

3.1 Sex, Faithfulness, and Freedom

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[0 : 01] But we're going to turn now to our Bibles. We're looking in Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, 1 Corinthians. Josh has been leading us through this in sections and last couple of weeks we've been in chapter 5 and 6.

We've come this week to chapter 7 or at least the first part of this long chapter. We're going to read from the beginning through to verse 24. And it's not a straightforward section this, so listen carefully as we read and then as Josh deals with it in a little time.

Paul has been writing about issues that the Corinthians seem to have brought up to him. They ask him questions or they've made statements and he's answering them. We saw that last week.

There was a whole lot of issues about people suing each other in the church. And Paul's dealing with that and saying this really shouldn't be. And then he's dealing with issues of sexual immorality. And in a sense that theme carries on now into chapter 7 as he's talking about issues to do with that and to do with marriage and so on. But all of it within the context of what are the real priorities and the overriding priorities for Christian people.

[1 : 25] As we wait the coming of the Lord and as we live not just for now but for eternity. So chapter 7 then at verse 1. Now concerning the matters about which you wrote.

You said it's good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But because of sexual immorality. The words temptation to are not really in the text there.

But because of sexual immorality each man should have sex with his own wife. And each woman with her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband.

For the wife does not have authority over her own body but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body but the wife does.

Do not deprive one another. Except perhaps by agreement for a limited time that you may devote yourselves to prayer. But then come together again. So that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

[2 : 31] But as a concession not as a command. I say this for I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God.

The one of one kind and the one of another. So to the unmarried and the widows. I say that it's good for them to remain as I am or as I do literally.

But if they're not exercising self-control. And it's not if they cannot exercise. He's saying if they're not exercising self-control. In other words if they're involved in sexual relations already with somebody.

Well it's better to marry than to be a flame. And again the words with passion there are not in the text. It's a difficult text and so each translation adds in things to try and explain it.

But it's better to marry than to be a flame. To the married I give this charge. Not I but the Lord. The wife should not separate from her husband.

[3 : 35] But if she does she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And the husband should not divorce his wife. To the rest I say.

I not the Lord. That if any brother has a wife who's an unbeliever. And she consents to live with him. He should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever.

And he consents to live with her. He should not divorce him. But the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife.

And the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean. But as it is. They're holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates.

Well let it be so. In such cases the brother or the sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. Wife. How do you know whether you'll save your husband?

[4 : 40] Husband. How do you know whether you'll save your wife? And now here's the principle. Only let each person lead the life. That the Lord.

Has assigned to him. And to which God has called him. This is my rule. In all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised?

Let him. Not seek to remove the marks. Of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Well let not him seek circumcision.

For neither circumcision counts for anything. Nor uncircumcision. But keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition. In which he was called.

Were you a slave when called? Well don't be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom. Well avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who is called.

[5 : 36] He who was called in the Lord as a slave. Is a freed man of the Lord. And likewise he who was free when called. Is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price.

You don't become slaves of men. So brothers. In whatever condition. Each was called. There let him remain.

With God. Amen. May God bless us. His word. Do turn your Bibles again.

To 1 Corinthians chapter 7. It is so very easy for us to look for a big solution.

Through a change in circumstances. Family life is difficult. Maybe a change of city. Maybe a change of church will be the answer. Feeling a bit unhappy.

[6 : 38] Maybe a new job will give me a better life. I'm in a rut. Maybe a new spouse might help. If only I had that lush looking grass over there.

That must be what the grass in Eden looked like. Well how often does that work out? The Corinthians seem to be applying this kind of thinking to their spiritual lives.

A change in circumstance. That's what we need. That's what will elevate our spirituality. And so what we find in chapter 7. Isn't disconnected from the incest.

The prostitution of chapters 5 and 6. And it isn't as far a jump as it seems. That the Corinthians are making a mess. By both having sex when they shouldn't. And not having it when they should.

The same issue is behind both. And it's the same issue behind certain attitudes to divorce. Whether to marry or not. 1 Corinthians chapter 7 is not the Christian's pocket guides to relationships.

