

1 Corinthians 7:1-24

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[0 : 00] There's an outline for the sermon, which I think it'll find helpful. I ask.

1 Corinthians 7, God's outlook on time is different to ours. We tend to think about the future a lot, where we'll be, what we'll do, what we'll be like.

We naturally make the presumption that there's a long string of tomorrows stretching out in front of us. We make lots of plans about how we'll spend our time in those tomorrows.

And we don't know when our lives will end, or when the world will end. And so it's very easy for you and I to think that we'll just carry on indefinitely. But God sees things from a different perspective.

God knows when the end will be. And his perspective on that time is shaped by that knowledge.

And God is kind enough to teach us not to be presumptuous.

[1 : 19] And to remember that life will not go on indefinitely. The end, in a very real sense, is just around the corner from God's perspective. We just don't know when.

And Paul can write later in this chapter, he says the time is short. And that's why the Bible writers often refer to the times in which we live as the last days. The last days are the time between the resurrection of Jesus and his return to earth in glory on the day of judgment.

Those are the times that the Corinthians lived in. And these are the times that we live in. And when it comes to the setting, that is crucial to understand that like the Corinthians, we live in the last days.

But it's also important for you and I to understand something of Paul's relation to the Corinthian church. Acts 18 tells us that Paul was in Corinth for about 18 months. And by the time he'd left there, there was a core group of disciples who'd been well established in faith.

And no doubt that grew into a church. And Paul addresses that church in his letters. But it would seem from 1 Corinthians that quite a lot has gone on since Paul was there. Since those early days.

[2 : 31] As you read 1 Corinthians, you'll see that the church in Corinth is racked by division. They're undermined by sexual immorality. They're weakened by a casual tolerance of sin. And they're challenged by the temptation of idolatry.

And so Paul finds himself trying to navigate pretty treacherous waters. And in this part of the letter, Paul is dealing with issues about the body and sex and sin.

And so prior to writing 1 Corinthians, Paul's received a letter from the church in Corinth. And in that letter, they've raised certain issues with Paul. They've asked certain questions. That's why chapter 7 begins in the way it does.

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote. But this isn't where Paul's discussion of the body, sex and sin begin. Because the end of chapter 6 is really important for understanding chapter 7.

So just cast your eyes back to the last 9 verses of chapter 6. And you'll see what Paul has got to say about the body. How the Corinthians have freedom in Christ.

[3 : 35] But they ought not to be mastered by their appetites. How the body is not meant for sexual immorality, but the Lord. How a Christian's body is a member of Christ.

And it is destined for the resurrection. How sexual sins are committed against one's body. And how we ought to honour Christ with our bodies.

Since we are bought with a price by Jesus and we now belong to him. And all of that is a really important part of the setting of 1 Corinthians 7. And we'll see how Paul develops in this chapter.

Some of the things that he's begun to explain in chapter 6. So let's turn to 1 Corinthians 7, 1-6. Where I think the focus is on sex within marriage. So look at verse 1.

Now concerning the matters about which he wrote. It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. Now it could be that Paul is referring to something that the Corinthians have written to him about.

[4 : 35] That he's quoting that. I think it's more likely that the apostle is expressing his own view. But whichever way you go on that. It's clear from the rest of the paragraph that Paul does see a place for married couples abstaining from sex.

But he especially wants to stress the importance of the sexual relationships which they share. In particular in verse 2. Because of the present danger of sexual immorality.

Now of course, sex in marriage is no miracle cure for temptation. It's no miracle cure for the temptation to be sexually immoral.

But Paul acknowledges that it can certainly help a married person in that respect. He makes the same point in verse 5. That even if the couple were to take a break from sex for a time.

The need for self-control in the face of temptation is a good reason to come back together. And Paul goes on with that in verses 3 and 4. He says that the husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights.

[5 : 44] And likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. And what Paul is saying in these verses is that a husband and a wife are to offer their bodies to one another gladly.

In fact, he says they've got a duty to one another to use their bodies in that way. It's fascinating, I think, that the apostle here can speak of the couple's bodies as their own bodies, verse 4.

And yet also speak of them relinquishing their authority at the same time. Indeed, only a body that is in some way owned can be given.

