

## **Stay as You Are** **1 Corinthians 7:1-24**

What happens when a house changes owners? The old owners move out and the new ones move in. Do the new owners have the house looking exactly the same? Not likely. Their personalities and tastes are different.

- They'll have different furniture.
- They'll arrange their furniture differently.
- They may repaint the house with colours they like.
- They may re-arrange the gardens.
- They may make some internal alterations – perhaps a new bathroom or kitchen.

The basic structure of the house remains the same – yet usually there are significant changes that indicate new owners have taken over.

It's like that when a person becomes a Christian. They come under new ownership. And the new owner, Jesus, wants to make some radical changes. The question is: what changes does He want to make?

- Does it include changing parents?
- Does it include changing spouses?
- Do you change your status in society?
- Does it involve changing jobs?

For the new Christian, there are radical changes. But it's important to know which things should change and which things should stay the same. Some Corinthians tried to change parts of their lives that shouldn't be changed.

### **The Context**

The beginning of chapter 7 marks a new part of Paul's letter. Paul now answers some questions the Corinthians asked. You can see that in the first half of verse 1:

*Now for the matters you wrote about...*

Paul no longer deals with issues and problems he heard about from various different sources; he now deals with their specific questions. This continues at least until the end of chapter 14.

We're at a disadvantage. Paul has the Corinthians' letter and knows exactly what they're asking. The Corinthians also knew what they asked, even if they didn't manage to photocopy the letter before they sent it. We don't have a copy of their letter and so don't know exactly what they asked. We can only guess from the answers Paul gives. How important is it to know their questions?

- At one level, we can say it mustn't be too important – otherwise God would ensure we had them.
- At another level, knowing the question asked often is important for understanding the answer.

For example, suppose the answer to a question is: "Pigs might fly." Will it always mean the same thing?

- If the question was: What's the name of that book by Emily Rodda that's something about pigs – it's simply a factual answer.
- If the question was: Do you think New Zealand will top the medal tally at the Commonwealth Games – the answer has nothing to do with pigs at all.

What did the Corinthians ask Paul? Many assume they asked something like: Should Christians get married? They assume that because of the second half of verse 1:

*It is good for a man not to marry.*

They think this is Paul's basic answer which he expands in the rest of this passage. They interpret the rest of this passage from that perspective. They think Paul says it's

spiritually better to stay single – but, if you can't manage that, it's OK to get married. The overall thrust is: being married isn't as good as being single.

I think there are several problems with that. **First**, it seems to contradict the rest of the Bible's teaching about marriage. In Genesis 2:18, God says

*It is not good for the man to be alone.*

Marriage is one of God's good gifts to men and women. It's a gift provided before sin enters the world. It isn't seen as a second-rate state for those who can't manage singleness. That's the consistent message of the Old Testament. And elsewhere Paul speaks very strongly in favour of marriage – for example, Ephesians 5:22-33 and Colossians 3:18-19. In 1 Timothy 4:1-3 he refers to false teachers who forbid people to marry. Paul doesn't have a negative view of marriage.

**Secondly**, the answer he gives in the first half of chapter 7 doesn't really deal with whether or not people should get married. Rather, he mainly addresses people already married. In verse 25 he turns to another of their questions and deals with something like that issue – but that's not the focus in this first half of the chapter.

**Thirdly**, the NIV translation's a bit misleading. The Greek doesn't use the word for *marriage* at this point. The preferable translation's in the NIV footnote:

*It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.*

That's much closer to the issue Paul talks about in these verses. He talks about people already married and deals with questions such as:

- Should Christians continue to have physical relat-

ions within their marriages?

- Should Christians continue to be married or should they get divorced and not have physical relations?

Is there another way of looking at verse 1? I think the second half of verse 1 is not Paul's answer – rather, it's what the Corinthians said. Thus, the rest of the passage provides Paul's corrective to their wrong thinking.

Is there reason to think the Corinthians would think it's wrong to have physical relations in marriage? Last week, I mentioned that Greek thinking divided humans into the physical and the spiritual. For the Greeks:

- The spiritual was good – they looked forward to the release of their spirits from their physical bodies.
- The physical was bad. For some, the physical was totally evil simply because it was physical. Others, just thought the physical was very much secondary to the spiritual.

That led to two opposite extremes in relation to the body.

- Some said the body didn't matter – it wasn't the real you. So it didn't matter what you did with the body because it would be destroyed and couldn't contaminate the spirit or soul. So it's quite OK to indulge the body in any way whatsoever.
- Others took the opposite view. They felt the spirit was imprisoned and contaminated by the body. So the body was kept under strict control. Physical pleasures endangered the spirit and so were rejected wherever possible. You had to eat to stay alive – but make sure it wasn't much and it was very bland so you didn't enjoy it!

