

HOW TO LIVE ABOVE AND BEYOND THE WORLD

7¹⁷Only let each one live in the social position to which the Lord assigned him and to which God called him—and these are the instructions I give to all the churches. ¹⁸Was anyone circumcised when he was called? Let him not become “uncircumcised.” Was anyone uncircumcised when he was called? Let him not become circumcised. ¹⁹Circumcision means nothing, and uncircumcision means nothing. [What is important] is keeping the commandments of God. ²⁰Let each one remain in the same status he had at the time he was called [to faith in Christ]. ²¹Were you a slave when you were called? Do not let it concern you—(but if you are able to become free, take advantage [of the opportunity])—²²for he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise, the one who was free when he was called is Christ’s slave. ²³You were purchased with a price; do not become slaves of men. ²⁴Brothers, let each one remain with God in the status he had when he was called [to faith in Christ].

²⁵Now with regard to virgins, I do not have any instructions from the Lord; but, as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy, I give this judgment. ²⁶I think that, because of the impending distress, it is good for a man to remain as he is. ²⁷Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if the virgin marries, she has not sinned. But [those who marry] will experience a greater degree of tribulation, and I desire to spare you [from this]. ²⁹Now I tell you this, brothers, the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ³⁰and those who mourn, as if they were not mourning; and those who rejoice, as if they were not rejoicing; and those who purchase [something], as if it were not their possession; ³¹and those who use [the things of] the world, as not being engrossed in them—for this world in its present form is passing away. (1 Cor. 7:17-31)

Introduction

How would you react if your home was burglarized, all your choice possessions were taken, and you had no insurance coverage to replace any of the stolen items?

When this very thing happened to Jeremy Taylor, he knelt down and thanked God that his enemies had left him the sun and the moon, a loving wife and many friends to pity and relieve his needs, the providence of God, his faith in Christ, his hope of heaven, and his love towards those enemies. (*Our Daily Bread*, 10/5/93)

Here was a Christian man who had learned to live above and beyond the world. Because the world in its present form is passing away, the primary focus of our lives should transcend above and beyond this present world. 1 Corinthians 7:15-31 helps to explain how this can be done.

I. Live Above and Beyond the World, by Practicing a Lifestyle of Peace and Contentment (7:15-24)

In verses 17-24 the Apostle Paul departs from the subject of marriage and addresses a broader matter: How is the Christian to relate to the society in which he lives? In a word, the apostle's answer is, We are to practice a lifestyle of peace and contentment.

In verses 15-16 Paul has already applied this counsel to marriage. In the case where an unbelieving spouse desires to leave the marriage the Christian should let him or her go—so that there may be peace. If the Christian, with good intentions, seeks to keep the unbeliever in the marriage against his will the result will be resentment and contention—the opposite of peace. The apostle's counsel: accept the providence of God by allowing the unbelieving spouse to make the choice they please and pursue the course of peace.

Now in verses 17-24 Paul is applying this counsel, (the counsel to practice peace and contentment,) to other areas and relationships in life.

In verses 18-19 he applies this counsel to the religious and cultural setting: *"Was anyone circumcised when he was called? Let him not become 'uncircumcised;'"* (or, as the N.I.V. gives the translation, *"Let him not conceal his circumcision."*) This is to say, if a man was converted to Christ as a Jew, he need not and must not create upheaval and turmoil by denouncing his Jewish heritage, culture, and identity.

Conversely, *"Was anyone uncircumcised when he was called? Let him not become circumcised."* If a man was converted to Christ as a Gentile, he need not and must not create upheaval and turmoil by denouncing his Gentile heritage and culture by assuming a Jewish identity. Paul explains in verse 19 that in the New Testament era the sacrament of circumcision has become non-essential, having been fulfilled in Christ's death, note Colossians 2:11-12,

"In [Christ] you were also circumcised, by the putting off of the sinful nature—not with a circumcision done by the hands of men, but with the circumcision done by Christ—¹²having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith by the power of God, who raised him from the dead." (Col 2:11-12)

"The circumcision done by Christ" is accomplished by means of our union with Him in His death and resurrection, the sacramental sign and seal of which is baptism.

The basic principle operating here is that, while we must never deny Christ or the Word of God for the sake of "peace," with regard to matters that are non-essential we are not to create unnecessary turmoil, we should seek to promote peace. The example of the apostles makes clear that we are never to deny Christ for the sake of a superficial, false peace:

Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, he said. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood. ²⁹Peter and the other apostles replied, We must obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:27-29)

In verses 20-24 Paul applies these biblical principles, (the practice a lifestyle of peace and contentment,) to the social setting.

Writing to those who were converted to Christ while in a state of slavery, the apostle says, *"Do not let it concern you."* The converted slave was not become preoccupied with his present position in society, (or lack of position;) he should not allow the situation to embitter him or cause him to wallow in self-pity. We must not allow the situation in which we find ourselves to overshadow our relation to Christ or hinder our service to Christ. By the grace of Christ, we are called to transcend our present social situation and lack of position by appreciating the truth expressed in verse 22a, *"he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman."* But Paul does go on to counsel the converted slave, *"but if you are able to become free, take advantage [of the opportunity.]"* Although a Christian slave was not to become pre-occupied with his social condition, and so resort to violence or succumb to self-pity; neither was he to become stoically indifferent and completely detached from this present world. If he could legitimately secure his freedom he was permitted and even encouraged to do so.