And only a body that is held in a non-possessive way can be offered. They're remarkable verses. I think it's hard to imagine verses which are more counter-cultural in our age.

But the key implication of Paul's teaching is in verse 5. A husband and a wife must not deprive each other. Sex is good.

[6 : 58] It's a good gift from God. So husbands and wives should serve each other with their bodies. They are to yield to one another generously.

However, Paul also makes a concession to this main point. Let me read verse 5 again. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer.

But then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. Paul says there's one reason, one reason he gives why it may be good to take a break from sexual relations.

Prayer. Here is something that's so important that fasting from sex might be beneficial. And the logic seems to be, doesn't it, that a break from sex could enable a couple to give themselves to a devoted season of prayer without distraction.

And Paul commends that to them. And to us. And he affirms once more that for the sake of self-control, they should come together, again, to avoid temptation.

[8 : 10] Well, secondly, in verses 7 to 11, Paul talks about two different gifts. The gift of marriage and the gift of being unmarried. Verse 7, he says, Paul's gift seems to have been singleness.

And he's unembarrassed to say that. He's unembarrassed to say that he wishes that everyone had the same gift as him. He sees marriage and singleness as coming graciously from God's hand.

So then Paul goes on to address people in both categories. Those who've got the gift of singleness. And those who have the gift of marriage.

And to the unmarried, he offers this encouragement. To remain unmarried as he did. But he also offers a really important qualification. And he says, if it were a choice between sinful singleness, on the one hand, and marriage purity, on the other hand, then the single person should pursue marriage.

I think in verses 8 and 9. Already, can you see that Paul is very nuanced? It's a nuanced view that he's articulating. He believes in a very real way that singleness is preferable to marriage.

[9 : 35] We'll hear more of that next week. But nevertheless, he insists all Christians are free to marry. With a clear conscience. And his point is that marriage is definitely better for a person who finds that they cannot control themselves sexually while single.

Sin is to be avoided above all. And if you're incapable of remaining single and remaining pure, Paul says then seek marriage. I don't think this means that if you have sexual urges, you should get married.

I take it that all people, all people have sexual urges of varying strengths. That is how human beings are made by God. The issue is not sexual desires as much as self-control. He's not saying you should pursue marriage if you've got a strong sexual desire. But you should pursue marriage if you have weak self-control. And that is Paul's word for those with the gift of singleness.

So then he turns to those with the gift of marriage. Look at verse 10. To the marriage I give this charge, not I, but the Lord. The wife should not separate from her husband. But if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.

[10:51] And the husband should not divorce his wife. And so Paul, can you see it in that verse, in verse 10, he traces his words back to the words of Jesus himself. There's no doubt he's kind of got Matthew 19 in his mind.

It's no surprise to find that Paul's emphasis is exactly the same as Jesus. He uses there, doesn't he, a word that's translated here as separate.

But I don't think he's using it in the same way that we use that word when talking about people separating today. That is, we use it in the way that it is different from being divorced.

So under our laws, people are separated before they're divorced. Or they're separated rather than divorced. But I don't think Paul has got those distinctions in his mind.

He uses the word separate to simply mean leave. He's talking here about making a decision to end the marriage. And he's saying that that is something that neither a husband or a wife should do.

[12:00] And I think it's important to state that because I'm not convinced that Paul is prohibiting separation as we understand it. There have been times in my pastoral care of people that I've advised a couple to separate for a short period of time.

I haven't done that lightly. Especially for the sake of people's safety. Though it can be for other reasons. But when I've done that, the intention has always been for that to be a temporary thing with a view to them being reconciled.

If and when there's proper repentance. I don't think Paul is speaking against that sort of thing in 1 Corinthians 7. He's speaking about separation or divorce where the intention is never to come together again.

Like we saw with Jesus last week. That's Paul's major point. And he puts it in very black and white terms. For wives it's at the end of verse 10. And for husbands at the end of verse 11.

They must not do it. But in between those two strong statements, he also makes a minor point. In between the black and white, there's grey again.

[13:07] He says that if the marriage is ended, contrary to God's will, then the godly Christian person will remain unmarried in the hope of reconciliation.