So Greek thinking could easily lead to these opposite

extremes of pure sensuality or pure asceticism – totally indulging the physical body or totally denying it.

Last week, the problem was the first – people who went for the sensuality extreme. This week, the problem's the other extreme – those wanting to deny the body. These people wanted to stop physical relations altogether – even in marriage. They boasted a spirituality that kept the body under strict control so the spirit wasn't polluted.

Paul writes to correct this wrong thinking. His basic answer is that physical relations in marriage are the norm. He deals with that by applying it to different groups in the church. Not everyone is currently married. Not everyone is currently married to another Christian. How does this work out for them? What's the spiritually right thing for them to do? I think Paul's basic answer can be summed up: Where possible, stay as you are.

### **The Normal Marriage**

First, Paul writes about those who are married – and the normal Christian expectations in marriage. Verses 2-7:

*But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish*

*that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.*

Do you notice the balance of this passage – the assumed equality within the marriage relationship?

- Each man should have his own wife; each woman should have her own husband.
- The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife; the wife should fulfil her marital duty to her husband.
- The wife's body doesn't belong to her alone but also to her husband; the husband's body doesn't belong to him alone but also to his wife.

Marriage is a mutual relationship. It doesn't mean there aren't different roles for husband and wife – that's clear in other Bible passages. Yet, the relationship remains a mutual one between equal partners.

But that isn't Paul's main point here. His point is that marriage involves physical relations between the two partners. That's part of what marriage is. It was part of their marriages before they became Christians; it remains part of their marriages now they are Christians. This isn't one of the radical alterations the new owner makes in their lives. The physical relationship isn't sinful in itself. There are God-given boundaries to its proper use. But within those boundaries, it's one of God's good gifts to humanity.

It seems some Corinthians thought a marriage without the physical side showed greater spirituality. Paul says that's wrong. That idea comes from Greek thinking, not Biblical thinking. Both partners should fulfil their obligations within the relationship. As a concession, he allows they

may refrain from physical relations for a period – but he puts certain restrictions on it:

- It's to be by agreement – it isn't something imposed by one partner on the other.
- It's for a limited amount of time – and he implies it isn't a lengthy period of time.
- It's for a stated purpose – in this case prayer.

This isn't a command. It isn't something married couples have to do, but something they may do. But even if they do, it's a very limited concession. Normally, they should fulfil their marriage obligations to each another.

In verse 7, Paul does indicate he wishes all were like him – that is, single. Some of the reasons for that will come out in next week's passage – so I won't deal with that tonight. But it doesn't mean that Paul in his singleness is somehow better than those who are married. Rather, some have the gift of singleness and some have the gift of marriage. God's the One who distributes these gifts.

### The Finished Marriage

Secondly, Paul addresses those who have been married but their spouse has died. Verses 8 and 9:

*Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

There's some dispute about the term the NIV translates *unmarried*. And it may be translated that way – that's its normal meaning. But in some cases it may also refer to *widowers* – men currently unmarried because their wives died. In the context, I think that's preferable because I think Paul deals with those who've never been married

once he gets to verse 25. However, I don't think it makes much difference to the overall thrust of what Paul says.

To these people, Paul also says: It's good if you can stay as you are – single. But it's not a command. It's not wrong for them to get married again if their spouse has died. Indeed, if they haven't been gifted that way, they should get married. That'd be the right thing to do.

We, perhaps, think this a strange statement. Surely these people don't have the gift of singleness and that's why they got married in the first place. That may not be the case. Their first marriage probably took place before they became Christians – remember, this church wasn't very old. That marriage may have happened for a variety of reasons.

- It may have been a political marriage.
- It may have been a social marriage.
- It was probably an arranged marriage.
- It was generally expected everyone got married.

The issue of the gift of singleness wasn't relevant at the time they got married. But in their widowed state, that should be taken into account. They shouldn't just assume they should get married again. That's cultural thinking. Instead, they should approach the issue from their new Christian perspective.

### The Normal Marriage – Again

Thirdly, Paul addresses those married to a Christian partner – people where both husband and wife have become Christians. Verses 10 and 11:

*To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be*

*reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

Again, Paul says: Stay as you are. This isn't one of the parts of your life that needs to change because you have a new owner – at least, not in the sense of getting a new partner. The marriage union is until death do us part. To use the Corinthians' terminology:

- Your spirituality won't be improved by getting rid of your partner.
- Your spirituality won't be improved by changing your partner.

That isn't the level at which changes need to take place.

