



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1 Corinthians 7:8–24

1 Corinthians

“Marriage Counsel: Part II”

TRANSCRIPT

Well, it’s time for us to begin. Let’s open our class by looking to the Lord in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we, again, are grateful to Thee as we think about the wonderful provision that Thou hast made for us through our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank Thee for the Scriptures that have been given to us and have been preserved down through the centuries so that we might read what Thy mind is for Thy creation and especially for us. We thank Thee for the way in which the plan of salvation is so beautifully set forth by the prophets and the apostles. And we thank Thee, Lord, that Thou hast preserved us by a divine providence so that we’re able to be here and read the Scriptures and by the help of the Holy Spirit, by him who is promised to us as the one who will guide us into truth to understand those Scriptures. And we pray that our meeting this evening may contribute to that end. We pray that the things that are said may be harmonious with the Scriptures that Thou wilt give us the eyes of understanding so that we profit from the things that are written and not from the things that are said. We are grateful for the opportunity and for the occasion. We pray Thy blessing upon each one present, upon their family, upon their interests. And we pray that Thou will supply all of the needs that we each individually have. We commit the hour to Thee.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] Well, we are continuing our study of 1 Corinthians chapter 7 under the very short title “Marriage Counsel” because that’s precisely what it is. The apostle is giving the Corinthians marriage counsel. There are some things of course that undergird everything that he says. For example, it’s clear that he regards marriage as a divine institution and that, of course, is what the Scriptures do say about it. It was instituted by God; it was not instituted by man. And so we call it and think of it as something God has given to us for our good. In fact, as the Scriptures themselves say, it’s a covenant that is consecrated by God. And so when it is entered into in harmony with the Word of God and its teaching, then we can expect that God will bless the marriage relationship.

John Calvin said it is the fountain of mankind. And what he meant by that simply was that all of us are the products of a marriage. And so, in that sense, we are all indebted to this institution. It is truly the fountain of mankind. He also said something that is very relevant for our day because if there is one thing that is clear in our day, it is that the marriage relationship is suffering, and, as a result, society is suffering from the neglect of that relationship as it is set forth in the Word of God. Calvin said, “When the bond of marriage is broken, than which none among men is more sacred, the whole of human society sinks into decay.”

We surely see evidences of that in our society. Our society. Now, of course, I know all of you young people out in the audience will not understand, but we who are older, we can see the effects of the decay in our society from fifty years ago. In fact, sixty years ago. We can see the effects, and they are there. And so one of the reasons for it, we feel—and I think we’re right—is the neglect of the marriage relationship as it is set forth in the Word of God.

Our age is characterized by increasing divorce and separation. And I mentioned last time an article that appeared in one of our national magazines concerning the lasting wounds of divorce. And some of the things that were set forth by this psychologist—so far as I can tell, not a Christian psychologist—as a result of divorce in our society are these: 3 out of 5 youngsters felt rejected by at least one parent, half grew up in settings in which the parents were warring with each other even after the divorce. In fact, I saw in our paper the other day a statement also made in connection with

divorce—I didn’t cut it out—but it was to the effect that not only do parents after they have divorced continue to fight, but the author of the article who was a person who was ministering to such people said that often the results of a divorce do not stop until the persons die. In other words, even after they’ve been divorced and lived for years afterwards, still the effects of the divorce are present.

Two-thirds of the girls, many of whom had seemingly sailed through the crisis, suddenly became deeply anxious as young adults, unable to make lasting commitments, and fearful of betrayal in intimate relationships. Many boys, who were more overtly troubled in the postdivorce years, failed to develop a sense of independence, confidence, or purpose. They drifted in and out of college and from job to job. For some families, divorce ends hostilities; for others, the war escalates. In fact, if there is one lesson that came out of the article and was stated is that divorce does not settle the problems that exist.

