

Calling and Contentment in Singleness and Marriage

1 Corinthians 7:17 – 31

May 17, 2009

Fairview Presbyterian Church

The *Country and Western* entertainer **Dierks Bentley** sings a song, with a very humorous accompanying video, where he asks, “*What was I thinking?*” His song came to mind earlier this week when I reread the text for today. What was I thinking when I chose it so many months ago? Thankfully, all scripture is god-breathed. And while this passage may not yield its spiritual gold and silver easily, it is there to be mined for those willing to take the necessary time and effort. Let us see what we can find.

Christians understand the meaning of marriage in light of creation and redemption, knowing that the marriage promises are fulfilled in a fallen world.

We begin by reminding ourselves that the Christian understanding of marriage is shaped primarily from our understanding of creation, on one hand, and redemption, on the other. From Genesis 1 and 2 we see that marriage is woven into the fabric of creation. Genesis 2 ends with the ringing affirmation of the centrality of marriage in ordering human life: ²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.¹ In the New Testament, the apostle Paul explores the full meaning of marriage in Ephesians 5:22 – 33. He concludes his discussion quoting Genesis 2:24 adding, ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.² Marriage is woven into creation and it reflects or symbolizes Christ’s relation to his church.

However, in between Genesis 2 and Ephesians 5 is the story of the human fall from grace, the eviction of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve disobey God, sin enters the world, and the fabric of God’s creation is marred. Our marriages unfold in a fallen, sinful world. Our marriages, our sexual identities, and our family relationships are all marred by the reality of sinfulness. It is in the context of these facts that we understand Paul’s purposes in I Corinthians 7. Paul is answering questions that have been put to him by the people of the Corinthian church. They desired guidance as to how to put their married house in order.

This is the type of practical guidance Paul is providing in these verses. He helpfully begins by establishing the basic principle that guides our thinking: heed God’s call in your life.

Heed God’s call in your life

¹⁷ Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

¹ *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Ge 2:24). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

² *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Eph 5:32). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Lois Ann and I have often remarked about how different each of our children is from one another. You may think about your siblings and marvel at how children who grow up in the same household can be so diverse and different. These facts are reflections of the providence and purpose of God. God gives to each person a unique mix of gifts, ability, interests, desires, aptitudes, skills, talent, temperaments, and capabilities. God also places us into a particular time and place. We are born into a specific family, given ethnic and national identities. We are each born to a particular status in life. In American culture we affirm the vision of the self-made man. Certainly, America is a remarkably fluid society. It is the land of opportunity. At the same time, in the most fundamental sense, no man or woman is self-made. Much of who we are and what we will become is established from the moment of our conception. There is much about our lives that is simply given.

It is in this light that we understand Paul's words. Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. Start with the person God has made you to be. Bloom where you are planted. Be a Christian where you are. Accept your status in life. Do not dream about how you wish things could or should be different. Paul tells us that this is a basic attitude required of us. He says This is my rule in all the churches.

This instruction applies concretely to matters of sexuality and marriage. The natural human misguided way of dealing with the problems we face in life is to seek to avoid and escape. If a marriage is going through a rocky time, one partner may begin to fantasize about how things would be better if they could escape the marriage, find a different marriage partner. If a single woman finds herself pregnant while in college and she says to herself, "Not now," she begins to imagine how an abortion, an escape, can solve her problem. Instead, Paul's instruction is to live the life God has given you. This is your marriage; work on it. That baby in the womb is God's good gift; rejoice in it. Heed the calling God issues. Live your life in a manner that brings glory to him even if doing so appears personally costly to you.

Next, Paul tells us not to be distracted by things that do not matter.

Do not be distracted by things that do not matter

¹⁸ Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. ¹⁹ For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. ²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.

