

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
1 Corinthians

IV. 1 Corinthians 7:1-40
Marriage and Slavery

1 Corinthians 7:1 begins a new section of the epistle. Now Paul is not referring to matters he has heard about by word of mouth. He is responding to a letter written to him by some of the Corinthian Christians. Almost certainly, as the quotation marks in our English translations suggest, Paul begins by quoting their letter quite directly: “It is well for a man not to touch a woman.”

Paul writes without the slightest hint of romantic intuition. The Corinthians are almost certainly writing to him about the place of sexual intercourse (that’s what “touching” means in this context) within marriage. It seems likely that some Corinthians have thought that as part of their life in the Spirit, as they await the return of Christ, they should simply refrain from sexual relations. Paul cuts to the practical chase. If two married people stop having sex with one another it will be all too tempting for one or both of them to have sex with someone else.

The other issue for married people is the issue of divorce, presumably for couples where one spouse is a believer and the other not. Paul recalls a teaching of Jesus on the subject (an infrequent device in his letters) and counsels against divorce. More than that, consistent with his belief that our bodies have the potential for genuine holiness he argues that when a believer has intercourse with a nonbelieving spouse the result is the sanctification of the unbeliever and not the corruption of the believer.

In general, Paul believes that because Jesus is returning soon people should try to remain as they are. Widows and widowers should not hurry to remarry. “Virgins” (unmarried young women?) should not hurry to marry at all. The advantage of singleness is that the unmarried have more time and energy to devote to the work of the Lord. However, while marriage is not to be encouraged for those who have lost their spouses, it is better than one familiar alternative: “For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” (7:9)

All this leads towards one of the most striking and complicated of Paul's injunctions... Christians are to live as if they were not who they are. The married as if they were unmarried, the mournful as though they were not mourning and the worldly as if they were not worldly at all. Because all worldly things are passing away and the new world is coming.

So stay as you are but without being bound by your circumstances, says Paul. For better or for worse, he thinks this applies to slaves as well. Given the shortness of time slaves should 1) make the most of their difficult condition, and 2) recognize that they are really Christ's slaves and therefore really free.

Excellent scholars tell us that slavery in the first century Greek and Roman worlds was not the same as slavery in the ante-bellum American South, but no African American Christian I know has ever found this very comforting. Perhaps because he is in some ways socially conservative, certainly because he believes Jesus will return in his lifetime, Paul does not make a connection between Christian freedom and emancipation. Many Christians, noting that Jesus has tarried and skeptical that slavery can be compatible with the Gospel, have thought Paul needed stretching here.

Questions for Further Study:

1. How do you understand Paul's instructions to married couples, to widows and widowers, and to "virgins" or "fiancées"?
2. In addition to the exhortation to the Corinthians not to change their status in relationship either to marriage or to slavery, Paul urges the uncircumcised not to get circumcised and the circumcised not to try to cover over their circumcision. This seems to have something to do with not changing one's status as Jew or a Gentile, and the whole chapter may call to mind the baptismal claim of Galatians 3:28. Is this what life looks like for the community of the baptized?

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3. Though the description of marriage is almost totally lacking in romance, are there signs of genuine mutuality—or is Paul’s vision of marriage here hierarchical?
4. Notice the distinction Paul makes between what he has learned “from the Lord” and his own opinion (7:10:7:12). Is this a helpful distinction when we think about Christian ethical practice today?

Questions for Discussion:

1. What can we learn from Paul’s discussion of sexual ethics in and out of marriage? Or is this all so hopelessly bound to his own time that we simply leave it aside?
2. How do you respond to Paul’s general claim that faithful people should not change their social status but should change their attitudes—those who mourn acting as if they rejoiced, those who were slaves as if they were free? Does this leave any room for Christian social action or do we simply try to make people feel better about the status quo?

3. We talk a good deal about an “inclusive” church. Does Paul’s openness to people in a variety of circumstances provide a helpful model of inclusiveness? Are there any limits to how open we should be?

For further study:

Sheila Briggs, “Paul on Bondage and Freedom in Imperial Roman Society,” in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 110-23