So I think that when Calvin says, “the whole of human society sinks into decay when the marriage is not held to be a sacred relationship,” we have empirical evidence for that in our society today.

Now, Paul’s theme in this section of 1 Corinthians chapter 5, chapter 6, and chapter 7 has been sexual irregularity. He talked about the sin that was taking place in the church at Corinth. He mentions in verse 1 of chapter 5, it’s actually reported that there is sexual immorality—which we have defined, because the Greek term means this as fornication—among you, in such fornication as is not even named among the Gentiles that a man has his father’s wife (incest).

Then in chapter 6 he continues and while he speaks with reference to the things that are related to it, he goes on near the end of chapter 6 to talk about, again, fornication in relation to a Christian and his body. Don’t you know that your members—your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not. Or do you not know that he who has joined to a harlot is one body with her for the two, he says, shall become one flesh. Flee fornication, that’s the word the apostle gives us in chapter 6 in verse 18.

So since he has been talking about sexual immorality in chapter 5 and chapter 6, the transition to marriage in chapter 7 is perfectly natural. We understand why. And the specifics and the problems in answer to the questions the Corinthians have asked him are set forth here in this chapter. You may remember—and this is well-known by all who’ve studied the Epistle to the Corinthians—that the apostle is writing for one reason particularly: to answer questions that have been put to him. We made the point that while it’s true that there were people of Paul, of Silas, or of Apollos, of Peter, and of Christ, it’s obvious they still held Paul in great admiration because when they want to know things spiritually, they write to him. And you can tell from the way that he writes the epistle, particularly from now on, that he is answering questions. And the little expression, now concerning, *{peri de}*, in the Greek text is here in chapter 7; verse 1: “now concerning the things which you wrote to me;” and then in verse 25: “now concerning virgins;” in chapter 8, verse 1: “now concerning things offered to idols;” and then in chapter 12 in verse 1: “now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant;” and finally in chapter 16 in verse 1 we read: “now concerning the collection for the saints.” And we have again a “now” concerning in verse 12 and this may be something that they’ve asked him about as well: “now concerning our brother Apollos.”

So Paul is answering questions now. And in the earlier part of the chapter in verse 1 through verse 7 or 8—7—he’s been talking about the fact that marriage is an established relationship. And, furthermore, he goes on to say that a person is to have his own wife and not someone else, each woman is to have her own husband and that they have duties, one to another. In fact, he uses the term “debt.” The husband must render to his wife the debt that is owed her. He’s talking about physical relationships; the relationships that take place in marriage: the consummation of the marriage, the continuation of the marriage in sexual intercourse. The husband owes his wife a debt; the wife owes her husband debt. He warns them not to deprive one another except with consent; that is, with agreement or for a period of time in order that they may engage in prayer. And then they are told by the apostle to be sure to come together again; that Satan not tempt them because of the

incontinence that is characteristic of human nature. Naturally it's built in to human nature that a man should have a desire for a woman; that a woman should have a desire for a man.

Now, Paul even says in verse 6 that he says what he says about being willing to give themselves to prayer for a time and thus depriving one another of the sexual relationship by agreement, that he says that by concession and not by commandment; in other words, it's not required that there be periods of time in which the relationship is not being carried out.

Now, he concludes that statement—that section with a statement that's a puzzle to us still today. He says, “But I say to the unmarried and to the widows (he's talking that—he says this in verse 8) it's good for them if they remain even as I am.

Now, we don't really know what Paul was and how he was at that time. But it's pretty generally agreed, and I think anyone who reads this would come to the conclusion that he is at least single now. We read of no wife with reference to all of the epistles the apostle wrote, and so we don't know why he is a single man now. He may have been married. He may have been divorced, because for a Jewish person to convert to Christianity was a serious, social, and personal problem in Judaism. So he may have been divorced. We know in Judaism, it was law for young men to marry; that is, they were not really expected to but it was part of Judaism to marry. And so he—if brought up in Judaism, the apostle as he was, a leader we should expect probably that he had been married and either that his wife had died or had left him or some other incident had happened that left him a single man. He is probably a single man now, but one cannot prove that. There isn't anything that clearly states it exegetically.