Verses 18 and 19 sound strange to modern ears and in a moment I will explain what Paul means and how this advances his argument. To help us tackle it, look first at v. 20, ²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. This is a restatement of v. 17, lead the life that the Lord has assigned. What this tells us is that if Paul is saying the same thing in v. 17 and again in v. 20, then the point of the in-between verses must be to illustrate his instruction to live the life God calls us to live. When Paul speaks of *circumcision* and *uncircumcision* in this context, these are simply shorthand references

to *Jew* and *Gentile*. He is referring to people's ethnic, national or cultural identity. What he is saying is that these identifying marks are not important in regards to our Christian identity. Cultural differences do not matter in Christ. This is why the Christian gospel has been able to take root in every language, culture, people group, tribe and nation on the face of the earth. Cultural differences count for nothing.

Paul adds that keeping the commandments does matter. There are times when culture and morality do collide and guidance and wisdom are needed. One example from the mission field: imagine a missionary working with a tribal group in Uganda. The local tribal chieftain hears the message of the gospel of Christ and responds positively, turning to Christ, converting to Christianity. Being an important man in his community, this tribal chief has four wives. Now, as a Christian, how should he respond to the clear New Testament teaching that God's people, especially leaders, are to be the "husband of one wife"? Should he choose his favorite wife and divorce the other three? Obviously not, for that would break the Lord Jesus' clear teaching against divorce. Historically, the guidance offered on the mission field was to instruct the chief to maintain his prior marriage commitments while refusing to take any additional wives.

Since Christianity takes root in any culture then it follows that the Christian faith does not call upon its people to be uprooted from their natural connections to family, community and culture. Some religions and religious groups demand separation and isolation, entering the sect or cult requires breaking the ties that connect a person to family and community. This is not so for Christians. The challenge instead is to learn to live in Christ in our family, community and culture.

Having dealt with cultural issues that do not matter, Paul turns his attention to another challenging aspect of life, teaching us that there are no barriers to Christ's ability to use married folk and single folk for his purposes.

There are no barriers to Christ's ability to use married folk and single folk for his purposes

²¹ Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ... ²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

Culture does not matter, Paul tells us. Neither does rank, class or status matter. His specific illustration is that of slaves; telling his readers who may be slaves not to be concerned about their status. He means that a slave is still able to discharge his spiritual responsibilities to Christ. Christ's calling can be followed whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free.

Freedom, of course, is preferable to slavery, and Paul says that if freedom is a possibility, take it. In the ancient world, a slave who obtained money could take it to a pagan temple and deposit there, much as we might deposit money in a bank. If the slave could acquire the payment price then he would take his master to the temple and

there the priest of the temple would hand over the money. The slave would be freed from obligation to men and instead would be understood to be the property of the god of the temple. This is Paul's point. All Christians, slave or free, have been purchased by Christ. We are Christ's property. We belong to him. And this is why our status in life does not matter.

This leads naturally to Paul's next point: the freedom we have in Christ is precious, therefore guard it diligently,

The freedom we have in Christ is precious, guard it diligently

²³ You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

The modern secular world understands freedom as being freedom *from restraint*. This sense of freedom is epitomized in the **Frank Sinatra** anthem, *My Way*, and its chorus, "*I did it my way.*" The ancient world was wiser regarding this concept of freedom than we are today. Freedom was not understood as release from constraint, but rather the ability to do what is right. We live in a moral universe. God has woven his moral purpose into the fabric of life. True freedom is not escape from social requirements that may constrain our wishes and desires. True freedom is to be possessed of a will and ability to live our lives as we ought to do so. Jew and Gentile, slave or free: these things do not matter, Paul tells us. But, he quickly adds, keeping the commandments of God – this does matter.

Paul tells us that Christ has paid the ransom price for our freedom; therefore do not become slaves of men. This is a recurring theme in the writings of Paul: resist the ways in which the world seeks to squeeze you into its mold. The issue here is thinking. How do you reason? Where do you gain your guidance? How do you prioritize values and commitments in your decision making? The secular world teaches very different values and virtues than the Christian world. Are you certain the values and virtues you confess are the same as those confessed and affirmed in the scriptures and by the church through the ages?