And even though that is specifically to the wife in verse 11, I take it that that applies equally to the husband. They shouldn't automatically get married to someone else.

Instead, they should seek the restoration of their marriage. And once again, I think you find that the Bible bashes up against the values of our society. In our day, when marriages end, people seem to move very quickly into thinking about another marriage.

A better marriage. As we saw in Matthew 19, and as we'll see next week, there may be certain situations where God permits that. There are. But that is the exception to the rule.

But where a marriage has come to an end, Paul urges restraint as far as pursuing another marriage is concerned. And that might be really counter-cultural for us tonight.

[14:19] But it is possible, isn't it? After all, anything is possible by the power of God at work in the lives of believers. At the moment in my life, I know of two people that are living out the teaching of verse 11.

I'll call them Bob and Frida. But tragically, for both of them, their marriages have come to an end. Bob is legally divorced.

Frida is not yet legally divorced. She's separated. But neither of them imagine any short-term change in their relationships. Nevertheless, they've remained, both resolved to remain unmarried, they pray for reconciliation and for change of heart and conduct that reconciliation would require.

And on the best days, I think they might even hope for that. But come what may, they are convinced that this is what God has asked them to do. Their non-Christian friends cannot understand it at all. Sadly, half their Christian friends encourage them to move on and find someone new. But in fidelity to the king's words, both Frida and Bob are staying unmarried.

[15 : 35] They believe that this is what 1 Corinthians 7 verse 11 tells them to do. And I can't fault their logic. Now, thirdly, in verses 12 to 16, Paul addresses the rest, those outside of the two categories.

He's spoken of previously, I think, he had in mind a marriage where both a husband and a wife were believers. But now he wants to address believers who are married to unbelievers. And here he acknowledges that his teaching is not directly traceable to something that Jesus said, though it still carries his own weight as an apostle. And once again, I think the major point is the same.

That the believer should act in a way that reflects the lifelong nature of marriage. They should remember that they've been joined together with a spouse by God. So in verse 12, he says, To the rest I say, I, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who's an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.

If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. But do you notice the slight qualification there? That if, if the unbeliever is willing and consents, because what Paul goes on to say in verse 15 is, if the unbelieving spouse is unwilling, that is, if the unbelieving spouse leaves the marriage, then the believing spouse is not bound in such a circumstance.

[17 : 07] And so rather than fighting the unbeliever who wants to leave, they should peacefully acquiesce. And here I think we have another exception to God's insistence on lifelong marriage.

We saw the exception in Matthew 19, didn't we, where he talks about a marriage that is torn apart by sexual immorality. Well, here there is a second where a marriage is ended by desertion. An unbelieving spouse leaves.

And in those two cases, it would seem that God permits divorce. And that a marriage would not be adulterous, as Jesus said last week. Now, Paul adds to this in verse 16.

Here he says, fighting to stay married to the unbeliever in the hope that they might be saved is foolish. And so marriage, Paul says, is not a foolproof instrument of evangelism.

Flirt to convert is not a good policy. Of course, where a believer is able to remain married to an unbeliever, God is well able to use, isn't it, that quiet testimony of the believer to win the unbeliever over.

[18 : 17] We find that in 1 Peter 3. But Paul discourages the Christian from thinking that's a sure thing. You can't know, so don't fight the one who wants to leave.

Choose peace instead. And of course, in the middle of this section, in verse 14, which is very difficult to interpret, part of Paul's encouragement here to the believing spouse is that if they can stay in the marriage, they may have a significant effect on the unbeliever.

Given what Paul says in verse 16, we know that the unbeliever isn't saved simply by being married to the believer, but nevertheless, he uses the word, doesn't he, sanctify, which suggests something significant.

Now, without getting into all the complexities of verse 14, the main point, which you shouldn't miss, is to make sure that no one thinks a believer should end a marriage with an unbeliever simply because they're not a Christian.

He's effectively underlining again, isn't he, the lifelong nature of marriage. Notwithstanding the fact that the husband and the wife don't share in one faith.

[19 : 26] And I think he's probably suggesting that if there's going to be a spiritual influence exerted in a marriage like this, it's probably going to be positive rather than negative. It is in that fact that the believer sanctifies the unbeliever as well as their children.