[7 : 44] It's not a case of check the index. Find my relationship status. And receive the wisdom for me personally. And then switch off from the rest. Because it doesn't matter.

Of course Paul is speaking about relationships here. Yes. But his message is born out of the same Corinthian disease that we've been seeing all along. And so it's a message for the whole church.

The Corinthians think that they're mighty. They think they're the winners. What they long for and cherish in this world is status. Winning. Being the best.

And so if you need to wish your circumstances away. If you need to change. Then you do that in order to chase after the status of being true spiritual giants.

Kings. Successes in this world. Go and get the greener grass. If it will make you win at this life. And so I think the background to this chapter.

[8 : 45] Is a pressure to change circumstances. In order to prove your spiritual credentials. Change your circumstance. And better your life and your spirituality.

But yet again. Paul is having none of this Corinthian disease. The answer for a fulfilled and flourishing life. Is not in our circumstances being rearranged. It's in concern for righteousness.

Whatever our circumstances. That's why Paul says three times in these verses to remain. Remain in the position we're called to. The Lord knows. He's put us there.

It's not beyond his control. They're not the problem. Now before we get into the detail of the text.

One final waggle on the T.

This is a long chapter. With lots of nuance. Paul mixes commands with some concessions. And occasions where wisdom is required. And so in some senses.

[9 : 42] It's probably the least forceful in the whole book. He recognizes that sin exists. And we can't magic things away as if they hadn't happened. But what's important is making them right here and now.

Not trying to alter the past and wish it wasn't the case. But to make things as right as possible in the here and now. And so the truth is that with all this.

We can't possibly exhaust all the different permutations. That we've come up against in this chapter. It's worth knowing that as we start. But even with all the nuance. There is one thing that Paul is absolutely clear on.

The sanctity of marriage. There isn't wiggle room there. And I think having these things in mind ought to help us. As we do get into some of these painful issues.

Because in a life lived under the sun. In a sin stained world. Relationships are not straightforward are they? And the Bible is very realistic about that.

[10:43] And no doubt as we turn to some of these. There will be pain in this for some of us. Maybe many of us. But we must trust, mustn't we? That our maker knows best. That what he's grunted to us isn't a mistake.

And that he knows the best way to flourish. So first. Paul says in verses 1 to 7. The marriage bed is cross shaped. Verses 1 to 7.

The marriage bed is cross shaped. There is a right and real biblical answer to sexual immorality. Marriage and marital sex. And Paul's focus in these verses is particularly on the married.

Right? We all know that few things grab the attention of the nation quite like a sex scandal. The tabloids can't wait to dish out some juicy scandal about sex.

Particularly if it's a government minister or a celebrity that's involved. But here Paul deals with the most perplexing sex scandal of all. It's the sexless one.

[11:46] Look at verse 1. The Corinthians saying it's good for man not to have sexual relations with a woman. Can you hear the band of mighty Corinthians saying, Well the truly spiritual Christians we deny ourselves.

The truly spiritual Christians abstain from these base passions that are so corrupt. Just look around at these lowly brothers making a mess of things. Incest. Sexual immorality.

No, no. Spiritual people don't dirty themselves with sex. If only they were a bit more pudish like us. Well Paul's having none of that.

Certainly not for married couples. Look at verse 2. Our translation doesn't make this the most clear. Verse 2 is probably more helpfully translated. But because of sexual immoralities.

Let each man go on having his own wife. And every wife go on having her own husband. Marital sex is the answer to sexual immorality. Corinth clearly has a problem with giving in to sexual immorality.

[12:49] That's fairly rife from chapters 5 and 6. But Paul says the answer is not to try and stop sex altogether. It's to have good sex. That's sex with your spouse.

In fact Paul says that if you want to have a spiritual marriage. A godly marriage. Then it's going to be marked much more by sex. Even than prayer. So we mustn't be prudes about this.

Sex is the glue for a marriage. It's not an optional extra. Look at how Paul talks about it. Verse 3. He says it's something that is given between spouses. It's a gift.

It's not something to be demanded and snatched. It isn't something to use to bargain with. It doesn't come with strings attached. It's gifted. It's given to our spouse. Given to them.