In the arena of marriage and sexuality the world devalues marriage, preferring to promote living together, without commitment. The world is seeking to redefine the meaning of marriage. The world today promotes homosexuality, seeking to punish any who question or challenge the moral legitimacy of homoerotic encounters. The world wants comprehensive sex education – meaning the removal of restraints – rather than the promotion of abstinence and the celebration of marriage. The world demands that the workforce attend mandatory seminars on preventing sexual misconduct, while remaining silent on the importance of marriage as the right and proper vehicle of appropriate sexual conduct. The world promotes birth control but not self control.

I know that I am preaching to the church. My reason for mentioning these false teachings of the world is that I see more and more devout and sincere Christians embracing these lies, becoming slaves to the false ideas awash in our world. Living with your boyfriend or girlfriend does not honor God. God blesses marriage, not the false

alternatives. And yet, more and more I am meeting Christians who come from solid homes and solid backgrounds, lifelong church members, who choose to live together rather than be married. Why is this? Where does that come from? How is it that the value of marriage has been lost among so many of God's covenant people?

There is no single answer to that question, but there are two component parts that I will point to at this time. The first is to recognize that most college campuses in America today have become adversarial battlegrounds opposing the Christian faith and Christian moral teaching. A good friend of ours, the mom in a solid Christian family, commenting on sending her two sons to a well known university in Philadelphia, said of their experience, "I feel like I have tossed my sons to the wolves." I reject the idea that the years of young adulthood require a period of wandering from the faith. In addition to what we are already doing here at Fairview Presbyterian Church to in contact with our college students and young adults, I am pleased to tell you that Lauren Blake has agreed to head up our ministry to our college and young adults.

The second influential factor has to do with the place of popular culture in our convictions and beliefs. We are influenced by our environment, by our surroundings, by the things that we permit into our hearts and minds. We are influenced in our thinking in our encounters with movies, television, music, books, news outlets, web sites, teachers, professors, magazine articles, concerts, the opinions of co-workers, and so on. There is a constant exchange of ideas and opinion at work in our world. I am concerned that many Christians are not exercising their role as responsible guardians of the influences they permit to enter and influence their thinking.

When I exercise, I watch music videos. I quite deliberately watch and analyze videos from various genres: rock and roll, metal, alternative, country, pop, Latin, hip hop, and so on. Each genre, as you might expect, tends to have a common theme and look to the videos: metal offers head-banging, flashing lights and smoke; hip hop features parties, hips and hand gestures; rock and roll revels in rebellion and sex (but not marriage). Recently it occurred to me that the biggest significance of these themes may be more what *is not* seen and sung about rather than what is. It is only in **Country and Western** videos that I have found themes such as marriage, family and God. Children show up regularly in **Country Western** videos and they are almost never present in any other popular musical genre. Of course, there are some C & W songs that are not edifying and there are some songs in the other genres that are very positive. The key question though is this: what do we surround ourselves with in the popular culture we permit to enter our lives? My experience is that C & W is the *only* expression of popular culture that celebrates marriage, family, children, personal sacrifice and love of country. What you put in is what you get out. What you surround yourself with is what influences you. These things influence how we perceive the world, what we value and the virtues by which we live. You have been bought with a price, the price of Christ's precious blood: do not let the world and its lies enslave you through its false wisdom and misleading values.

This leads us naturally to Paul's next point: in marriage and singleness, we guard our thoughts and understanding by listening to right authorities.

In marriage and singleness, we guard our thoughts and understanding by listening to the right authorities

²⁵ Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

How do we make decisions in life? We do so, mostly on the basis of authority. We learn this habit first from our parents, for they are the authorities established by God to raise us to honorable adulthood. In honorable adulthood each of us must determine which authorities we will permit to guide and shape our understanding, and direct our actions and decisions.