Now, unfortunately, I spent 30 or 40 years doing exegesis of the Greek text of the New Testament, and I have a natural tendency to want to be sure that I can prove why I am saying, and I would like to be able to tell you I can prove that. I cannot prove it. And so we have to say that as far as what Paul was at the time, the only thing we can say is it appears that he was single, but why we don't know. Evidently the Lord didn't think it was something necessary for our Christian living, and

I would imagine that most of us feel that way. I surely agree with the Lord. It’s not necessary as far as our Christian living is concerned.

Now, having said that, the apostle goes on now to talk about some specific cases. And first there comes up the cases of the unmarried and of the believing married people. In verse 8 through verse 1,1 and I hope you’ll listen as I read these verses now.

“But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn. (Now, my text adds the words and they do, I think, give the proper sense: to burn *with passion*.) Now to the married I command, *yet* not I but the Lord (What an interesting statement: yet not I but the Lord. We’ll say something about it in a moment.): A wife is not to depart from *her* husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to *her* husband. And the husband is not to divorce *his* wife (or be parted from his wife).”

If one were to sum up the rest of the chapter, it would be by the use of two adjectives: *better* and *good*. The apostle talks about what is admissibly good, but he urges his readers to consider what is better; and that’s what he means by not marrying: that is, it is better. He will later on explain why it’s better, and we’ll deal with that when we get to it. But it’s good to be married but there is a better social standing and position.

Now, notice right at the beginning “now to the married I command, yet not I.” Now, that’s interesting. And if you notice in verse—let’s see—verse 10, verse 6, he has said, “but I say this as a concession not as a commandment,” and then verse 12, “but to the rest I, not the Lord say,” and then verse 25 he says, “now concerning virgins, I have no commandment from the Lord yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in his mercy has made trustworthy.” Incidentally, that does not mean that you have the right to make judgments like the Apostle Paul. You can say, well, nothing in the Bible is said about this; therefore, I pronounce on it. There’s a lot of difference between an

apostle giving his judgment and you giving your judgment. And then, one other verse here in verse 40, “But she is happier if she remains as she is according to my judgment and I also think I have the spirit of God.”

Now, that might raise some questions about the inspiration of the Word of God and specifically about Paul’s claim to inspiration. I have a friend who is a former student of mine. He’s a pastor now in Missouri, and he says on this point; for he sent me some notes that he’s written, and he said, “On no other subject does God say, ‘Don’t do this but if you do, then here are further instructions.’” That’s a very interesting observation. On no other subject, so he said,—now I don’t know of any objection to it at the moment—don’t do this. But if you do it, here are further instructions. The Word of God usually just says, don’t do this. And you are subjected to the results of your decision contrary to the will of God. But in this case, it’s a little different.

So the apostle is saying some things that are very unusual in this chapter, and we’ll try to talk in a moment about why he talks as he does. But in verses 8 and 9, he says:

“I say to the unmarried and to the widow: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it’s better to marry than to burn with passion.” (To burn is to burn with passion.)

The Jewish people had some very down-to-earth ideas, and they’ve expressed them in some of the rabbinic literature. For example, in Pirkei Avot, the wise men say, “Whosoever multiplies conversation with a woman will in the end inherit Gehenna.” [Laughter] That’s a warning. And then in another place where Rob says to Rabbi Judah as they are walking along a road and see a woman walking ahead of them, “Hurry up and get in front of Gehenna.” Now, what they mean by that is get in front of that woman so that out of sight she may also be out of mind, and thus they won’t be exposed to the temptation; what he has called up here in verse 6, “So that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

So let her remain unmarried. To the married, a wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. You can see the rule is no separation; married or single is optional. You may get married or you may stay single—he likes that, calls that better. Those are optional things, but once you’re married, there is no option. Remaining in a marriage is a requirement. It’s a command. There is no option. The reason for this, of course, is that Paul is talking about the things ultimately that our Lord has been talking about. For example, back in Mark chapter 10 in about verse 11 and 12—yes, it is verse 11 and 12—our Lord is speaking and he says, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” So the rule is: no separation. Marriage is optional. Remaining single is optional. But once you marry, there’s no option. You have to stay married.

