

Have you ever tried reading other people's email? I'm not talking about breaking into other people's inbox, I'm talking about being copied on a email that wasn't written to you. At times, reading an email that was written to you can be incredibly confusing; it's not that we don't recognize the words we're reading, it's that without any context, we're not entirely sure what the words mean.

Occasionally Naomi will receive an email from a long-time friend, and she will say to me "*Mark, you've got to read what \_\_\_\_\_ just wrote.*" But when I open the email and begin to read, it often it feels like I'm joining in a conversation mid-stream...again, I recognize the words, but sometimes the meaning escapes me. The great thing about email is that I can scroll down to see if the person is responding to something Naomi has already written...context is a key to understanding.

It's no different when it comes to reading the Bible; the context unlocks meaning. When we read Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, we do well to remember a few things:

(1) First, we need to remember that it is a letter. Paul was not writing a comprehensive theological dissertation on any given subject, including God. Any student of the Bible needs to understand that there is more to say about God, the church, and relationships than Paul says in 1 Corinthians. In fact, he does say more in other letters, but his words need to be seen along side the rest of Scripture.

(2) And second, we need to remember that Paul's letter has not come out of thin air. The words we read were inspired by God, in other words, these are God's words (through Paul) to the church in Corinth. But we need to keep in mind that these words were written

for an original audience. This is a letter aimed at a particular people, in a particular time in history, with a particular set of questions and circumstances. What I'm driving at is that these people had a context.

As I approach our text this morning, I have been forced all week to do so humbly. As I've studied this text, I've become aware that there's a back story going on that we can't completely reconstruct; we're not exactly sure what situation Paul was responding to. Paul wrote concerning singleness, marriage, and remarriage but he framed his counsel in light of an unnamed "*crisis*;" he counsels in light of the fact that "*the time is short*"...the difficulty is that he doesn't explain what he means. The text leaves us with some ambiguities.

So this morning, as we approach 1 Corinthians 7:24-40, lets do so with both humility and expectation, because I believe that in spite of some ambiguities there is a word from the Lord for us today. If you have your Bibles, please turn with me to 1 Corinthians 7:24-40; if you are using the Blue Bibles in front of you, you can find our text on page \_\_\_\_\_.

*24 Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. 25 Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. 26 Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is.*

*27 Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. 28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not*

*sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.*

*29 What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; 30 those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; 31 those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.*

*32 I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. 33 But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— 34 and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. 35 I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.*

*36 If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. 37 But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. 38 So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.*

*39 A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. 40 In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.*

By a show of hands, how many of you have a Facebook account? Those of you who raised your hands are not alone, in March of this year Facebook administrators estimated that there are over 901 million users.

If you are one of my Facebook friends, you are probably really disappointed; I rarely update pictures, and almost never change my status. But for people who I haven't seen in decades, they can go to my page and quickly find out that I live in North Vancouver, I'm a pastor at North Shore Alliance Church, and I am married to Naomi Peters.

Facebook has worked hard to creatively connect people to the details of our lives, and that includes our relational status. Just how important are relationships? Relationality is core to what it means to be human; we've been created in the image and likeness of God who is Himself the ultimate expression of relationality: He exists as Father, Son, and Spirit.

If you ask a person about their greatest joys in life, more often than not they will point to a significant relationship. Conversely, if you ask someone about their greatest disappointments or regrets, they will often point to the breaking of a relationship. Consider this, when a prison warden is forced to punish a violent inmate, they put them in solitary confinement...the absence of relationship is enough to break the most hardened offender.

On my Facebook page, my relational status is married “but” Facebook allows for a wide range of options: single, engaged, married, widowed, divorced, in a relationship, or you can simply select “*it’s complicated*.” Relationships, and our status, can be complicated; when it comes to relationships, none of us have all the answers, and none of us can predict or control the outcome of the relationships we are in.

In verses 25-40, Paul turned his attention to those who were single, or engaged to be married; the church he wrote to was comprised of the same mix of people that attend our church: those who are single, married, widowed, divorced, and engaged. For them, just like us, relationships were complicated, and so Paul offered some counsel to help them discern what to do and how to live in their present circumstances.

This morning I want to zero in on vs. 29-31, but before I do I’d like to make a couple observations on the larger text.

**(1) First**, Paul’s makes it abundantly clear that for those who have never been married before, choosing between singleness and marriage is not a matter of right and wrong. That may sound obvious enough, but I’ve talked with a number of singles who languish in indecision because they’re not sure what God wants for them. In verse 28 Paul writes, “*Are you [engaged] to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned*”.

We can honour the Lord whether we are single or married, but it seems that Paul offers his counsel from a particular vantage point that we can’t quite reconstruct.

In verse 26, Paul mentions a “*present crisis*;” he doesn’t elaborate on the nature of the crisis, presumably because the Corinthians know exactly what he is referring to. But in light of this “*present crisis*,” Paul suggests that the Corinthians might want to consider singleness as a good option.

