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Sermon Notes

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Marriage and Singleness in a World That is Passing Away

1 Corinthians 7:29-40

Faith is the eyesight of the soul by which we can see invisible spiritual realities: past, present, and future.

Faith is also the eyesight of the soul by which we can see present physical realities properly... and understand that everything we see in this world is temporary... fleeting... dust in the wind... but that the world that is coming is eternal.

By faith, we can look at life on this planet properly – to use the things of this earth properly – and not allow our hearts to get entangled in things that are soon passing away.

There are many reminders of the fleeting nature of life... and the clear wisdom to the understanding “You can’t take it with you.” Some have said, “There are no U-Hauls behind hearses.” The deceased man in the casket had to leave all his worldly goods behind for others to inherit or even to fight over.

In 2012, a luxurious private jet – the Gulfstream Aerospace G-IV – worth \$35 million – carried the dead body of singer Whitney Houston from LA to New Jersey for her funeral. The interior of this amazing plane is pure luxury – leather seats, unusually large windows, polished hardwood seat tables. It occurred to me how little that luxury meant to her at that point. All life is fleeting

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is urgent that Christians understand the temporary nature of our lives here on earth... and to apply that even to the most significant and lasting human relationship there is: marriage.

He wants us to see all things in this world FROM AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE... how will everything I touch and interact with and do and commit myself to in this world look on Judgment Day and in eternity?

Only if we see even our marriages from this eternal perspective can we maximize the brief time we have together in this world.

I. Don't Let Your Heart Be Entangled in this Fleeting World (vs. 29-31)

A. The Flow of Argument

1 Corinthians 7:26-29 Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. ²⁷ Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. ²⁹ What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short.

1. In verses 17-24, Paul advocates that people should as much as possible remain in the life situation in which they were when Christ called them
2. In verses 25-28, he applies this to the case of virgins—young people who have never been married... stay single if you can
3. In verse 26, he says “In light of the present crisis...” meaning the persecution that Christians face in this world, and the fact that this is much easier to face as a single person
 - a. Paul himself was in prison “again and again”
 - b. As a matter of fact, the Holy Spirit had specifically warned him this would keep happening IN EVERY CITY!!
 - c. Imagine how much grief his calling would cause if he had a wife and children to look after!
 - d. How would he provide for their needs from prison??
 - e. So Paul says concerning himself, he has the single-minded devotion to the calling of the Lord, and the present crisis of persecution will not stop him at all; but if he were married, he would have a deeply divided mind
4. Even beyond the “present crisis,” married people “face many troubles in this world...” and Paul says compassionately and wisely, “I want to SPARE YOU THESE TROUBLES”
 - a. What kinds of troubles? Start with simple physical provision: food, clothing, shelter, other basic necessities
 - b. Marriage usually implies children, and when women are pregnant and then give birth and have to care for newborns, they are very vulnerable; they rely on a husband to be a shelter

Genesis 33:13 Jacob said to Esau, "The children are tender and I must care for the ewes and cows that are nursing their young. If they are driven hard just one day, all the animals will die.

5. It is the role of a husband “to serve and protect” (Genesis 2:15), as Paul says plainly even about the elderly:

1 Timothy 5:8 If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

6. Once you have a family, you begin to have practical issues of housing... home-ownership brings you into many issues that take a ton of time to address; the metaphor of putting a roof over their heads includes making sure the roof doesn't leak, and when the time comes replacing the shingles with new ones
- a. Upkeep, preventive maintenance, car repairs, budgets, long-range financial planning, college for your kids' future, planning for your own retirement...
 - b. Looking after the general state of your property is relentless in this world in which things rust and rot and break down under the onslaught of sun, rain, wind, cold, snow
 - c. We don't want to be the sluggard whose property is run down, overgrown with weeds and ramshackle in appearance; so you may end up spending lots of time at Lowe's or Home Depot
 - d. Beyond that, there are medical needs of your wife and children... if they are sick or have some kind of chronic medical issue, this will dominate your time, energy and money
 - e. These are the realities of a settled, normal family life
 - f. These are the troubles Paul would spare single people
7. But a single person is much more free to move about in this world and respond to the Lord's radical call

Matthew 10:9-10 Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; ¹⁰ take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep.

B. In Any Case: Christians Need an Eternal Perspective

1 Corinthians 7:29, 31 What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. ... For this world in its present form is passing away.

1. Time is “short” or “compressed”... literally “the time HAS BEEN SHORTENED”
2. God is compressing this final phase of redemptive history...

