**1 Corinthians Series Notes Week 7**

Once again I’ve left someone else with the duty of preaching so my notes are written from what I think might be useful.

This weeks section is chapter 7 – which is a discussion of marriage, virginity, calling all set inside the idea that the end is coming (verses 26 onwards, ‘because of this present crisis’).

I am going to give you a set of exegetical notes which includes the things I think are important or might be helpful/fun to know, so if you wish to follow a more exegetical bible study as has been done in previous weeks you can. However, I am also going to suggest two areas of discussion that might be interesting: one a sort of thought experiment based on the middle of the chapter; the other discussion around the verses about slavery and freedom.

You can choose which you wish to do and maybe use the other one at a different time or for personal study.

**1 – Thinking about the ‘end of things’ or ‘this present crisis’.**

**Read verses 29-31**

Though this chapter is about marriage, circumcision and slavery, the main argument is that

people should ‘*stay in the situation in which they are called (first met Christ) because this*

*age is passing away’*.

In many ways Paul ignores giving detailed life instructions for the sake of making sure that

people know Christ and are acting as though they are ‘in Christ’ together.

* What situation were you in when you were first called to Christ?
* What might knowing that you are in the end times change about how you practice your faith?
* What issues that the church faces today would you still think are key? What issues would you decide could be left alone?
* What principles from the last few weeks seem most important to the life of the church as you have experienced it?
* Do you think that feeling that we aren’t in the end times makes a different to what we prioritise? Is that good or bad? Has it been damaging to church/teaching you have heard or good that we don’t think of ourselves as being in the end times?

**2 – Discussion – Slavery and freedom**

Look at what is being said in **7:21-24**

How might we understand it in its context?

Paul uses slavery and freedom as examples of living in the end times and In doing so he shifts the real world position of a person into less important than the spiritual reality expressed in a metaphor – ‘slave to christ’.

He’s trying to make slavery a nothing because only spiritual reality is truly ‘real’ – however, after the end times don’t turn up that seems quite callous.

**Wrestling with past usage:** People have used this text to keep slavery as a system going. In a verse that does not condemn slavery or encourage gaining freedom we can see that if we think of Paul as laying down laws for all time someone would be able to use this verse to reinforce their ownership of other humans.

The verses were used in arguments with Christian abolitionists (and there absolutely were Christians on both sides of the slavery debate) to show that Paul, knowing of the use of slavery, not only didn’t have a problem but encouraged slave to make the best of their situation. It would be used in sermons to tell enslaved people that God had given them that position and to seek freedom would be to go against Gods word.

*Do we think that the verse can be read that way?*

*If not, how do we ensure people understand it differently?*

**Wrestling with present usage:**

Pauls privilege as a Roman citizen allows him the privilege of using the status of being enslaved as an example for a bigger concept. I say in the notes below that he uses marriage, circumcision and slavery as his examples in chapter 7 – in all cases Paul is privileged: he is a free, circumcised, single, man. There fore discussions about being ‘free’ from worry in these cases are quite easy.

This is very similar to some of the rhetoric that opposes Black Lives Matter campaigns with the ‘all lives matter’ slogan. It is a place of privilege to be able to use someone else’s live experience as an example in a debate, and to think that theologising that issue makes it easier to live in that situation.

I think white writers have also often read these verses with a privileged eye that sees them as an example to use for our relationship to Christ. I myself have talked about being a ‘slave to Christ’.

I want us to think a little about what that imagery means.

*How different might this verse sound if you are a descended from enslaved people?*

*What does it mean for us to use the example of being enslaved to God at this present time, with the discussion we are all having around the legacy of slavery here and in the US?*

Paul encourages people to be good masters of their slaves in Ephesians and sends a slave back to his master in Philemon. All these were used as examples of why God is not against slavery.