In a discussion with several fellow Presbyterian clergy recently the issue of ordaining active practicing homosexuals came up. I read to the assembled group the apostle Paul's words from Romans 1:18 – 32 adding that I do not see that there is any way around Paul's clear condemnation of homosexuality as an expression of human rebellion against God's authority. One of the clergy present immediately began to question the legitimacy of the Apostle Paul's authority. My colleague's response was predictable. We all do this when we find ourselves cornered in an argument; we attempt to change the basis of the authority at work. Of course, a Presbyterian clergy person dismissing Paul is remarkable since every person in the discussion had at one point in their past affirmed publicly that they *"accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and [to be] God's word."*

The Apostle Paul is careful in his exercise of his god-given authority. Paul here is saying that he has no clear command from the Lord. In the earlier passage, v. 10, speaking of divorce, Paul made it clear that his instruction was straight from Jesus. Here he is careful to underline that he is offering *his* opinion. His opinion is trustworthy. It carries weight and value, but it does not rise to the same level of authority as a word from the Lord Jesus.

Let me ask you, *"What authorities govern your thinking about the role and importance of marriage?" "Do you believe that your thoughts regarding homosexuality should be guided by the teaching of the scriptures?" "If you think that living together is a valid option, upon what authority do you base your belief?"*

It is important to be clear regarding the sources of authority in our lives. For our young people, the first line of authority is that of parent. For the adults present, we affirm that the Bible is God's word. We believe that the creeds of the church are faithful summaries of what the Bible teaches. In regards to questions of marriage, children, and sexuality, these should be the standards against which we measure our beliefs and actions. Are you willing to do so?

The last thing we note this morning from the remaining verses in this passage: the rules may change in a time of crisis, but the requirement of resting in godly contentment does not.

The rules may change in a time of crisis, but the requirement of resting in godly contentment does not

²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. ²⁹ This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

In v. 26 Paul mentions the *current distress*. He does not define what the crisis is, though presumably the recipients of the letter would have understood his meaning. The Greek word he uses is quite strong. The situation, whatever it may have been, was serious. In a crisis the normal rules may change. In an evacuation the authorities may turn an interstate highway into a one way roadway. When escaping a burning building you leave everything else behind. In periods of civil disorder a government may impose martial law. In a crisis you focus upon other matters and normal priorities may shift. We become willing to let some things go that under normal circumstances would be quite precious to us.

On one hand, Paul says that celibacy is a good thing and on the other that marriage is a good thing. Paul words should be understood as counsel as to a general approach to life. He is not issuing specific requirements. He is offering an approach, an attitude. He counsels contentment. Be content with who you are. Be content with how God has made you. Be content with your status in life. Paul makes it clear that marriage is and remains an option, even in the midst of the *current distress*. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Marriage is a good thing. The Christian home is a good thing. Establishing marriages, even in times of hardship and difficulty, is a good thing.

In light of the distress facing the Corinthian church, Paul counsels an approach to life that emphasizes being in the world, but not of it. He writes.

From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Throughout this passage we have heard Paul repeatedly express his desire that Christ's people be relieved of worldly cares or distractions. In these verses he is reiterating the position. Christians must be in the world, but not of it. We buy and sell, but do not put our trust in our possessions. We deal with the world, but trust in Christ, Lord of a coming kingdom. Paul's words are not an invitation to hide in the mountains as hermits, waiting on the end of the world. Rather, they are a recognition that fashions change, the world changes. We live in the world in a manner that keeps our focus and trust upon Christ, not in the things of life. This will be a theme we will explore in detail in our upcoming series from the book Ecclesiastes.

Say, Amen! Somebody.

Live as You Are Called

¹⁷ Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. ¹⁸ Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. ¹⁹ For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. ²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. ²¹ Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. ²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

The Unmarried and the Widowed

²⁵ Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. ²⁹ This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.