Hebrews 1:2 ... these last days

1 John 2:18 Dear children, this is the last hour;

3. Time is not linear... sometimes time seems to draw out and be extended; other times it seems even the years fly by like they were merely minutes
4. Very soon, Jesus Christ will come! Three times in the final chapter of the final book of the Bible, Revelation 22, Jesus Christ says “I am coming SOON”
5. James makes it very plain

James 4:14 What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

6. We are trained by the Word of God to see our lives in this world differently than unbelievers... they act like life will go on as it always has... they are shocked by changes; they don’t seem to realize how true it is

Hebrews 9:27 man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment

In the movie “Scrooge,” the ghost of Christmas future brought Ebenezer Scrooge to see an open grave with a tombstone inscribed; when Scrooge saw his own name written on that stone, he cried out in shock and horror... as though he had no idea that something like that could happen

So... our Christian faith prepares us for the brevity of our own lives, because we will die at a time the Lord has ordained

Also our Christian faith prepares us for the future end of the entire world, of this present evil age; all of the businesses with their buying and selling; all of the empires with their rising and falling; all of the inventors and composers and authors and creators with their creativity... all of it will come to an end; and the Bible attaches one word to that: SOON!!

This will all SOON END

1 Corinthians 7:31 this world in its present form is passing away.

C. Paul’s Rather Shocking Applications

1 Corinthians 7:29-31 From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ³⁰ those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they

were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; ³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

1. This has a rhythm to it, like a poem

Those who have wives... *let them live as if* they had no wives

And...

Those who weep... *let them live as if* they did not weep

And...

Those who rejoice... *let them live as if* they did not rejoice

And...

Those who buy... *let them live as if* they did not possess

And...

Those who use the things of this world... *let them live as if* they did not use it at all.

2. Paul is teaching an eternal perspective in all of these temporary conditions... even marriage

- a. These words could be taken out of context and twisted to mean something Paul didn't really intend; especially when it comes to marriage
- b. He is not literally saying to all you husbands, "This afternoon, ignore your wife, pretend she's not speaking to you, act like you never met her."
- c. Not at all!! You may think this is exactly what you wanted to hear, especially if there's a big game on this afternoon and she wants you to clean the gutters!

3. What Paul IS saying is, "Even if you are married and are in the covenant relationship that is the most binding and significant earthly relationship in this present age... live like it is still temporary; you will both die someday, and your marriage will end; your present physical relationship is temporary, but your spiritual relationship is eternal

Aside: it is vital for couples to hold each other loosely, as in God's hand. If your spouse dies and you continue to live, your life on earth is still valuable. Your life is hidden IN CHRIST, not in your spouse. I have seen some godly people grieve with a healthy grief when their beloved spouse dies,

and they go on serving the Lord in a healthy way; but I have seen others shrivel up and die themselves when they lost their spouse

When Paul says “Those who have wives should live as though they did not,” he is saying “Have an eternal and wise perspective on your brief life together. Even if you are married for six decades, if you are both Christians, you will spend infinitely more time in heaven as glorified saints than you did on earth as husband and wife

4. Paul extends this to every aspect of life in this physical world... hold onto everything loosely

a. If you weep, do not weep like your weeping is permanent

1 Thessalonians 4:13 Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.

Psalm 30:5 ... weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

i) we should always remember the place to which we are going

Revelation 21:4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

b. In the same way, those who rejoice in some earthly thing should act as if they did not... it is too easy for us to get wrapped up in earthly successes and be too elevated

i) Think of the emptiness of some sports championship... think of the guys who come onto the Super Bowl field after everyone has gone home to sweep the confetti off the field

ii) Or the guys whose job it is to scrub the sticky dried champagne off the lockers in the locker room

iii) For a long time, FBC had a collection of softball trophies from the 70s and 80s that no one remembers or knows who played... the joy in winning those trophies is long faded

iv) Most of the things that people celebrate with lavish joy are insignificant and will soon fade away... like the laughter and clinking glasses of a New Year's Eve party

v) Even good wholesome Christian joys on earth should be tempered by realization that our lives here on earth will soon pass away... the birth of a child or a wedding should be celebrated in light of eternity... those who rejoice should do it knowing that their real joy comes from something else

- c. And those who BUY SOMETHING, don't act like it's really yours to keep
 - i) As we said, there are no U-Hauls behind hearses...
 - ii) Everything you own you don't really own; God is loaning it to you for your temporary joy, and also for the advance of the Kingdom
 - iii) Everything you buy could become a tyrant, in some sense owning you
 - iv) Paul says, if you buy, you should be as though you don't really possess it
- d. So therefore, anything you use in this physical world, it should be as though you didn't really use it at all

D. Why? Because this world, in its present form, will SOON PASS AWAY

1. You are an ALIEN and a STRANGER here, just passing through
2. And in this context, that includes how you think about marriage

II. The Practical/Spiritual Advantages of Singleness (vs. 32-35)

A. Having Established This, Paul Advocates Singleness

1 Corinthians 7:32-35 I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs-- how he can please the Lord. ³³ But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world-- how he can please his wife-- ³⁴ and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world-- how she can please her husband. ³⁵ I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

B. Paul is Not a Kill-Joy... Nor a Strict Ascetic

1. Paul is not forbidding marriage as though it were a lesser existence, a lower level of godliness or piety
2. Not at all!
3. His argument here is amazingly PRACTICAL and SPIRITUAL at the same time
 - a. He wants to free Christians from the inevitable practical issues that will dominate daily life as a married couple, especially as parents