Now, fourthly, by way of exposition, in verses 17 to 24, having talked about the possibility of people changing their status from single to married or from married to divorced, Paul takes a step back to question the value of changing your status in any way.

And his argument seems to be, doesn't it, in coming to Christ, people have had their status changed in the only way that ultimately matters. And so in the light of that, in the light of being called by Jesus, belong to Jesus.

Paul suggests that changing anything else is unnecessary. People should remain in the situation they were in when they became Christians. And to make that point, he focuses on circumcision and slavery.

Two of the great social distinctions in the world of his day. And he says, whether you were circumcised or uncircumcised, whether you were a slave or a free man, you ought to consider your situation that has been assigned to you by God.

[20 : 42] And the word assigned in verse 17 is deliberately designed to underline God is at work in your life. I don't think Paul is commenting on the moral value of circumcision or slavery per se.

He says in verse 21, if a slave can gain their freedom, they should do it. He's just wanting to be really clear with you that there's something of far greater value than these things and that is belonging to Jesus Christ.

And that's why Paul invites you and I to consider our true identity as grounded in Jesus Christ. We're not defined by circumcision.

We're not defined by slavery. We are defined by being Jesus Christ. And it's the security of that identity in Christ which means that the Christian person should be able to sit loosely to any other situation or status in life.

You can remain in the position you were in when you were called because you remain there with God. And so the implication for marriage and for divorce is obvious.

[21 : 52] By implication, Paul is saying that marriage and singleness don't define us. They too are less important than our belonging to Jesus.

So it's also true that a person should be content to remain single or remain married because they remain in their situations with God. Now, it's hard work isn't it, alright?

Take a mental cigarette break or something like that. And let's try and summarize what these verses mean, okay? Let's try and think about what has this got to say to us?

Well, first of all, for marriage. And so primarily, and I want to say two things here, primarily and unsurprisingly, marriage is a gift. That's the language Paul uses it, isn't it?

In verse 7, he describes marriage as a gift. And so both marriage and singleness. And despite Paul expressing his desire that all would remain single as he is, he still affirms the essential goodness of marriage.

[22 : 51] That's something that's been covered handsomely, isn't it? Genesis 2, Matthew 19, we've seen it each time. On those who have been married, God has poured out his grace and his blessing.

It's a wonderful gift. And so when marriage is enriching and wonderful, we must remember that all the joy you experience in your marriage comes from the king's hand. And when marriage is hard and disappointing, even then we are to remember that it is a product of God's goodness that we are married.

And we ought to remain grateful for it. Even on the days when we find it hard to see its goodness, marriage is always God's gift. It is something to be thankful for.

But of course, it's a gift that carries with it certain responsibilities. And I suspect we've seen two key responsibilities of marriage today. The first is a responsibility to serve one's spouse sexually.

I'm thinking of verses three and four. And as I've said before, these are verses which couldn't be more against the grain of our society's thinking. If they tried, our culture places, doesn't it, an enormous emphasis on an individual's autonomy with regards to their body?

[24 : 09] It's a big thing in our culture. And our culture understands sex primarily in terms of self-fulfillment. But here Paul talks about a married couple having a bodily debt to one another.

And Paul is talking about, isn't he, a couple voluntarily yielding their bodies to one another? And here is Paul talking about sex and its purpose is not primarily about self-gratification but humble service.

The ESV talks about conjugal rights. People talk about that. I think that slightly misreads what Paul is talking about. Because what Paul is talking about is not conjugal rights, but conjugal giving.

It is not that I have a right to make demands of my spouse sexually. It is more that I have an obligation not to withhold myself.

And I think there's a really massive difference between those two things. All this is to say that our bodies are our own bodies, yes, but they're not simply our own.

[25 : 30] And Paul made that point in chapter 6 and verse 19. You are not your own. You are bought at a price. You are bought, of course, by Christ's precious blood.

And further to this now, he adds that in marriage your body not only belongs to Christ, but it's also shared with your husband or wife. It's a radically other-centered, other-person-centered view.

not only of marriage and not only of sex, but even of your own body. So it teaches us, I think, that sex ought not just to happen in a marriage when both people feel like it.