In verse 28 Paul wrote that “*those who marry will face many troubles in this life*;” this is not a general reference to the challenges of married life...he’s talking about the difficulty of marriage in light of the “present crisis.”

It’s important to note that nowhere else does Paul talk about marriage as being like a ball and chain around one’s neck. In fact, in Ephesians 5 Paul talks about the marriage relationship in glowing terms; he compares marriage to the relationship between Christ and the church. Paul is not anti-marriage.

So what is this “crisis”? Many have suggested Paul is referring to persecution. In this period of history, Christians began to face persecution from both Jews and Romans. Some were beaten, imprisoned, exiled, and killed. In the face of such persecution, it’s challenging enough to remain faithful and focussed on God when you only have yourself to worry about.

Paul was writing as a pastor to a group of people he knew and loved. In verse 28 he wrote, “*I want to spare you*” from trouble. In verse 32, Paul wrote, “*I want you to be free from concern*.” In verse 35, Paul says, in essence: “*My counsel has your best interests in mind, but I’m not trying to put a noose around your neck...you are free to marry, or to remain single...either one will honour God*.”

Paul's counsel to remain single in the face of crisis (persecution) may not have application to present-day Vancouver, but this word is directly applicable in cities all over the world. But Paul's encouragement toward singleness has application beyond the context of persecution; it's here that I would like to make another observation.

(2) To quote Richard Hays, "One of the most important messages of this text for the church is that the single life has dignity and value."<sup>1</sup>

Two big mistakes have been made in the church with respect to singleness: (a) the one is to elevate singleness, holding it out as a way of attaining to a superior spirituality; (b) the other mistake is to view singleness as being unhealthy and abnormal. In the history of the church, both mistakes have been made.

Paul argues that for some, it is better to remain unmarried and not simply because of persecution but because the single life can allow Christians more freedom and flexibility to serve God. Paul isn't saying you can't serve God if you're married, or that singles are the ones who can love God the best. What he does say (vs. 32-35) is that a single person is not concerned with the needs of a spouse, and thus, they can choose to devote more time to the Lord.

**Illus:** There is dignity and value in singleness, but there is also significant loneliness. I have quite a few single friends, many of whom would love to be married. Over the years my friends have

quietly shared how challenging it can be to go home after a long day and be faced with the prospect of cooking dinner for one. Or, to get excited about a two week holiday, when they can't find anyone who go with them. Or, to be out at an event and encounter something funny, outrageous, incredible, but have no one to talk about it with on the way home.

In the West, I'm not sure we do "family" very well. We value independence and privacy so highly that having your own house/yard is more "important" than living in community with one another. In many homes we have children that are dying to get out of the house when they graduate, and parents are dying for the freedom that will come when they do.

The reality is that the vast majority of the world lives very differently: mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, and grandparents all living under the same roof. If we did family better, or at least different, perhaps singles could retain their dignity without all the loneliness.

Jesus had a very different understanding of "family," one that I believe He intended to be reflected in the church; we read about it in Mark chapter 3.<sup>2</sup> Jesus was teaching in a home that was jam-packed when His mother and brothers arrived outside. They couldn't get in and so they sent someone to call Jesus to come out. The messenger said, "*Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.*"<sup>33</sup> "*Who are my mother and my brothers?*" [Jesus] asked.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Hays, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: 1 Corinthians*, 132.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 3:31-35

*34 Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."*

When we give our life to Jesus we become a part of God's family, and God intends for His family to have a tangible, flesh and blood expression...it's called the church. When we give our life to Jesus, it's not that our nuclear family loses all importance, it's that our relationship with Jesus becomes the defining relationship in all of life.

And what that means is that we are thrust into a whole new world of brothers, sisters, mother and fathers. When the church is working right, there are no only children and there are no orphans...we open our hearts, our homes, and our lives to those who are our family in Christ. If we did family better, perhaps singles could retain the dignity of their status without all the loneliness.

**Living From a Jesus perspective:** In the time remaining, I want to touch down on verses 29-31 and think with you about how to live in the present from a Jesus perspective.

*29 What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; 30 those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; 31 those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.*

Over the centuries, many have wondered at Paul's words "*the time is short;*" what did he mean? Was Paul preparing for the end of the

world? Some think so; in nearly every century since Paul, people have made some bold prediction that Jesus would return in their lifetime. If you're looking for a lousy book to read read, you should consider picking up "*88 Reasons Why Jesus Will Return in 1988;*" it sold 4.5 million copies...I'm sure you could pick one up for cheap.

When Paul said that the time was short, I'm not convinced he was referring to a quantity of time; he hasn't pressed "start" on his stopwatch. What Paul knew was that Jesus could come back at any moment, and so, he wanted to live his life in joyful, purposeful, missional anticipation of His return.

We have to take what Paul says here metaphorically, otherwise he is blatantly contradicting what he said earlier in this chapter. Paul has encouraged husbands and wives to live in mutual submission and to meet one another's needs...but in verse 29 Paul writes "*From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not*".

