something different eventually
 - But neither should we ignore the manner and timing and the context in which He chose to call us into faith
 - Reflect on it carefully as you consider how to serve Him
 - Consider that many a man has gone to prison for a crime without knowing the Lord
 - But then while in prison, the Lord brings them to faith so that they can be His representative in that prison
 - Later, some may receive their freedom, and so then they move on to something new
 - But their first assignment was to be a witness where they were
 - On the other hand, we are called to change who we are
 - How we think, how we behave, and what we value, will change continually as we grow more mature in our faith
 - And some of that growth may prompt us to make other changes in our walk, including how we serve the Lord
 - That kind of change is good, because it's prompted by the Spirit
 - But don't try to force that change by mimicking the progress of others
 - We each will have our own calling in service to the Lord
- Finally, I think this principle also extends to a church body
 - When you feel called to join a particular church body, like here at Oak Hill Bible Church, then you are receiving a mission as part of that relationship
 - Every church body has a mission to reach its local community
 - We may have a heart to reach beyond that community as well, and this is appropriate
 - But our primary mission reflects God's purposes in planting our church in its present location
 - So don't aspire to fit the mold of another church body, whether in size or style or location or audience
 - We should seek to care for what God has given us in our present circumstances
 - We should seek to reach the neighborhoods around us, and to reach the circle of friends and family we know
 - Even as we seek to expand that audience everyday
- Let's seek to remain in the place God has placed us, while also seeking to become more like Christ