Now, H. A. Ironside said that he had heard of people trying to get around this by a subterfuge and say, “Well, I just don’t believe the Lord joined us together. I think the devil did it. I, therefore, think we are free to get a divorce and marry somebody else.” Well Ironside calls that subterfuge. That’s precisely what it is. If you’re married, you are to stay married.

Now, I don’t like to say you are stuck with her, or, you are stuck with him because that suggests that there is something really bad about that. No, it’s not bad. It’s good. And even if you don’t feel that way, it is good, because it’s in harmony with God’s Word and you can count on divine providence if you look to him, working in such a way that in the situation in which you may think that you are very unhappy and would love to get out of and it would be better for you to get out of it; the Word of God says No. And if you stick with it, you will find that God’s providential care of you as a believing person will bring you to the place where you confess it was God’s wonderful providence that I did not get that divorce that I was seriously thinking about.

So the options are one or the other; however, if a person departs—there are just two—even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband; two alternatives. So far as we can tell, if you divorce your husband, those are the two alternatives: stay unmarried or be

reconciled. Now, there are some things that we may say in connection with that in a moment, but we'll go on.

In the case of mixed marriages, the apostle talks about now. So he's moving from marriages and getting married to mixed marriages, verse 12 through verse 16. Let me read these verses:

“But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy (That is, they are sanctified). But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace (tranquility; marriage peace is what he is talking about). For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?”

What strange language to think of a person saving another person. Well, there are one or two other places in the Bible in which that expressed statement is made. The apostle talks about that in Romans chapter 11, as I remember, and another place, also. But what they mean, obviously, in the light of all that is written is the means or instrument of salvation of someone else because of if there's one thing the apostles make plain, it is that no one can save except the Lord himself; but the language is the language of the conversation as this is.

So verse 12 through 16, the case of mixed marriages, I would say—although this is not stated—I would say that the apostle does not have in mind intentional marriages in which a person marries another person with full understanding that they are not a believer. He doesn't say anything about that. And as a matter of fact, our Lord doesn't say anything about that. And Paul could have said, “I'm saying this, the Lord did not say it.” The only thing we can say is to say it is likely that

these same principles would apply in which a marriage is entered to intentionally knowing that the person is not a believing person. What he probably is talking about is a marriage in which two people are married and then one of them is converted and becomes a believer, then what do you do? The old Puritans said, “If you’re a child of God, marry a child of the devil; you’ll be sure to have trouble with your father-in-law.” Well, you may have trouble also under other situations, too.

What is lying in the background of this? Well, probably in Paul’s mind, what is in the background is what took place in Israel’s history. When they went into captivity—were taken into captivity—then came back and Ezra and Nehemiah record the events that describe what happened when they came out of the captivity; came back into the land to rebuild the city and the temple and the walls of the city. And what they discovered, of course, were—was that many of those who had come back—Ezra discovered this in his day. He discovered that many of the people who had come back and of course, also, those I presume who had been left, had married the heathen about them.

Now, what are you going to do about that? So the issue was brought up. You remember Ezra? They carried out a judgment on the matter—kind of a court case—and they determined that they would have to put away all of those wives that they had married among the heathen. The reason for it is plain: because that was a problem with reference to the transmission of the line of God’s elect people; from which ultimately the Messiah would come. And so over a hundred people were put away—I think it’s—reading the last chapter of Ezra—it’s something like that, 113 or -14 were put away. So that must have been in the background of these people who were largely, we may presume, or at least had a strong influence from Jewish people.

