

St. Andrew**Academy**

1 Corinthians: You think you've got problems!

Week 4

Sex and Marriage at the Turn of the Ages



A brief review – Protecting the colony!

- ❖ Chapters 4 and 5 are about the need for discipline in the Corinthian community
 - What do we make of something like “Drive out the wicked person from among you.”?
- ❖ Here are a couple of thoughts
 - We can hear Paul’s challenge to us all. What we do matters! Do what builds up the community and is a good witness to others. Avoid doing what is not.
 - Recognize that Paul is fighting hard to protect a fragile “colony of the new human race.” Before we are too hard on Paul, we ought to ask ourselves whether we are fighting as hard today to protect and to grow the people of God.



Counsel for those in various marital statuses

- ❖ Chapter 7 has been one of the most misunderstood portions of the NT.
 - Misreadings have led people to think that Paul despised women, thought sex was disgusting, and viewed marriage as no more than a means to cope with lust!
- ❖ But this is not the case!
 - Paul is not writing a treatise on marriage. He is answering specific questions put to him. Again, we have only half the conversation.
 - At times, Paul is quoting the Corinthians back to themselves. The NRSV is a real help in seeing this.
 - As we'll see, Paul has a remarkable, even shocking at the time, vision of the mutuality of marriage.
- ❖ Paul offers advice to those who are married to believers, those who are married to unbelievers, to those who've spouses have died, and even to engaged couples.



Marriage in the Bible

- ❖ The story begins in Genesis 2.
 - Marriage is the union of a man and a woman who become one-flesh. This is part of the creation story; part of God's design for the world.
 - As the Bible moves forward from Genesis, marriage is seen as a covenant, for which the model is God's covenant with his people. This is the remarkable image from Hosea. It is explicit in Malachi 2:14-16.
- ❖ When Jesus is asked about divorce (Mark 10:2-12), his reply begins with the creation story.
 - Since God has done the joining, "man" is not to pull it apart. Jesus pulls the question about divorce into a discussion about discipleship and covenant. Jesus gives no provision for divorce, and hence to remarriage.
 - In Matthew, Jesus provides for divorce in the event of adultery.



Is the real issue here divorce or marriage?

- ❖ Jesus is not interested in the legal permissibility of divorce under Jewish law.
 - He reframes the question for his *disciples*. What they have the *right to do* and what they *ought to do* are not the same thing.
- ❖ Are we a little like Jesus' questioners?
 - We want to talk about the rules of divorce.
 - Instead though, should we be talking about the meaning of marriage?
 - How does "marriage" in the community of Jesus' disciples differ from "marriage" in the outside world?
- ❖ If we keep our eyes on Jesus' understanding of marriage, we'll find it easier to understand Paul's advice to the Corinthians – what he is saying and what he couldn't be saying.
 - Remember, Paul is writing before Mark or Matthew or Luke!



Counsel for those in various marital statuses

- ❖ Advice for married couples (v. 1-7)
 - Maintain sexual relations – abstaining will not make the couples more holy or pure! Paul gives the remarkable guidance that this is to be fully mutual.
 - If the couples decide to abstain for a time of prayer, it is ok. But keep it short and keep it mutual.
- ❖ Advice for widows and widowers (v. 8-9)
 - Stay unmarried. Is Paul a widower himself?
 - But . . . it is better to remarry than to burn with passion.
- ❖ More advice for the married (v. 10-11)
 - Though under Roman law both husbands and wives had the right of divorce, Paul says that Jesus, not Paul, has taken divorce off the table for his disciples.



More counsel

- ❖ Advice for believers married to unbelievers (v. 12-16)
 - Paul makes it clear that he is speaking for himself now.
 - Stay married! The holiness of the believer is contagious! The unbelieving spouse will be made holy through the believer.
 - The believer does not have to stay married to an unbeliever who insists on a divorce.
- ❖ This is the sort of thing that led many pagans to see Christians as destroyers of “family values.” If it comes to it, the Christian is to choose the community of Christ over his or her spouse.



Paul's general rule for the Corinthians

- ❖ Remain as you were when called!
 - Don't try to change your status. If you were uncircumcised, stay that way. If you were circumcised, stay that way. If you were a slave, don't worry about it (but grab the chance to be free if you can!)
- ❖ There are a couple of things going on here.
 - The old world is passing away (slower or faster!). Making all sorts of changes in the present world would be a little like moving deck chairs on the Titanic. Don't go looking for anxiety!
 - In Christ, we have all the “status” we need, there is no reason to run around trying to make a lot of changes (like divorcing unbelievers or abstaining from sex or becoming circumcised) seeking to be more holy. Most of what we think is so important in life really is not – what matters is our status in Christ!



Counsel for engaged couples (v. 25-31)

- ❖ *Remain as you are!*
- ❖ There was a huge grain shortage in the Roman Empire at the time.
 - Paul is probably counseling couples that this wasn't the best time to marry and start a family. They shouldn't be troubled by various pressures to marry.
- ❖ Paul is referring to the present crisis and to the fact that it points us toward the ultimate crisis that will come when Jesus returns.
 - We have to strike the balance between living as if Jesus will come tomorrow and the truth that it is not likely.
 - We shouldn't let so many of the usual pressures in life to rob us of the peace and joy that can be ours in Christ.



Divided loyalties (v. 32-40)

- ❖ These are not hard and fast rules. Paul is not anti-marriage. Apostles are married.
 - Married couples, such as Priscilla and Aquila, whom he met in Corinth, are an important part of Paul's ministry.
 - One can be married and in ministry.
- ❖ But Paul also knows that we can be diluted by divided loyalties and unnecessary anxieties.
 - If a choice *must* be made between the Lord's work and starting a marriage and family, the right choice is God's work. Perhaps the famine going on made all this much tougher than we might imagine. Perhaps some marriages need to be postponed. Perhaps sometimes we can't have it all.



How do we find meaning for us in all this?

- ❖ Christians spend a lot of time debating the “rules of divorce.” Perhaps we ought to spend more time on “marriage.”
 - What are the implications of embracing the marriage of two disciples as a covenant made before God that has as much to do with their discipleship as it does their happiness?
- ❖ We need to see that Paul is cautiously picking his way forward trying to separate his own opinions from Jesus’ commands. What does this say about our own reflections on the “minefields of the faith”?
- ❖ Contrary to what so many Christians are teaching these, Paul embraces a shockingly mutual relationship in marriage.



More reflections

- ❖ Married partners belong to each other, each committed to the others needs. There is no room here for a “me-centered” approach to life.
- ❖ Singleness has dignity and value. Paul even seems to prefer it! Being single allows the person to focus all of their energies on the service of God and others.
 - Marriage is a gift, but not the only gift!
- ❖ Paul reminds us that we are to be holy, that God and God’s matters are to be at the center of our lives.
 - Just imagine – our holiness is contagious! Others can be sanctified (made holy) through us.
- ❖ As in all of Paul’s letters, the understanding of the church as an eschatological community living “between the times” is essential to working out the meaning of our discipleship.



New Testament Timeline