*What might a good slave master be?*

*How do we feel about using that imagery for God?*

A final thought about literal readings, context and wider discussion:

*Is Paul equating Christ with slave ownership or could it be merely an easy example because of the situation in the first century of ‘you are not your own’ which has a wider significance?*

*How then might we still use this verse without damaging those who listen?*

**3 – Exegetical notes on the chapter as a whole.**

These won’t be quite as long as previously because I’ve been ill this week – but hopefully they will still be useful.

I’ve tried to proof read but significant brain fog means they might be jumbled – please email me if something is utterly confused, I probably just missed it.

Chapter 7 is the beginning of a set of sections in the letter which seem to be based on things that the Corinthians have written to Paul about, or have written to him for clarification on. We don’t know which because at times it seems like they have asked a question, but other times that he is refuting something that they have declared to him about their way of life.

The sections are often referred to as the ‘Peri de’ sections because they all start with those two words which mean ‘now concerning’.

The first encounter with that heading is in ch 7 v 1 where Paul says ‘Now concerning the matters about which you wrote’. From that point on when we see ‘Now concerning’ or ‘now about’ it seems to relate to a letter that they sent him.

This is important because of the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians that has been asserted in the first 6 chapters.

We have seen him respond to the reports of others by reasserting his relationship as their apostle and their father in Christ. He now therefore has given himself a position that can speak directly to their behaviour and give commands.

There is much debate about exactly what is going on in Corinth – whether people are too free sexually or are turning away from sex to an ascetic lifestyle – but one thing is clear: Paul considers that they are confused about what it means to be ‘free’ in Christ. Chapter 7 to 10 all deal with ideas of freedom and how that should be practiced. How does one understand their personal freedom in Christ? My opinion is that Paul is always measuring personal freedom against the responsibility to the whole – the body of Christ. It is for that reason that Ch 6:12-20 exist where it does in the letter: it establishes the spiritual and physical link between the members of the body and who truly owns their bodies, so that from then on he can remind them of the responsibilities that come with freedom.

**7 : 1-5**

Though the teaching content of this first paragraph fits with the teaching of the whole of the chapter – marriage and relationships – it is also linked to chapter 6:12-20 through the use of the word ‘authority/domination’.

Paul seems to be refuting a slogan or statement that they have made: it is good for a man not to touch a woman’.

He then discusses – as with chapter 6:12-20 – who they think owns their body. He doesn’t directly refute the slogan, because it isn’t wrong in all cases. He instead uses it to talk about domination or mastery over something. The word used is one of ‘power over’ something. So in 6:12 ‘All things are lawful for me, but I will not me under the authority/mastered by/dominated by anything’, here becomes in v 4 ‘the wife does not have authority over her own body but the husband; likewise the husband does not have the authority over his own body but the wife’.

Remember that the last sentence before this section of teaching was ‘you are not your own’. (ch6:20) So that is fresh in their minds – they belong to Christ, and to the group, not merely able to behave as they would please.

Paul is establishing layers of ownership and within marriage he wishes to make it clear that this, like the relationship with Christ, is one where ‘rights’ and ‘freedoms’ have been given over to another.

He expresses notions of duty in marriage with alarming equality, and also allows that there are times when it is ok to refuse conjugal rights – his only warning is that because of ‘sexual immoralities’ one should make sure that their partner is not deprived.

This equality of statement in Paul’s thinking in marriage is important in pastoral teaching. His focus really is to stop immorality, but given an opportunity to speak on marriage he gives an over-arching ethic that neither owns their own body any longer, but they have given it to the other. He also does not give the command that he could which would say ‘husbands, you own your wife’ ‘wife, you own your husband’; rather Paul’s focus is on the one who willingly gives up themselves for the other. This is an important refutation and balance to those who would use teaching from Ephesians to claim that ‘headship’ in a family means that the husband ‘owns’ a wife in some way. Paul here directs you not to think of what you own, but of who ultimately is the authority over you.

