

Maintenance Required
Lesson Five - Asceticism
1 Corinthians 5-6

Intro:

What is asceticism. It is not a word that we hear often in our American context but it is a theological term that impacts the way in which we view life around us.

If you are not familiar with the word Asceticism or its definition, I am sure you are not alone. Essentially, asceticism is the rejection of or the abstaining from earthly desires, pleasures, and circumstances in order to achieve a greater spiritual experience that would subdue all earthly passions.

This is the type of thinking that gave root to the monasticism of the middle ages which led men to forego marriage and worldly occupations, giving themselves over to isolation and poverty dedicated to spiritual enlightenment through Bible reading, prayer, study, and even physical punishments on the physical body.

The main driving force behind this line of thinking is that all physical desires of this world were sinful and must be removed from our lives in order to please God and reach heightened spiritual enlightenment.

While this type of asceticism is not common practice in our culture beyond perhaps those who are catholic or orthodox, Mark Dever warns in his book that American culture often times falls into the opposite ditch: Earthly pleasures and circumstances become what is all-important.

"circumstances are all-important, and when we think this way, we naturally conclude that the problems we have will be solved by simply changing our circumstances. In this we are a bit like an ascetic (one who practices asceticism). We think of our marital status and our employment as the all-important aspects of our lives, the things that shape and determine our goodness, happiness, satisfaction, and general usefulness to God. And today, when these areas of our lives are not going well, we don't seek to renounce them; we seek to change them. We think the answers lie in having different worldly circumstances. So we confidently, restlessly, maybe even desperately act to change our situation. We seek a new job, a new social status, a spouse, or, if we already have one, a different spouse.¹

¹ Dever, Mark. 12 Challenges Churches Face (9Marks) (p. 66). (Function). Kindle Edition.

While on the surface these two positions seem to be two unrelated problems, at their core they share the same root problem and assumption: that our spiritual well-being depends primarily on changing our worldly situation.²

In chapter 7, Paul is responding back to specific questions that are being asked by the Corinthian church that have been prompted by the unhelpful false teaching that has arisen in the church.

Paul uses the opportunity to provide the Corinthians with the proper view for the circumstances of this life: not one of removal or uncontrolled pursuit, but one that submits them to an eternal focus.

The Question of Marriage - V. 1-16

As we begin our passage, it appears that the false teaching that Paul is seeking to correct -this asceticism seeking to create a higher spirituality - has primarily been focused on marriage within the body of Christ.

Paul starts off by highlighting the teaching that had been occurring there in Corinth - It is good for a man not to touch a woman. It appears that there had arisen in the church the idea that intimacy between a husband and a wife was not spiritually good, that spousal intimacy was sinful.

We can see the importance of answering this question as it brings into question the whole concept of marriage for this church.³

Beyond this, it appears that there was also teaching that believers who were married to non-believers should leave their spouse or at the minimum not have intimacy with them.

Paul addresses the first concern of intimacy in verse 2-4 bluntly - To avoid fornication and immorality occurring in the body, husbands and wives should faithfully give themselves to each other in love. Paul goes even a step further by stating that each spouse owns the body of the other - they are no longer their own, but one flesh together. This would have been a revolutionary concept in the greek culture of a woman owning anything much less the husbands body.

Paul then, because the sexual aspect of marriage is so important and is a gift from God, stresses that abstinence in a marriage covenant should be only for limited times

² Ibid. (p. 66). (Function). Kindle Edition.

³ Ibid. (p. 68). (Function). Kindle Edition.

and for a specific purpose. Paul upholds the importance of marriage and the goodness of the gift of sex within the bounds of marriage.

It was not a sinful, but a glorious gift from God that He created for our enjoyment and betterment when experienced within the boundaries of marriage.

“Paul is not giving reluctant concession to the enjoyment of sex; it is the abstinence he concedes to.”⁴

After mentioning the benefit he has of serving God in singleness and his desire all believers have such freedom and benefit in verses 7-9, Paul emphasizes that is not sufficient reason for one to leave their covenantal marriage. Paul also gives instructions for how the church should handle those who have been divorced or widowed. How should the church respond to their desire to remarry.

By instructing believers to remain committed and faithful to their unbelieving spouse, Paul upholds the sanctity of marriage before God, reminding us that it is not just sacred for believers, but all marriages (one man and one woman) are sacred.