For them. Don't know about you. But I hate the pressure of buying presents. Particularly around Christmas time. Where you have to find one for everybody. What on earth am I going to get this person?

[13:55] But there's one time when I don't hate it. When it's a genuine delight. It's when I know exactly what to get someone. When I see something that's just perfect for them.

And you know. This is the perfect present. Well Paul says likewise in marriage. Give to your spouse sexually. For their joy. For their delight.

That's what the cross says isn't it? It isn't all about what I can get. But what I can give. The cross patterns for his life in all ways. And that doesn't stop at the bedroom door.

So we give. Now of course there are times when. For physical reasons isn't possible. Serious illness.

Physical feelings. And other issues can mean that. That sometimes sexual intimacy. Either can't be regular. Or need to look slightly different for a time. I'm not sure that. If that's a burden that you feel.

[14:53] Then it can be a hard one. But look the truth is. You cannot give what you cannot give. You can only give what the Lord has gifted you to give. So that's no feeling.

Paul says give to your spouse in the way that you can. Give to them. For them. And giving differs from man to woman doesn't it? So notice how mutual Paul says all of this is.

Look at verse 2. Man to wife. Then woman to husband. Verse 3. Husband to wife. And wife to husband. Verse 4 is the same. This mutuality is the whole way through this. And marital sex is mutual giving. Both for the delight of the other. It's a two-way thing. Generally most men can be ready for sex at almost any time.

No matter how their day has gone. That's not a concern for them. But women are different aren't they? Most women it's harder to set aside how they're feeling. What the day has brought.

[15 : 56] And to need time and lead in and build up. We're different creatures. But knowing the differences shapes how we can give. Because sex is mutual within marriage, isn't it?

We're giving to them for them. Then look at what Paul says in verse 4. We don't just give. It's not just mutual.

But the truth is we're not our own. I think in our world this verse must seem utterly scandalous. Bodily autonomy has been such a tenet of progressive freedom.

But look. The mutuality continues. Paul's not saying that a man owns his wife. No, he's saying it's that we have promised and covenanted that our bodies no longer belong solely to us in marriage. Paul said already in chapter 6 that we're not our own. We've been bought at a price. The price of the cross. And so we belong to the Lord. But also in marriage.

[16 : 54] We've committed so strongly to one another that we are not our own. But belong both to Christ and our spouse. That's the power of the two unions we saw Paul major on last week.

Sexual union and union with Christ. Permanent inseparable bonds. And so Paul's point is that in marriage our bodies are no longer ours to withhold.

They're for our spouse. And so verse 5. Look at the word that Paul uses. Deprivation. The truth is we deprive our spouse of what is theirs when we don't give it to them.

We cheat. We defraud them out of what is theirs. There are two kinds of cheating that can ruin a marriage. Adultery. And depriving.

Cheating our spouse out of what we've promised to them. Verse 5 and 6 make a concession about sex. But that only goes to highlight the command.

[18 : 00] The command is husbands and wives keep doing it. He gives one concession. It might be for a time that sex is set aside to devote focus and time instead to pray.

A type of fasting. But notice verse 6. Even that is a concession to the Corinthians. Those fixated on abstaining. Those struggling to understand what freedom means.

It's not a command. It's not normative. It's not essential. And the concession comes with two conditions. One. Agreement. This too has to be mutual.

Not a unilateral decision on behalf of one person to suit oneself. And two. It's for a limited time. It's not to last for a long time. It's for a short period.

And so even for a time of prayer. Even for a fasting of sorts. Paul says. Do not let the marriage bed grow cold.

[19 : 00] Or Satan may tempt you. Within a marriage. A couple ignite their sexual passions together. And once they burn. Don't let them burn in the wrong place.

Verse 5 simply mirrors verse 2. Go on having your own spouse. It's no mistake that the battle against sexual sin flips from singleness to marriage.

The devil knows what he's doing. Before marriage the battle is to not have sex. That's a struggle for any young couple isn't it? But once married the battle is to keep having sex.

Paul says. Keep fighting that battle for the sake of your spouse. Delight in them delighting. Let the cross shape your bedroom.