This theme, of ‘you are not your own so sacrifice for someone else’ is going to be important going forward into communal practice. So Paul here, in good Roman fashion applies the same rules to the microcosm of the family as he does to society.

**7:6-7 (and 29-31)**

I have kept these two verses apart as I think they are an addendum that bridges his teaching all the way through to v29-31. It introduces that what he is saying is ‘by concession not command’. Odd phrase that.

It makes more sense when seen in light of verses 29-31 where Paul explains, that the ‘impending crisis’ means that there really isn’t time to worry about these things. For Paul we should stay away from immorality in order to be a holy as possible and ready for the coming back of Christ. A new age is coming that will change everything. “the present form of this world is passing away” (v31) is Paul declaring that these old ways of doing things really wont matter for very long.

It is in this light then that Paul says what he teaches here is ‘by way of concession’ to their need for rules, not by command. He wishes that everyone were gifted to be celibate because it is easier to simply focus on the Lord. These issues of what to do with this body are really of no difficulty for him because he simply serves Christ.

We cannot, and should not, escape Pauls eschatology (idea about the end times) when reading 1 Corinthians, especially his teaching on sexual/marital relationships and (as is touched on in this chapter) slavery, as he simply does not seem to think that people will be around long enough to effect change.

*‘Stay in the situation into which you were called’* is not because Paul sees the gospel as ineffective in issues of social change, but that he thinks there is not time for social change. Jesus will be back before change is possible because the change coming is the passing away of the age – if that is the case, then be as holy as you can in what you have now.

Though in his later letters he may have other ideas, in 1 Corinthians his aim is to maintain holiness for a short time.

**7:8-16**

**8 -9 -** his first teaching is simple – stay as you are. The only reason to marry is to avoid sexual immorality as that would damage the holiness that he is so concerned about. Marriage clearly isn’t a great option as far as Paul is concerned but its better than immorality.

* This is one of the key clues that these are ‘concessions’ due to the ‘impending crisis’ (and that Paul doesn’t know hes setting up a new religion) – no one setting up a religion or community tells people to stay celibate, the religion would die off pretty quickly.

**10-11** – Paul reveals to us one of the things he does know about the teaching of Jesus. He has a Jesus tradition that he taught that divorce was bad, and that remarriage counted as adultery. This also fits with his pharisaic background.

**12-16**  - Paul admits that he is speaking from his own wisdom and differentiates it clearly from the Jesus tradition he has just quoted. It implies that he is careful about quoting Jesus, knowing the power that has, and that his other teaching has also been his own wisdom.

This whole paragraph is the thorny issue of believers married to non-believers – but notice once again that the issue he is worried about is holiness. How is holiness passed on, how is it tarnished or damaged? They seem to have asked (or may be told him ) that men have left their wives thinking that it would be unholy to be in relationship with an unbeliever – and given Paul’s strength of teaching about being members of Christ in chapter 6 it is a perfectly easy assumption to make if he has preached anything similar in past visits.

Here however Paul chooses to uphold the marriage covenant alongside the new joining to the body of Christ. His Jewish understanding of the mutuality of marriage (seen in verses 1-5) is played out here in the discussion of holiness being shared by those who are joined together.

This is a little glimpse into the notion that Paul is not setting up totally new ‘christian’ ways of doing things, rather he is evaluating what already exists in light of Christ. Somethings have to go but what is good and he sees as Godly remains. Jewish ideas of marriage, the law and circumcision all come up for debate in Pauls letters but rarely does he undermine what is already established as holy and holiness – he sometimes expands it to gentile behaviours, but he does not wipe out what is already there. He remains a Jewish man who has had the Messiah revealed to him.

Paul is speaking here to those already married. He is not laying out rules about believer-nonbeliever relationships. Paul doesn’t talk about love in this whole section. His notions of marriage are to do with sexual morality and children. His teaching on staying married therefore leads right into his point in verses 17-24 – stay in the condition in which you were called.