In addressing those who were converted to Christ as free men, the apostle reminds them that they have been purchased with Christ's blood to belong to Him as His bond servants, note 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20, *"You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God with your body."* He also urges them not to become "slaves of men"—we are not to conduct our lives or conceal or compromise our Christian faith out of fear of men or in an effort to gain their approval. We may take note of John 12:42-43 as a negative example not to be imitated:

... even among the rulers many believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved the glory [that is] from men more than the glory [that is] from God. (Jn. 12:42-43)

The basic principle operating here is that, as Christians, we must not be a source of social upheaval and disruption for our own personal benefit and advancement. But this does not mean that we should refrain from addressing, and when possible, correcting, the social evils and injustices of our society. Through the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, the LORD declares, *"These are the things you are to do: speak the truth to each other; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your courts"* (Zech. 8:16.) In the Book of Proverbs the LORD exhorts His people: *"Speak*

up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. ⁹Speak up and render righteous judgments, and minister justice to the poor and needy" (Prov. 31:8-9.)

Let us live above and beyond this present world, by practicing a lifestyle of peace and contentment. *"Let each one remain in the same status he had at the time he was called [to faith in Christ]"* (vs. 20.) We must recognize that who we are and where we are is a part of God's sovereign will and plan for our lives—according to verse 20 it is a *"calling,"* the Greek text literally reads, *"Let each one remain in the calling [he had] when he was called [to faith in Christ]"*—subject to change as God opens up new opportunities if He sees fit. We must appreciate that our calling into the kingdom of God and to the status of being a child of God in Christ Jesus takes precedence over every earthly position and no earthly position can compare to it, note 1 Corinthians 3:21-23, *"all things are yours. ²²Whether ... the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all things are yours; ²³and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God."*

II. Live Above and Beyond the World, by Appreciating the Transitory Nature of This World (7:25-31)

In verses 25-31, when he addresses those in the Corinthian church who were engaged to be married, the apostle counsels that the best course for them—especially at the present time—would be to remain single.

Paul recommends this course to them at that particular time *"because of the impending distress."* Was the church undergoing a period of persecution, similar to what the churches at Philippi and Thessalonica experienced?

We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to proclaim to you his gospel in spite of strong opposition ... ¹⁴You, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus; you suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews. (1 Thess. 2:2,14)

Or is there the apprehension that the church is about to enter the period of great tribulation just prior to the return of Christ? Note the apostle's comment in verses 29-31, *"Now I tell you this, brothers, the time is short ... for this world in its present form is passing away."*

From the language the Apostle Paul employs, it seems that he is speaking about the last great tribulation. But if so, how are we to understand this passage? It appears that throughout the course of this present New Testament era there are certain times that may be defined as "peak moments" when Christ's return is especially imminent. That is to say, there are certain moments in history when the social, historical, and religious events of the world are aligned in such a configuration as to make the return of Christ a potentially imminent occurrence.

By way of illustration: When the numbers on a combination lock are properly aligned so as to bring the tumblers of the lock into the unlocked position, the possibility of the lock being actually opened is at such a time an imminent possibility; whereas, when the numbers are not properly aligned, the lock remains in its locked position without the possibility of being immediately opened.

What might be some of the events and circumstances that make the return of Christ an imminent possibility? Judging from the conditions that prevailed during the early first century, we would suggest that they would include one universally dominant government (as was the case in the first century with the dominance of the Roman empire,) the world-wide proclamation of the gospel and the widespread persecution of the Christian church, and the Jewish people situated in the land of Israel. The events and conditions listed above were characteristic of the first century, the very time at which the Apostle Paul declares the return of Christ to be an imminent possibility.

In verses 25-31 the apostle is writing and counseling the Corinthian church from the unique perspective of the time in which they lived: in the providence of God, the world situation made the return of Christ an imminent possibility. Note: Just as when conditions are right for the spawning of a tornado, it is appropriate to sound the alarm, even though the weather patterns may change course and the tornado may not materialize. Likewise, when the conditions of the first century indicated that the return of Christ was an imminent possibility, it was appropriate for the apostle to address the warning and counsel he provides in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.

In such a time of heightened spiritual crisis, when the conditions are especially “aligned” so as to make Christ’s return an imminent possibility, it is appropriate for the church to live a life that is detached from the world as described in verses 29-31a, *“Now I tell you this, brothers, the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ³⁰and those who mourn, as if they were not mourning; and those who rejoice, as if they were not rejoicing; and those who purchase [something], as if it were not their possession; ³¹and those who use [the things of] the world, as not being engrossed in them.”*

But it is **always** appropriate for the Christian to remember the fleeting, transitory nature of this present world and live in the light of eternity. We must heed the counsel of the Apostle John: *“Do not love the world or anything in the world ... ¹⁷The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever”* (1 Jn. 2:15a, 17.) We must imitate the example of Abraham, considering ourselves to be spiritual sojourners in this world and ever looking forward to *“the city that has foundations,”* that is to say, the firm and eternal kingdom of God. The Book of Hebrews describes Abraham’s spiritual perspective as follows:

By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰He did so because he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Heb. 11:9-10)

We must realize that the words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians have a pertinent application to Christian people living in any time in history; namely, his exhortation to use the things of the world, but do not become engrossed in them. This is certainly in harmony with our Lord's own teaching in His Sermon on the Mount: *"seek first his kingdom and its righteousness, and all these things [i.e.; the necessities for living in this present world] will be given to you as well"* (Matt. 6:33.)

Let us live above and beyond this present world, by appreciating the transitory nature of the world.

Conclusion

As we take an honest look at our lives, what do we find? Are we living like the people of this world, are we totally pre-occupied and absorbed with the things of this present world, like those who are without hope and without God? Or, being focused upon Christ our Savior, are we living above and beyond this present world, seeking to live in conformity with our new identity and destiny in Christ? By the grace of God, may we acknowledge and seek to live in accordance with our true and spiritual identity in Christ as it is expressed by the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Colossians:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things; ³for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Col. 3:1-4)