It teaches us that physical affection isn't simply a matter of following spontaneous impulses. It teaches us that sexual commitment within marriage requires thought, not just instinct, and intentionality, not just feeling.

It teaches us that the deepest joys of sex are not in our own physical pleasure as much as bringing pleasure to another. And so here's the first responsibility of marriage that Paul emphasizes in these verses.

[26 : 45] The second responsibility we've spoken of lots in the previous two sermons, and it's the responsibility to stay married. What God has joined together, let no one separate.

And in this passage, I'm thinking in the clear command in verse 10 and verse 11, a wife must not separate from her husband. A husband must not divorce his wife. I'm thinking of the clear command in verse 13, if a woman has a husband who's not a believer and is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.

Must not. Must not. Must not. Paul could not be clearer. That he has embraced Jesus' teaching about marriage and divorce, and he presses it upon us here, even in the midst of some important caveats as well.

What about singleness? Let me say two things. The first thing is like marriage, Paul describes singleness as a gift. What does Paul mean in verse 7 when he describes singleness in that way? Well, traditionally, if you read lots of commentaries, they will tell you it's been understood as the gift of celibacy. It's been understood that the gift of singleness is an unusual freedom from a desire for sex or for marriage.

[27 : 59] Some people have been granted a kind of special ability to live as a single person without being weighed down. That's the gift of singleness, the story goes.

I think that's very unconvincing. I don't think that's what Paul is saying here. It doesn't mean that some people have a special freedom from the desire for sex or marriage.

But the gift of singleness isn't some kind of special ability to live with chastity. Well, if that's not the case, what is it? Well, it seems to me that the most natural way to read the text is that the gift of singleness is singleness itself.

And the gift of marriage is marriage itself. I don't see any reason to think that Paul is saying, speaking about special abilities or powers that go along with being single or being married.

He's simply talking about being single or being married. And he's saying, understand singleness and marriage as a gift from God. And so if you are single, that is God's gift to you.

[29 : 14] And if you are married, that is God's gift to you. He's not saying that either are permanent. He's not saying that some are better than the others. He's just saying, God is in charge of your life right now.

And he's a good God. And so whether you're single or married, it is a gift. And we should see it as such. And that is what God wants for you right now.

This is what he's given you. And the main implication of that is gratitude, isn't it? For God's kindness. Paul's language is tempted, is to challenge us when we're tempted to be something other than grateful for singleness.

So often, isn't it, people have said, well, singleness is the gift that no one wants. It's an unwanted gift that some distant uncle gives you at Christmas that you don't really like and you've got no use for.

Or maybe we think of the gift of singleness as a really kind of tough missionary assignment that you're, it's a gift like serving the Lord in the jungle in the Congo.

[30 : 18] It's a gift in adverted commas. But as I've said before, I think we think like that partly because we've been really careless in the way we've read the Bible.

And also because we're so influenced by the world in which we live. Like the world, we often see singleness as a place you inhabit in the transition to marriage. A place of incompleteness.

And therefore, it's a place of dissatisfaction. We think that romance is one of the most significant gifts that anyone could ever receive. We think that marriage and sex are ultimate.

And celibate singleness just seems to be a massive missing out. But that's not what the Bible says. The Bible says singleness is a gift from God. And it's something to be received gratefully.

Received, of course, as I've pointed out, the Bible does dignify the grief that many single people feel in not being married. And it confirms the goodness of a desire to be married.

[31 : 19] But that's not the whole story. And Paul's perspective here is a crucial part of the whole picture. It points us to appreciate singleness as a blessing from God.

And I think that's not just an invitation to the single people, but for the whole of us as a church. How will we know when we're starting to see singleness as a gift like God does?

Let me give you a few suggestions. We'll know when we're starting to believe it's a gift when single people aspire to it. and when their Christian friends encourage them in it.

We'll know we're starting to believe it's a gift when we stop presuming that when a person who is older and single must either be divorced or miserable or have something wrong with them.

We'll know we'll start believing it's a gift when we pray for the singleness of our children. When we teach our children not to presume that they will grow up and get married but that they may have the privilege of serving God singly their whole life.

[32 : 35] And we'll know we've started believing this when we fear the fear of our children's loneliness. When we fear our children's loneliness less than we fear them wasting their lives.