So the question arises: when one person in a marriage is converted and the other is not hearing the Word of God in some way, then should the person who has been converted put away the other member of the marriage? If a man is converted, should he put away his wife? If a wife is converted, should she divorce her husband? And so Paul is dealing now with that situation, and it’s clear that he is taking a little different tact from that which Ezra was required to take. The rule: no separation, again.

But three reasons are set forth for this. First of all, in verse 14 we can call this the influence of the saved individual upon the unsaved individual: “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband.”

Now, we have different senses of sanctification in the Bible. There are at least four uses of the term *{hagiazo}* which means “to sanctify.” There is a sense in which the term is used to describe the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing a person to Christ. In 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 the word is used in that sense. In other words, when efficacious grace operates and we have brought to the knowledge of our Lord the working of efficacious grace by which we have brought to faith is called the sanctification of the spirit followed by the belief of the truth. Notice the order—both there and in 1 Peter chapter 1; so that is preparatory sanctification.

And then we read in this epistle in verse 2 of the first chapter that all of the Corinthians were sanctified. Well, if there was one congregation that was not sanctified—outside of Believers Chapel—it would be the church of Corinth because Paul is writing them with all of these problems. And so they weren’t sanctified, and yet they’re called sanctified in the first chapter. And he uses a perfect tense in Greek, which refers generally to an act in the past; the results of which continue to the present moment. So Paul wrote to them as ones who had been sanctified. In chapter 6, verse 11, he referred to sanctification and probably there referred to the work of the Holy Spirit when he brings us to the knowledge of our Lord and sets us apart for Him. In 2 Corinthians, he talks about a sanctification that is progressively operating in our lives. And so we know of progressive sanctification; probably used more frequently in that sense in the Bible. And then finally we are told in the Bible that when the Lord comes, we shall be sanctified. That, of course, is the time in which our condition is the same as our position and our sinful nature is eradicated.

Now, here he uses sanctification in the sense of the believing person in a marriage, because of his conversion—say, the husband—because of the husband’s conversion, the other members of the family are in a sanctified state. Probably what it means is that they have a privileged opportunity by their contact with a believing person. So that if I’m the saved person in my family, my wife and

my children benefit from my conversion, and it can be said of them that they are sanctified by my conversion.

John Calvin says with reference to this, “Therefore this passage is a noteworthy one and based on the profoundest theology, for it shows that the children of believers are set apart from others by a certain, special privilege so that they are regarded as holy in the church.”

Now, a lot of people argue from this that we ought to baptize infants, but there isn’t anything in the Bible that suggests that plainly. In fact, another, Charles Kingsley Barrett, one of the leading New Testament scholars of the day says with reference to this: on the question of whether a child born to Christian parents or to a couple when one is a Christian, Barrett says, “There seems to be no indication in 1 Corinthians or in any other Pauline letter that baptism was administered except to believers.” So, as far as I can tell, this is a special privilege. It’s a special relationship when a child is brought up in a family in which one of the adult members is a believer; that child has a special privilege, a special relationship, special opportunities, and the apostle recognizes them. And for that reason, he says, if a person becomes a Christian in a marriage in which the other person is not, they should not separate. There is enough benefit in this to continue the marriage. I agree with the apostle. Aren’t you surprised? Well, I think there’s a lot of wisdom in that because, in one sense, I am the product of that. And so I feel that this is beautiful advice and I am thankful for those who’ve carried it out in my case.

Furthermore, the apostle suggests another reason. He says in the 5th verse—15th verse, “But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.” In other words, it is desirable that there would be marriage tranquility; peace; peace in the marriage I think he’s talking about. I may not be right about that, but he—because he doesn’t specifically say it, but that seems to be harmonious with the context. So for both wife and children, it’s desirable, Paul says, if one of the members, that is the husband or the wife is converted, they should stay together for the benefit of the other person and the children.