Paul then addresses how believing spouses should treat their spouse who is unbelieving. Strict Asceticism sought to end these relationships as connection to an unbeliever would have been viewed as negative impact on one's spirituality.

How does Paul respond to this charge in V. 10? He forbids those who are married to an unbeliever from divorcing or leaving them.

Paul notes that if there is a desire by the unbelieving spouse to stay married, then the believing spouse should continue faithfully in their responsibilities as a spouse. Why? As a means to draw them to Christ, as Paul mentions in v. 14 and 16.

The Call to the Right Focus - V. 17-23

Here, the rubber meets the road in Paul's correction of their understanding. Their physical condition or circumstance did not elevate or damage their ability to grow spirituality.

The ditch of Asceticism says you must remove yourselves from these things completely (marriage, intimacy) in order to be more spiritual. The other ditch of materialism or

consumerism says if I just find the right circumstance, then it will all fall into place and I'll be able to be more spiritual.

This portion of the texts shows just how similar both positions are in their assumptions. As Dever points out, both groups are treating their circumstances as if they are decisive, and Paul says you can be spiritual regardless of if you are married, or single. Whether you are married to a believer or an unbeliever.

"The ascetic says, "If I renounce marriage, I'll become holy." The modern person says, "If I find the right marriage, I'll become happy.""⁵

While some are to remain in their singleness for the glory and service of the kingdom as Paul mentions in this passage, that is not a requirement for everyone. While some are to take partake in marriage, Paul wants them to understand the seriousness of that role along with the unique challenges that represent that are not present for the single individual.

If Paul is saying that it is better to be single as they are able to have a greater focus on God, how does that make him different from the Ascetic? Isn't he saying the same thing?

The answer is no, because Paul specifically encourages those who are married to stay married, those who desire marriage to get married, and for those in marriage to pursue intimacy together. It is not about the denying of pleasure that Paul has his preference, but to encourage God-centeredness which is not exclusive to either group.

So what is the right focus centered on?

1. Our call to God is our primary focus regardless of our earthly situation.⁶

Paul's command to the churches was to continue in the circumstance in which God called them. To remain faithful to Him above all else. To pursue spiritual holiness and uprightness regardless of their status in society.

In verse 18-19, Paul uses the illustration of Jewish cultural identity to drive his point home. If you are circumcised, becoming a follower of Christ did not require you to undo that. If you weren't circumcised, becoming a follower of Christ did not require you to change that.

Their physical condition did not give credence or elevation of their spirituality.

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Paul then uses another illustration in verses 21-24 - those who were in servitude vs those who were freemen when they came to Christ. Paul instructs them that their position as a servant did not limit their ability to follow after Christ. He encourages them to take their freedom when possible, but does not limit what God can do through them.

Likewise, those that are freemen are able to be used by God and are able to pursue spirituality unhampered. Why? Because our circumstances are not decisive over our spiritual growth.

Regardless of our position and circumstances, Paul commands that we ought to pursue Christ. We do not achieve a higher level of spirituality if we working in a church vs a bank. Both can pursue Christ. We do not achieve a higher level of spirituality if we refuse to have any hobbies, activities, or enjoyments.

"The rule Paul gives for believers everywhere and in every age is that their calling to God is primary, whatever their situation in life."⁷

2. The reality that our current circumstances are not ultimate.⁸

We must recognize that this world and its circumstances are not the end goal for us. We live life freed from that burden of the here and now, because we live in view of eternity.

"My Christian brother or sister, stop focusing on your worldly circumstances. Of course, our non-Christian friends may define themselves completely by such circumstances, but that's because they think that is all there is. But you know better!"⁹

We must learn to not fall into either ditch - that a withdrawal from this life and good of God's creation will grant us greater spiritual enlightenment or that working ourselves into specific circumstances will provide us greater happiness or contentment beyond what we find in Christ.

We embrace our purpose of living after Christ in freedom as His servant. That is what will provide us spiritual growth. That is what allows us to live a life of glory to Him.

⁷ Dever, Mark. 12 Challenges Churches Face (9Marks) (p. 75). (Function). Kindle Edition.

⁸ Ibid. (p. 75). (Function). Kindle Edition.

⁹ Dever, Mark. 12 Challenges Churches Face (9Marks) (p. 76). (Function). Kindle Edition.