- b. The “concern” he addresses in verse 32 has to do with all the physical things connected with life; think of Joseph and Mary as they arrived in Bethlehem, with Mary near her time to give birth; Joseph was filled with concerns for finding a place for his wife to give birth to the Savior of the world... but there was no room for them in the Inn
 - c. That was specifically Joseph’s role at that moment
 - d. Paul is saying there will be a lifetime of those practical concerns once you get married
4. He wants to FREE both the men and the women from such earthly, physical concerns so they can be more fully devoted to the Lord
 5. A single man can be more single-minded on pleasing the Lord than a married man; but the married man is really serving two masters: Jesus Christ and his family’s bodily needs, and his interests are divided; you can deprive yourself of food or clothing or shelter, but you really can’t do that to your wife or little ones

2 Corinthians 11:27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

How could Paul make a wife and children endure that?

C. Paul Also Addresses a Godly Single Woman

1 Corinthians 7:34 An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world-- how she can please her husband.

1. Many godly women have forsaken marriage so they can fully serve the Lord
2. I think of Lottie Moon, the heroic Baptist missionary who served in China; she was engaged to a theological student named Crawford Toy; but he was questionable theologically and she was fully devoted to serving Christ in China; she gave up any dreams she had of a married life and lived every single day to serve the Lord in China; so also Amy Carmichael, who devoted her life to rescuing children from trafficking in India

When she realized God was calling her to singleness, she had significant fears. She wrote of those fears in a letter to one of her adopted children:

The devil kept on whispering, ‘It’s all right now, but what about afterwards? You are going to be very lonely.’ And he painted pictures of loneliness — I can see them still. I turned to my God in a kind of

desperation and said, ‘Lord, what can I do? How can I go on to the end?’ He said, ‘None of them that trust in Me shall be desolate.’ That word has been with me ever since. It has been fulfilled to me. It will be fulfilled to you

3. These great women of God were freed from fears and lived lives for the Lord without the responsibilities of marriage
4. A godly wife spends much of her time meeting the bodily needs of her husband and children... think of the Proverbs 31 woman

Proverbs 31:15 She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.

Proverbs 31:27 She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

5. So, Paul’s concern here is fruitfulness, not restriction

ESV 1 Corinthians 7:35 I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

The Greek word is a “noose” or a “harness” ... Paul’s not seeking to bind your conscience... you shouldn’t feel guilty if you get married; but he wanted to promote orderliness and undivided devotion to Christ

D. Again... this is NOT for everyone... or even for the majority

1. Paul is not saying single people are HOLIER than married people... the Roman Catholic church has for centuries forbidden marriage by its priests and nuns, and openly taught that such a status is superior spiritually. Paul is NOT saying that!
2. God has ordained Christian marriage and parenting to evangelize and disciple the overwhelming majority of the saints who will end up in heaven; that is his normal way of swelling the ranks of the redeemed
3. But there are SOME who will be called to a life of singleness and single-minded devotion to Christ

III. “So... Should We Get Married or Not?” (vs. 36-38)

1 Corinthians 7:36-38 If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. ³⁷ But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind

not to marry the virgin-- this man also does the right thing. ³⁸ So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.

- A. Paul Turns to Address Couples in the Pipeline... perhaps Betrothed, engaged couples... or perhaps the fathers of betrothed daughters... each person has a vital decision to make
- B. What About US? My Betrothed is EAGER for marriage and a family...
 - 1. Paul says if you think you are behaving wrongly toward her... perhaps even unseemly or sexually inappropriately—the words imply something shameful... then you need to get married!
 - 2. If your conscience is pushing you toward marriage, then DO IT... you have not sinned!
 - 3. Even more if your passions are telling you you do not have the gift of singleness... then MARRY the girl! Enjoy your life together
- C. However (vs. 37) if you are solidly under control, and you have no obligations restraining you... your conscience is free... and if you can do it... then STAY SINGLE
- D. If you marry her, you will do well... if you can stay single, in the way I've been saying, you will do even better!

IV. Should the Widow Remarry or Not? (vs. 39-40)

1 Corinthians 7:39-40 A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. ⁴⁰ In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is-- and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

- A. Paul's Final Words are to Widows... "Should I get remarried??"
- B. She is FREE to do whatever she wants... as long as she marries IN THE LORD!
- C. But One Final Plug... she'll be happier if she stays single

V. Applications

- A. Come to Christ!
 - 1. Central to this chapter: life on earth is temporary, life in the next world is eternal
 - 2. It is vastly more important to know that your sins are forgiven through faith in Christ than to have a wonderful marriage or home life, or to live as a single person doing whatever you want

3. Whatever your earthly lot, your life is a mist that will soon vanish...

B. Christians: Redeem the Time... because Time is Short

C. Learn to Hold onto Everything Loosely... your marriage, your children, your houses and cars and possessions, your skills and talents... all of these things are temporary... what you do with them for Christ is eternal

D. On Singleness: esteem singleness properly... understand Paul's arguments for the spiritual and practical advantages of singleness

E. Seek Sincere and Undivided Devotion to the Lord

1. You can do this whether you are single or married...

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.