### **The Mixed Marriage**

Fourthly, Paul speaks to those married to a non-Christian partner – that is, where only one (either husband or wife) has become a Christian. Verses 12 to 16:

*To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her; she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.*

*But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

Again, the basic instruction is: Stay as you are. Don't try to get out of the marriage. If your non-Christian partner wants out, then don't cause trouble for them. But, as the Christian partner within the marriage, you aren't to take the initiative to end the marriage. Your responsibility remains to your partner.

- You aren't less spiritual because you're married.
- You aren't less spiritual because you're married to a non-Christian.
- Nor is your marriage any less a marriage.

That's Paul's basic message to them.

Now, these verses contain those very difficult bits about the unbelieving husband and the unbelieving wife being sanctified through the believing partner and the children being holy rather than unclean. What do those things mean? We don't have time to go into detail tonight, and I don't think I fully understand anyway. I'll just make three brief comments:

- First, we need to understand that words have ranges of meanings. The same word doesn't always mean exactly the same thing every time. The exact meaning of a word is determined by its context. The word *sanctified* can have a range of meanings.
- Secondly, in this context the fact they're *sanctified* doesn't mean they're *saved*. Verse 16 makes that quite clear.
- Thirdly, it does refer to some advantage this unbelieving spouse has over the normal unbeliever. At the least, that unbelieving spouse is brought within the sphere of the gospel through the believing partner. That's an advantage. It doesn't guarantee their salvation – but it does put them in a better position than the general unbeliever. Paul may mean more

than that – but he doesn't mean less.

As a quick aside: this isn't talking about a Christian who marries a non-Christian. Other parts of the Bible tell us Christians shouldn't marry non-Christians. This tackles the situation where two non-Christians marry and one becomes a Christian after they're already married.

### Other Examples

I'm not going to read verses 17 to 24 again. They're an interruption to the subject of marriage. Why does Paul go off on this seeming tangent? I don't think it is a tangent. These are two other examples of things that don't have to change now we're under a new owner.

- The first is circumcision. What should the new Christian do about circumcision? Nothing. It's irrelevant. If you're circumcised when you became a Christian, don't bother trying to become uncircumcised. And if you're not circumcised when you became a Christian, don't get circumcised. It's not important for your Christian life. It doesn't add to your spirituality in any way.
- The second example is whether you're a slave or a free person. Once again, Paul says it's irrelevant. You can be a slave and an effective Christian; you can be free and an effective Christian. It makes little difference. Of course, everyone prefers to be free. And so, if you're a slave and have opportunity to become free – by all means, take it. But that in itself won't make you a better Christian.

### Conclusion

The Christian's under new ownership. Jesus comes into our lives and takes up residence. And that does mean

some radical changes. But it's important to know what areas need changing and what areas don't really matter.

These Corinthians – or some of them, at least – had it wrong. They wanted to change things that didn't need to be changed and they wanted to keep things that did need to be changed.

- It seems that, now they'd become Christians, some wanted to get rid of physical relations within their marriages and even to get rid of their marriages themselves. That's wrong. That's one area that did not need to be changed.
- On the other hand, they wanted to keep their Greek way of thinking about the world and their Greek standards of wisdom. That was one area that did need to change. Their minds needed very much to be renewed so they learned to think Biblically.

Do we make the same mistake today? There's always the danger of focusing on change in the wrong areas. There's always the danger of focusing on a brand of so-called spirituality that's defined by the world.

- Some focus on external physical aspects – what a person does or doesn't wear; where a person does or doesn't go; what physical actions a person does or doesn't do when they worship.
- Some focus on internal spiritual aspects – whether or not a person has an air of spirituality; what spiritual experiences the person can boast about.
- Some still focus on the denial of bodily appetites.

While these things may have some relevance on occasion they aren't where the Bible's focus is. Yes, the Bible focuses on an inner change – the renewal of our minds so we think the way God wants us to think. But those inner

changes will always work themselves out in our bodily lives. Think of the fruit of the Spirit – for that's where the Bible focuses. They're all inner changes of attitude.

- Change from hate to love.
- Changed from being impatient to patient.

But the only way you ever know whether the changes have happened is through your bodily actions.

Do I need to get a new spouse to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit? Do I have to get rid of my spouse to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit? Of course not. Do I stop physical relations in my marriage to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit? No.

We always look for tests of spirituality different from the Bible's. Why? Usually, because the ones we make up are easier – and they're things we think we can do to impress God. We must always come back to what the Bible says God looks for in the lives of people who are truly His.

Christian spirituality is not avoiding the body. It's not getting out of the relationships we were in. Rather, it's about transforming ourselves and therefore the situations in which we already are.