Now, if there's anything that my article that I read to you suggests, it is harmony with that particular viewpoint, because the lasting wounds of divorce—the words of the psychologist without any reference to Christianity and all—this is something that appeared in *Time* magazine—indicate that from empiricism, that is, from experience, this is seen to be true. They should stay together. Divorce is a terrible thing, according to the apostle, and I think experience brings that out, too. Divorces, as my article that I read state, never are final often until death. They're still fighting years afterwards either over the settlement or over other children or various other things that take place. It's a very serious matter. My Christian friends, wives and husbands, to have such a relationship to your husband that you cannot become friends, to be reconciled to one another; it's really a terrible thing that affects not only you, but it affects your children and it affects others who know you as well.

But there is a third reason and that's verse 16. This is a missionary reason. The apostle says:

“For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?”

Now, I think that what Paul has in mind is the thing that Peter has in mind when he writes in 1 Peter chapter 3 a statement with reference to this—this situation. Peter says in verse 1 of 1 Peter 3:

“Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear.”

Fear of the husband? No, fear of God. In other words, submission, according to the Word of God, may be the means by which the conversion of the loved one takes place. So Paul again says,

You should stay together if one is a Christian and one is a not—and one is not, because conversion may result. You do not have any reason for saying it will not take place. So I consider this to be counsel to a wife who has an unsaved husband or counsel to husband who has an unsaved wife.

If—for example, the Lord Jesus seems to suggest that adultery is grounds for divorce. That doesn’t come up specifically here. But if that is true, then the question often arises, Is remarriage an alternative then? Now, Christians fight over this, and there are some good reasons why one can take the position that there is no such thing as remarriage, and there are others who feel—probably the great majority—that there are reasons that legitimate a remarriage, adultery being one of them, and in this case, departure. In other words, if a husband just leaves. And after a period of time—a significant period of time—which reconciliation is sought and there is openness to it, there may come a time in which the wife or the husband, in either case, may remarry.

The word that is used here in verse 15: “if the unbeliever departs, let him depart;” is a word that was used in the contemporary literature of the times for divorce. *{chorizo}* is the word. And there is reason, in fact, a number of cases in which this word—not just one but a number of cases in which this word became the common term for divorce so that if we could—if that is true, we’re not absolutely certain that the apostle understood it that way—but in the period of that time, it was understood that way in the ordinary language of the day. If the unbeliever divorces his wife, let him be divorced. A brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases. In other words, it would be possible for remarriage.

I once had a student write a master’s thesis on that particular point under me, and that was his conclusion that it was possible for remarriage to take place. It’s not—we don’t have time to talk further about it, and I don’t have the wisdom to settle the question certainly, so we’ll have to let it go at that.

And we come to the last part of our section, and this is the general principle that Paul now introduces in verse 17 through verse 24. And listen now to what he says:

“But as God has distributed to each (or has assigned to each, has divided out to each), as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches (In other words, this is general teaching, not simply for the Corinthians, it’s for the Apostolic Churches the apostles is acquainted with and knew). Was anyone called while circumcised? (I’m sorry I was reading that wrong.) Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised.”

There were ways by which individuals who were Jewish who had been circumcised sought to camouflage their circumcision; there was an operation and a [indistinct] that they could undergo that would camouflage the fact that they had been circumcised, because they didn’t like to go into the public arena where they had the baths, and it would come to be known that they were Jewish, and so they did have that operation. But it’s not surprising that Paul should say, Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised, because he’s going to be in a primarily Gentile company before long as a result of the Gentile mission that the apostle was engaged in. And vice versa. Was there anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Now, we can understand why that might take place because the Jewish people were known to claim to be God’s elect people; and they are—as an ethnic group, they are God’s elect people and the time is coming when that election—incidentally the election does not mean every Hebrew, of course, or every Jewish person, it means the elect among the crowd of Jewish people. It will reach its consummation in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises in the kingdom of God upon the earth; what we call the millennial kingdom. So you could understand how a person who was uncircumcised might wish to be circumcised, to be identified with Israel.