Give to them. And so verse 7. Paul concludes this section. And look at his message. He says. He wishes that all were free as he is.

[19 : 59] I don't think Paul can mean in verse 7. That he wishes all were single. That wouldn't make sense of the whole picture of the Bible. And the creation mandate. And if we look at the rest of verse 7.

It would actually put him at odds with God. God gifts our present circumstances to us. They aren't by accident. They're at his loving hand. So Paul doesn't mean there's a special gift.

That allows someone to delight in singleness. And find it easier than other people. Anymore that there's such a gift that makes marriage particularly bliss for some. To think in that sort of way is actually quite dangerous.

No instead Paul is saying. To those of us who are married. That is God's good gift. To those who are single. That is God's good gift. I think what Paul is saying here is. He wishes all were free as he is. And if we look at verse 6. That makes more sense doesn't it? He is free in knowing that abstaining from sex isn't required. That's a concession. He grants a concession for the Corinthian spirituality.

[21 : 02] But freedom knows that that's not required. You can enjoy the gift that God has given you. The truth is that sex is not less than spiritual.

Quite the opposite. In the right context. It's thoroughly spiritual. And so we see Paul getting at the real issue here in verse 7.

The key to spirituality isn't to change our circumstances. If you're married. Don't try to undo that. Don't try to undo that as a means of inflating your spirituality.

Don't be caught up in thinking that for a Christian sex is a dirty thing. Only to be touched when really needed. Or worse. Something to consign to the past. I'm a mature Christian now.

So I've got godlier things to do this week. Paul says no. In marriage godliness is given to your spouse. Great maturity.

[22 : 02] Greater spirituality isn't gained in wishing. For what we don't have. God knows what he's given to you. Make the most of that. If God has given you marriage.

He's given you a sex life. They're the same reality. Godliness just looks different in these. Doesn't it? Well Paul goes on to think about this principle for those who have been widowed.

And so he says in verses 8 and 9. Widows be wise. Widows be wise. Paul says a widow is free to marry again. Or not to marry.

Again there isn't a godlier option. Wisdom is what's required. And so you see Paul give his wisdom here. Not a hard and fast rule. Verse 8. He says I say that it is good to remain single as I am.

I think we should read this as widows. Not widows and single people. Commentators suggest that the word translated there in verse 8 as unmarried.

[23 : 06] When that's paired with widow. It's possibly better translated as widows and widowers. And we see the same word used in verse 11. And it doesn't mean never been married people.

So Paul's suggestion for widows is it is good to remain single. For many who have been widowed and lost their dear, dear spouse.

Remarriage can just seem like the last thing they'd ever want to contemplate. If that's you, I can't fathom your pain. And this isn't all that the Bible has to say about being widowed.

But here in the Corinthian context, what Paul is saying is that circumstances in and of themselves don't dictate or limit our godliness.

So Paul says there's certainly wisdom in not rushing into something else to try and heal the hurt. And very often being widowed can open up another sphere of life. The loss, as the loss is more and more come to terms with, then it might just be a new season of ministry that's opened up.

[24 : 12] There are many fine examples of that in this church. Godly men and women who pour themselves out in service to brothers and sisters with their newfound independence. And that's good.

But Paul also says that remarrying isn't the unspiritual option. Particularly if you become romantically entangled with someone else. Paul says far better to marry than to feel sexually.

The sense of verse 9 isn't if it's a struggle to be self-controlled then get married. As if just give up the fight. Paul would never say that.

And the fight doesn't stop when we're married anyway. The sense of verse 9 here is that if you have become sexually entangled with someone, then better to be married.

Make it right. A widow's free to do that. But it's better to marry than to burn. Burn in shame for sin. Or perhaps even to burn at the last judgment.

[25 : 11] Because that sin has never been put right in repentance. And so as a widow, the spiritual thing to do, the godly option, is to practice righteousness.

To take sin seriously. If that means marrying, fine. If it means remaining, good. It's not our circumstances that dictate godliness.

And no matter what anyone else might tell you, that won't be the making or the breaking of whether you're spiritual or not. Well, Paul now takes things into the realm of divorce.