**17-24 –** Paul gets hold of his main point here and uses circumcision and slavery as his examples.

You must stay in the ‘condition’ in which you were called. I think condition is important here because the three uses are

‘single vs married’,

‘uncircumcised and

‘free or enslaved’.

These are three conditions of ownership of the person, and in each pairing one half of the discussion is ‘owned’ by someone or assigned to them and the other half is free.

The married person as we have heard is ‘owned’ by their spouse.

The circumcised person is a member of Israel and therefore owned by God by definition.

The enslaved person is ‘owned’ by their master.

Seeing this focus on ownership makes the complicated verse 22 about how a free person is a slave to Christ into its proper context. He then uses the same phrase from chapter 6:20 to link the entirety of what we have been reading back together.

In the new world order, no one is free. Ownership belongs to God. So all three of the standards tht people might be arguing about and that are key in the ancient world really aren’t important in Paul’s timeline.

Unfortunately they have been to ours. 1 Cor 7 has been used in proslavery arguments throughout the centuries. Though Paul says that ‘if you can make yourself free’ the fact that he encourages the enslaved person to ‘make use of their situation’ has been used by pro-slavery campaigners to enforce the idea of the ‘good slave’ who lets God use them where they are, and back up the idea that some people are born to be enslaved.

Where working to get free was common in the ancient world it was impossible in chattel slavery of the kind practiced by England and the US. Slavery was not nicer in the ancient world, but it was more complex.

Once again, I say that this is why historical context matters. Paul’s edicts on slavery are concessions to get people through to the end times, not teachings to last for all time or to set up a new system of governance.

We have to wrestle with the slavery element in these texts because otherwise it can be read very literally and used to keep people in oppression. Paul at most in his letters asks the owners of enslaved people to treat them well, he never asks for them to set their enslaved workers free. For me this is an indication of the short time frame that Paul envisages as his teaching about the body of Christ makes no concession to human hierarchies so it would be entirely possible for a person who was enslaved in the household to lead in the church – this sort of thing long term would cause issues (similar to women leading) and so we would expect some teaching on how to deal with such things.

**25-28**

Now concerning virgins…..

The virgins here are women and the people he is addressing are men. Virgins should remain as they are ‘because of the impending crisis’ (end of all ‘this’). Men, don’t seek a wife, also don’t seek a divorce. It’s feels like a rushed set of basic statements given to sum up his feeling about ‘staying as you are’ in relation to marriage.

And then he gives his reasons – because those who are married will experience distress in the end times.

**32-40**

Paul is worried about people getting married for two reasons: first, they will have anxieties and pain in the end times; second, the married people cannot give enough time to the Lord.

His concern again is that people choose the route that brings most holiness, and for Paul that absolutely is the one that he himself has chosen to walk!

No surprise there, I think.

Again his caveats are to do with sexual immorality.

There is some not very nice possessive language used in v36 “ If anyone thinks he isn’t behaving properly towards his virgin…” The gist of this paragraph is about male control over bodies and Paul really gives little space to the woman in the scenario – probably because the implication in ‘his virgin’ is a woman already promised to the man so the decision is mainly out of her hands. These are the moments when we see Roman culture coming through in to the discussion. Paul wishes a man to honour commitments if it means that immorality is avoided. He does not wish any man listening to hear that not getting married is better ‘because of the impending crisis’ and then commit acts of immorality. Though the possessive language is there, Paul rules out the possibility of just sleeping with a woman and not marrying her, and thus leaving her as an outcast.

**Verse 40 – and I too think I have the spirit of God**

This weird little phrase is Paul ‘throwing shade’ at someone who has been teaching them, or at them claiming that because they have the spirit of God they can decide for themselves how to behave.

It’s a bit of spite, and a flounce. Paul is annoyed at such a claim and so throws it back at them.

I told you I like 1 Corinthians because it is a very real letter. This is what I mean. Upset Paul gets annoyed and has a bit of a sarcastic moment and a dig at them. He’s not perfect.