Here's what's going on here...Paul is encouraging the entire church (singles, marrieds, divorcees, widows and widowers) to live from a Jesus perspective. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, a new kind of life, the life of heaven is breaking into our world; the old order of things is passing away. Since sin has been dealt with, and death has been, is being, and will be defeated, we need to look at life from an entirely different perspective...a Jesus perspective!

And so, husbands and wives aren't to live in a marital fishbowl, forgetting that Jesus has called them to His mission in the world. Paul calls us to attention...the time is coming when Jesus will return and so whatever we are facing (or feeling) won't last forever...our tears will turn to joy, our weeping will be done away with.

He reminds us that life is more than buying and selling: when you buy something, don't hold onto it very tightly...it isn't yours, and it won't last. And as we engage in the world around us, we need to be ever mindful that all that we see is not all there is to see. We live in this kingdom, but we were made for another...the kingdom that God is bringing even now.

Friends, if the world in its present form is passing away, then we can either live the life of the future now, or, we can live a life that is already dead and dying. Living from a Jesus perspective ensures that the life we live in the present is making an investment in the life to come.

I know that I am talking somewhat mystically, but the life I am talking about, life with Jesus, is supernaturally ordinary. Jesus invests the "ordinary" rhythms of our life with His extraordinary presence. For instance, He can meet us in our everyday relationships and give us the grace to love, to forgive, to listen, and to serve.

Jesus can meet us in our work and give us the grace to work diligently whether someone is watching or not. He can give us the grace to deal rightly with our teachers/bosses/employees/customers. Jesus can live through us in our work so that attention is drawn to Him.

Jesus can meet us in our yard-work, or housework, or raising kids; Jesus can fill the most mundane moment/task with an awareness that He is present.

Jesus can meet us in our creativity, so that what our minds/hands produce becomes one more evidence of His creative brilliance. Jesus

can even meet us in our sports activities, so much so that our skills, our attitudes, our commitment to "team" all reflect His values, His kingdom.

Jesus can meet us, love us, and use us right where we are regardless of our relational status; we don't need a change in our status in order to live for Him. We don't need a change in our circumstances in order to live for Him.

You can live for God as a high school student. In High School you are surrounded by other students who have only heard Jesus' name used as a swear word...you can be the one who demonstrates that Jesus is brilliant, loving, powerful, and relevant...why not you?

You can live for God as a retiree, or a divorcee, or as a married man or woman, or as a single person. Loving, forgiving, listening, serving...none of these are dependent on our relational status...we can put them into practice in whichever relationships we have.

If you are single, don't be concerned that somehow you are living a Plan "B" life; you can live for God right where you are. God knows you, He knows everything about you; He knows your heart, He knows your desires, He knows your disappointments. Maybe God has in mind to bring about a change in your relational status, but leave that to Him, you can live for God right where you are.

And if you are married, you're not living a Plan "B" life. Love your wife (or husband), and pour into your kids; loving your spouse, and pouring into your kids is a part of bringing God's kingdom to earth.

But pay attention: you can be so consumed with your spouse, or your kids that there is no room for Jesus' transforming presence. Moms and Dads are constantly tempted to abdicate the role of "parent" in order to be their child's "best friend." Parents are constantly tempted to gratify every desire of their child's heart but that kind of "parenting" fosters a spirit of entitlement. We don't live for our kids, we live for Jesus, and our kids need to see it!

Being married doesn't make you any more important to God, and being single doesn't make you less important. And for those who have experienced separation and divorce, Jesus wants you to know He didn't love you any more when your marriage was still thriving; your relationship status could never affect how much loves you.

The last 3-4 weeks we've been walking through 1 Corinthians 7, taking note of what Paul says to those who are married, those who are divorced, those who have been widowed, and to those who are single or engaged. But the danger for us in all of this is that that we like categories, we like boxes, and once people have been separated into their relational "box" we tend to leave them there.

Even while Paul was giving specific counsel to specific subgroups within the church, we need to keep in mind that Paul had one basic unit of relationship that encompassed them all: family...together, we are the family of God. Like any nuclear family, we didn't necessarily choose one another, but we are family...and it's time for the Western church to rise up and embrace our identity.

All of us need brothers and sisters, father and mothers, grandparents...and likely those of us who don't feel any sense of "need" are those who have the greatest need.

Jesus can meet us, love us, and use us right where we are regardless of our relational status; we don't a change in our status in order to live for Him. But neither should we need a change in relational status in order to experience a sense of "belonging" in the family of God.

Jesus said that people will know we are His disciples if we love one another. Let me encourage you to open your heart, open your home, and make room for the family seated all around you. If you're not connected beyond the weekend service, likely your experience of our family is going to be very small. As you think about the upcoming Fall, I want to encourage you to think about getting connected to one of our small groups, where you can begin to practice "family" week after week.

As we conclude our service this morning, and our time in 1 Cor. 7, I want to remind you that because of the great love of God we have been adopted into His family; Jesus has made a way. As the worship team comes we are going to celebrate the love of God, and trust that as He fills us, we can pass on His love to one another.