I must confess, sitting in my desk sometimes, the thought comes over me; Lord, I think I would have liked to have born a Jew. Now, that’s contrary to his providence for me, of course, but I do appreciate very much the Jewish people because they do, in their position before God, stand as the elect people of God. They’re in disbelief now. They have rejected our Lord. They stand on a

divine judgment—not all of them, though. The early church was largely Jewish. And on the day of Pentecost, largely Jewish people receive the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit which brought the body, which we call the people of God, into a new relationship; a new relationship in the progress of the salvation of God.

So I’m not, however, Jewish. I’m Gentile. Johnson, about as Gentile as you can be, even better than Jones—more Johnsons than Jones, did you know that? More Johnsons than Smiths. Everybody wants to be a Johnson. Now I’m Gentile. [Laughter] Now, I think I was deterred by something that flitted through my mind while I was reading the word there. [More laughter]

Verse 19:

“Circumcision is nothing, uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can be made free, rather use it.”

Now, that can be taken two ways, and I don’t have time to talk about the technical aspect of it. It can be understood, as Paul is saying, if you have an opportunity to be free, take advantage of it. But it also can be understood and many give good reasons for it; in fact, I’m generally persuaded of this, that what he says is that if you are a slave, stay a slave and serve the Lord as a slave; to be the Lord’s slave is what he talks about. But that is a technical matter, and I’d have to—you’d have to understand Greek to understand the problem. And since most of you are wise enough to have passed Greek by in your studies, we don’t have time to talk about it. And it doesn’t really make a whole lot of difference except one case Paul would be saying if you’re a slave and you can be free, take advantage of that, or, if you’re a slave and now you’re in such a position that you can be of particular influence among slaves as the Lord’s slave, take advantage of that situation. Very much like a missionary, he goes out and identifies himself with the people. Identify themselves with other slaves

because this is an opportunity, again, for missionary endeavor. At any rate, let me finish reading it, verse 22:

“For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each remain with God in that state in which he was called.”

One can call this the doctrine of the status quo or the principle of staying as you are. So you can see from the applications that Paul makes that it has a much wider application than marriage; not simply stay in your marriage in which you may be for the moment unhappy. But if you are uncircumcised, don’t try to be circumcised and vice versa. And if you’re a slave, don’t try to be free. Remember God has called you in a particular way—placed by his divine providence, and you have been placed there if God if God providentially controls things for a particular purpose.

Now the term “call” is used here, as you know, three times. Verse 17, “as God has distributed to each one as the Lord has *called* each one;” verse 20, “let each man remain in the same *calling* in which he was *called*”—twice there—and verse 24 or verse 22, “*called again*” and then verse 24, “brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was *called*.”

Now, the call is the divine call. He’s talking about the call from darkness to light; what Peter talks about in 1 Peter 2:9 as the work of conversion by which we are called out of darkness into the marvelous light of salvation. This is a greater freedom than freedom from social slavery. Social slavery was a social injustice in the days of the Roman Empire. But even in such a situation in which, of course, Paul could do nothing, there is a freedom that Christ’s slaves enjoy and also a slavery that they may use as a missionary endeavor to others who are in a like position of social injustice.

Now, he illustrates it in verse 18 and 19 and verse 21 through verse 22, “the slaves to remain faithful (not slavery) but to the call that came *in* slavery; be a faithful slave, the Lord’s free man.”

That’s what he’s particularly talking about.