Paul says singleness is a gift from God. Do you believe that? Paul also says it's a gift that comes with many challenges. And there may be many challenges that we could discuss but the one Paul focuses on here is the temptation for lack of self-control.

And this remains a significant temptation for married people. I don't think for one second that married people have any kind of monopoly on sexual sin.

But nevertheless Paul mentions sexual impurity in relation to singleness here specifically verse 9. It's in that verse where he says if sexual sin is a clear and present danger perhaps especially if you're in a relationship with someone struggling for self-control then Paul urges a swift move towards marriage to avoid sexual sin.

Now the real solution to poor self-control is not marriage is it? It's better self-control. So whether or not marriage is possible for the single person the exhortation to grow and practice self-control is of the utmost importance.

[34 : 04] And it requires earnest prayer and good habits and eye-gouging and hand-chopping repentance. And certainly a brave and an honest accountability with people you trust and with other families.

And failure in this area is devastating. And it has a deep and a lasting impact on the one who fails. And it usually harms another person with whom sexual sin is committed.

And it poses significant issues in potential future spouse and it can seriously undermine if not destroy Christian leadership and Christian witness. And above all it grieves the Holy Spirit of God who made us and redeemed us to live chaste and pure lives.

Spirit-led self-control is the antidote to such grief. Now finally today the kingdom of God. Because 1 Corinthians 7 is not just a chapter about marriage and divorce and singleness and sex.

It's a chapter about God's kingdom. It's a chapter that presses us to think about these things in the light of God's kingdom. Because all through Paul's discussion of these issues in this chapter the kingdom of God lurks beneath the surface and occasionally pokes its head above the surface.

[35 : 21] Let me explain to you what I mean. So for example in verses 1 to 6 where Paul underlines the importance of sex within marriage he does concede doesn't he there is one reason and one reason alone why it may be helpful for a Christian couple to fast from sexual intimacy.

Can you see it? Verse 5 What's the reason? It's for devotion to prayer. I've been really struck how surprising that is.

Really, really surprised. Where does that come from? And what I've discovered is this the kingdom of God pokes its head above the surface of the text and it reminds us that if there was ever going to be something worth abstaining from sex for it would be praying.

It's a small hint, isn't it, to you and I that there's something going on in the world that's bigger than sex. Bigger than marriage. It's a reminder to me that prayer is one of the ways that God's people play a part in a much bigger thing.

It's one of the ways that we participate in the growth of the kingdom of God. So let me ask you as I've asked myself does prayer seem to you to be more important than sex? It might not be because you're influenced by what you see on the surface of life and you're insufficiently engaged in God's kingdom.

[36 : 48] I guess it's also possible that you think that God's kingdom is more about Bible study, Bible teaching, more about evangelism.

But it's interesting, isn't it, I think, that Paul doesn't talk about foregoing sex for a mission trip. He doesn't talk about foregoing sex for reading the Bible.

It's interesting, I think, that he chooses prayer here. Is it possible that the work of prayer is far more important to the work of God in this world than we think?

Where are all the Christian couples foregoing sex for prayer? really, have you ever heard of anyone doing this? Now, of course, I hope it's not the kind of thing you boast of if you do it.

And please don't come and tell me if you are. But in my past experience, I've never heard of it. Are there any Christians doing this? What might that say about how important the kingdom is to us?

[37 : 54] About how important praying for the kingdom is to us? What about verse 19 as well?

There we've got another little clue that there's something much bigger going on than the issues that occupy the surface of this chapter. Here again, we see the kingdom of God poke its head above the surface of the text.

Verse 19 is very important. Let me remind you of the context, verses 17 to 24. Paul says that if identity markers like slavery and circumcision don't matter as much as you think they do, then the same is true of marriage and divorce and singleness.

And he's writing them to married people and he's telling them to be content. He's telling them to remain married and invest in their marriages with obedience. And he's writing to unmarried people and he's telling them to remain content and invest in their singleness with obedience.

And he speaks to divorced people and he says to you stay content and obediently pursue reconciliation. It's better to be an obedient married person than a disobedient single person. It's better to be an obedient unmarried person than a disobedient married person.

