

Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. 1 Cor 7.17.

The last time I spoke to you from 1 *Corinthians* it was all about sex and prostitutes. That was chap 6. Now here in chap 7 it's yet more sex, and marriage and divorce. With half the congregation divorced, it's all a bit much, isn't it? I don't think I realised what I was taking on when I thought I would preach my way through 1 *Corinthians*. But that is the whole point. People who say that the Bible is irrelevant, don't know what they are talking about. If they actually bothered to read it, they would soon see that it covers every aspect of life, even the difficult and squirm-worthy bits like human sexuality, marriage and relationships. Chap 7 is very long, and if you take time to read it sometime this Sunday afternoon, you will find much good teaching on Christian marriage.

But closer inspection of this passage will shew that it is not really about sex, marriage and divorce. St Paul, who was not married, did not decide he would just write a long chapter to the Corinthians about marriage. There is a deeper question he is trying to answer, and the clue is to be found in 7.1 which, unfortunately the NIV gets completely wrong. Paul is *not* saying, 'It is good for a man not to marry'. He is quoting what the spiritual elite in Corinth are saying and actually being very critical of it. To make the point there really should be quotation marks around it. So:

Now for the matter you wrote about i.e., 'It is good for a man not to marry'.

But even *that* is not satisfactory, because the NIV has made a serious translation blunder. The Greek actually reads: 'It is good for a man *not to touch a woman*'. So the point of chap 7 is not Paul

talking generally about marriage and divorce, but Paul dealing with a specific issue. The spiritual elite in Corinth had got it into their heads that spiritual things were good, and physical things were bad. So, for instance, something like sex was bad, because it was physical. And they, the elite, were better than the rest of the congregation, because they had stopped 'touching their wives' or had even divorced their wives. They had broken off engagements. Weren't they spiritually superior, turning their backs on something low and physical like sex? Weren't they better than the rest of the 'animals' in the congregation?

To all this Paul says here, No, no, no! It was because of this misplaced idea of spirituality that sex was 'unspiritual' that married people were shunning sex. That's why Paul says what he says at v3... Single people were avoiding marriage, vv8-9... Some married people even thought they should divorce altogether to avoid the evils of sex, vv10-11... And those who are engaged (= 'virgins' here) should just not bother with marriage, v36... Paul's advice is that people should stay as they are: if married, then stay married.

There is an added complication here in that St Paul, like all the others, believed that the 2nd Coming was so imminent that there wasn't really a lot of point in settling down and getting married, because the world was going to be wound up anyway, vv29-31... That is a different issue from this view that spiritual things are inherently good, and physical things like sex are inherently bad.

Why does Paul make such a meal of this? And what might this rambling chapter have to say to us today? Some people today still think that somehow you are a better Christian without sex. It's

'dirty'; necessary, but still dirty. That's why the RC church values celibate priests, monks and nuns. Somehow they are on a higher spiritual plain. They even cite vv32-34... I had been a minister for nine years before I was married, but I must say that after I was married, people, women as well as men, really opened up their hearts to me then. One man even said to me just before my wedding, 'Why should you be spared the punishment?'

Chap 7 is important, because it's about far more than marriage and sex. It's about the lordship of Christ over *everything*. You see, by saying spiritual things are good, and physical things are at best unimportant and at worst bad, you are saying that a large part of creation is a) not good and b) not God's. God made *everything*, even sex, and *everything* is good. Indeed, there is a whole book of the Bible, the *Song of Songs* which is an erotic poem between a young man and a young woman, who are crazy about each other. All life's in this Bible. There's nothing irrelevant about scripture.

You see, we all fall into this so-called Gnostic trap. Some of you will be offended today because I have mentioned sex from the pulpit. But why not? Isn't it here in 1 Cor 7? If God can speak about it, why can't we? All the time we separate the sacred off from the secular. This is what we do on a Sunday. We're all religious today, but in the week we get back to normal, as we settle into the secular routine. In church we hold a concert of 'sacred music'. But isn't all music a gift from God? And what about 'religious' art? Why do we keep making this divide between sacred and secular, when everything comes from God, and Christ is Lord of all?

Why do we pray for our Junior Church leaders, but we don't

hold a special service for *all* teachers? Why are we frightened to talk about sex in church? When was the last time we heard a sermon about work - not church work, but ordinary, weekly work? Can you see my point? It's *all* from God, and there is no aspect of life that is not his concern. A famous Dutch theologian once memorably said:

there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'

Spiritual things are *not* better than physical things. Didn't God himself make our bodies? Didn't he himself come to us in a physical body as Jesus of Nazareth? Wasn't he raised from the dead as a *body*? This is where the Corinthian spiritual elite got it so badly wrong.

The whole *world* is God's. We must not make this division between sacred and secular, between spiritual and physical. Nor must we retreat into our little churches and do our little Sunday thing. Christ is Lord of *everything*. So we must get out into the world and lay claim to it for the Lord Jesus.

And we must let Jesus reign in our weekly work, in our jobs, in all our thinking. Worship isn't just singing a few hymns in this little retreat on a Sunday. We must honour him at work, in the week, in the kitchen, and even in the bedroom. All creation, every single part of it, is God's, and Christ rules the lot. Those old Presbyterians got it right in the 1600s when they drew up the Westminster Confession. It begins by asking what is the purpose of life. 'What is the chief end of man?' And the answer is, 'Man's chief end is to *glorify* God, and to *enjoy* him for ever'. What an amazing idea - to *enjoy* God! Not just now in church, but every day, in every sphere of life. Bring him glory *everywhere*! It's all his!