And what I think this really teaches us is something rather important for our day. Slavery was a social injustice. There’s no doubt about that. The Roman Empire permitted it, practiced it. Other countries did as well; even African countries have—have also observed it or practiced it. And Paul did not ever—as far as I can tell, he never made a statement that approved of slavery. But what we can say, I think, is that Paul saw slavery as no threat to a Christian life. In other words, he didn’t feel that slavery prevented a person from living the Christian life; that he could live the Christian life in a condition of slavery, because he never says anything that indicates that he wants to cause a social upheaval. Now, perhaps that was wise because being such a minority in his day, the Christians would have suffered from that, no doubt.

Well, the applications that I’d like to suggest by this are primarily this one: our problems that we have as persons are not changed by a change of circumstances. That’s so important for us to realize. Our problems are not changed by a change of circumstances; there are two important, crucial ideas expressed here in these few verses. In verse 20 he says, “let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called;” and then in verse 24 he says, “brethren, let each one remain (now notice) with God; with God in the state in which he was called.” Remain, and when you remain, you have the confidence that you remain, abide with God; God is with you in your obedient response to the circumstances that you find yourself in. The facts are that circumstances are irrelevant to leading a life that glorifies God. People glorify God in all the range of personal circumstances. We see it in well-known Christians who’ve had experiences that most of us say, “I never could have survived that experience” and still become a Christian. But they have proved by submission to the will of God in horrible circumstances, difficult circumstances, and also in circumstances that are very tempting, that life with God is possible even then. Abiding in God to Paul is absolutely fundamental.

Now, what undergirds all of this? What is it that makes it possible for Paul to say, “Remain where you are and when you remain where you are, you are remaining with God.” Well, I think if you think about it for a moment, what Paul assumes theologically is the sovereign providence of our great God. In other words, we’re in certain circumstances because of his providence. What is

providence? Well, Dr. Leonard Woods, some years ago, defined providence this way: “The Doctrine of Divine Providence is that all things are sustained, directed, and controlled by God.” That means, your personal situation is sustained, directed, and controlled by God. That’s what providence is. Providence is the foreseeing God who understands all that is to come to pass and providentially deals with those things.

Sir Isaac Newton, a scientist, said, “A God without dominion, without providence and final causes is nothing but fate and nature.” We don’t believe that. We as Christians believe that God is a personal God who possesses the knowledge of things in the beginning and in the end because he’s determined them. And he providentially sees that all of his will is done.

If you want a better authority, I’ll give you another one. “Behold the fowls of the air; they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, yet your Heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?”

Or if you want more people; many people in heaven shout out, “Hallelujah for the Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth.” Sammy Rutherford, who had occasion to lean on the providence of God because he was constantly persecuted, constantly persecuted and driven from pillar to post, found his way into the prisons of the queen and the king. He said, “I adore and kiss the providence of my Lord who knoweth well what is most expedient for me and for you and your children.” And Paul said, “In him we live and move and have our being.”

So assumed, under all of this, is the solemn providence of God, and it’s expressed in the supreme responsibility unto our Lord into whose slavery all of us have been sold by Calvary’s purchase price. That’s what he says right there in verse 23, you were bought at a price. Do not become the slaves of men. We are the slaves of God. We have been bought with a price. We are all slaves. Paul is a slave. We are a slave. Ross Rainey, who has preached in the Chapel, had put on his stationery—when he writes me right at the top it’s Ross Rainey, his address, and so forth, and he has “A servant of Jesus Christ; a slave of Jesus Christ, really.”

All secular conditions, occupations are opportunities for life with God. That’s what Paul means by: stay in the calling in which you have been called and be the object of God’s providential care in those circumstances. Let’s bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word, and we thank Thee for the counsel that comes from the apostle, for we surely need it. There are so often occasions in our lives when we’re very unhappy with the things that have happened to us. And so we fight and squirm and often are the object of the exercise of discipline like little children. We pray, Lord, that Thou wilt give us submission to recognize that we are the objects of a sovereign, loving, providence of God. May the words of the apostle work in our hearts to the strengthening of our Christian character and life.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.