Boys. Verse 19 is what matters most. And Paul says keeping God's command is what counts.

[39 : 07] But ultimately this evening, I want us to finish, and I want to draw your attention to verses 22 and 23. Because I wouldn't want to say that we get a little hint of something bigger there, because I want to argue that something bigger slaps you in the face.

I wouldn't describe this as the kingdom of God just poking its head above the surface. Rather, the kingdom of God leaps out of the water to its full sight, and it grabs you by the scruff of the neck. And it lifts you up to see the view.

And in this final section, you remember that Paul is urging you towards contentment. Contentment to remain in the situation, in which you were when Christ called you. Now, there's reasons, right reasons, where someone will move from being unmarried to married.

And sometimes reasons to move from being married to unmarried. Just as there are some reasons for you to move from being a slave to becoming free. But nevertheless, the key emphasis is on contentment with where you are now in obedience to God.

And what this last section reminds you and I of so helpfully is that we are not defined by our circumstances. Circumcision and slavery are not who you are.

[40 : 20] Married is not who you are. Single is not who you are. Divorced is not who you are. And I think it's really hard to believe that sometimes. But as Christians, we are not defined by our status in these respects.

Our identity does not rest in these things. Because they are not ultimate. And we've been saying, haven't we, over these three weeks, and it's enormous amounts of time, I know, that we are defined instead by that which is ultimate, by God's kingdom.

By who we are in relation to him. By what we've become in Christ. So listen again to how he puts it in verses 22 and 23. For he who was called in the Lord as a bond servant is a free man of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a bond servant of Christ. You were bought with a price. Do not become bond servants of men. You've been bought. You've been purchased with Jesus' own blood.

And that makes you wonderfully free. And at the same time, wonderfully bound. And you're bound to the loving lordship of the one who bought us. And as those who now belong not to ourselves.

[41 : 26] And not to the complex world in which we live, but to him. And we seek to live as those who are responsible to him. And not responsible to please the world around us.

Not responsible, ultimately, to please our spouse if we have one. But responsible to please God. And there are a lot of radical thoughts that we've looked at this evening.

But I think this is the most radical. We are free from being fixated on our singleness or our marriage. Because in Christ, we've been liberated to be fixated on his kingdom. But at the same time, there's this profound paradox.

We are slaves, joyful slaves of Jesus. Owned by him. Possessed by him. Ultimately, not to be owned or possessed by anyone else. And so who do you ultimately belong to?

To your wife or to your husband? No. To yourself? No. You belong to Jesus. And Paul says belonging to Jesus is you will not care so much about whether you're circumcised or not.

[42 : 36] Or whether you're a slave or not. Or whether you're single or not. Or whether you're married or not. It just won't matter to you as much as it would before you met Christ. Because God has called you to belong to Jesus. And Jesus has paid the price for your life with his blood.

And now you are his. And by comparison to that, nothing else really matters. I want to say to you again that I think nothing puts us in starker conflict with the world in which we live than this.

We live in a world that is obsessed with relationships and romance. With sexual fulfillment. With people being coupled. With having a family. And our society thinks these are the ultimate things. And we have to say that's not true. It's filtered into our hearts and our minds. I see it in myself. I see it in the Christians around me. The world has invaded the church.

And we need the Bible to show us again and again what reality really is. We need Jesus to thrust himself out of the water. To hold us up. To show us the kingdom of God.

[43 : 43] So don't mishear me. Marriage matters. It really does. And singleness matters. Because they are both gifts from God. And how we can conduct ourselves in marriage, singleness, or divorce matters too.

Because obedience matters to God. And how we can conduct ourselves in marriage. And how we can conduct ourselves in marriage. I'm just saying that your anxiety about your status needs to be shaped and calmed by the perspective that the kingdom brings.

There's something that matters much, much more. And whether we're married or single, divorced or remarried, circumcised or enslaved, Jesus matters more.

His kingdom matters more. Because he brought us to liberate us. And to lovingly enslave us. To free us from the world's obsessions. And to employ us in his service.

The one who is a slave when called by the Lord is the Lord's free person. And similarly, the one who was free when Christ called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price.

[44 : 46] Do not become slaves of human beings. I'll pray for us.