And he has two situations in mind from verses 10 to 16. Verses 10 and 11 seems to be divorce between two Christians. And then verses 12 to 16.

Divorce when one spouse is a Christian and the other isn't. But in both instances, Paul is clear. Rupture isn't the way. It certainly isn't the more spiritual thing.

[26 : 14] And so firstly to the Christian couple, Paul says, think reconciliation, not rupture. Verses 10 and 11. Think reconciliation, not rupture. Divorce is never a spiritual triumph.

It's always a travesty. For a chapter that is full of options, Paul's saying either this or that are fine, as long as you pursue godliness. There is one thing he's utterly clear on.

The sanctity of marriage. That's why married couples are to prioritize their sex lives. But it's also seen in how Paul talks about divorce. Verse 10.

The wife should not separate or divorce. Verse 11. The husband should not divorce. Notice Paul doesn't give us any caveats.

There's no qualifications. Don't divorce unless this happens. Don't divorce unless, of course. No caveat, no qualification. Don't do it. Don't think about it.

[27 : 18] A Christian should never enter marriage conceiving that, well, if it doesn't work out, then I've got an out. No, says Paul. Don't think like that.

What's the answer when marriage is hard? When you're at odds constantly? When you've had no sleep for weeks with your children screaming in the night? And it feels like your spouse is a burden on top and not a help?

And you haven't been appreciated in weeks, months, where there's distance and coldness? The answer is not divorce. When your spouse doesn't share your spiritual fervor and it feels like you could give yourself more to church, but their work or their hobbies get in the way, the spiritual way is not divorce.

Look at the brackets in verse 10. Paul says, not I, but the Lord is saying this. That isn't to undermine his own apostolic authority, as if the rest of the letter is somehow lesser.

But what he's saying is that what he says about divorce here, Jesus himself said. He isn't applying it. He isn't offering additional spirit-inspired instructions. No, with divorce, he's saying it's as plain as day.

[28 : 30] Jesus is clear. Now, we don't have time to cover the nuances around divorce. Jesus does make clear that there is one circumstance that could mean divorce is possible, adultery.

But even in that circumstance, divorce isn't required. It's permissible. But it's still every bit of travesty. And so Paul's message to a messed-up Corinth is to think reconciliation, not rupture. And doesn't this cross speak into that too? The cross says to us that forgiveness is possible, even if it's costly. It says to us that wrongs can be overcome. And it says to us that sacrificing for others is glorious.

Yes. So get help. Ask brothers and sisters to help you. Don't think about rupture. Think about reconciliation.

I'm borrowing one of the illustrations from the book Aspects of Love here, but it's a good one. Netflix's series The Crown has a very powerful scene where Her Majesty the Queen and Prince Philip are talking about the friction and crisis that's engulfed their marriage due to the unique pressure of her position as both monarch and wife and mother.

[29 : 50] And the Queen says, the exit route which is open to everyone else, divorce, it's not an option for us. And because it was simply not something they would or could contemplate, they then had to work out the issues together.

And when Prince Philip sadly passed away recently, they'd been married for some 73 years. I wonder how many marriages would have lasted the course if divorce wasn't so easy today.

The Lord Jesus knows what will see us flourish. Will we trust him in that? If he's given us marriage, he's given us marriage. Divorce is a disaster.

It brings hurt and lasting damage. It affects the couple and the kids. It isn't the easy ticket to a better life. Now, Paul does acknowledge that sometimes sin does take over and marriage does break down in verse 11.

But look at what he says, even then, it's not too late. Reconciliation is possible. It should be sought. Paul's message here about divorce is that it isn't the answer to see us flourish.

[31 : 03] Marriage, tweaking our circumstances isn't the key to winning at life. It's not the key to spirituality. Godliness in the present, whatever God has gifted us with, even if it's a difficult marriage, that's real spirituality.

The life of faith is a life of trusting that God knows best. And so your marriage is to be cherished, nurtured, and fought for. So Paul says, think reconciliation, not rupture.

Our present circumstances are always an opportunity to let the cross have its say. And that's the message carries through for marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian.

Paul says in verses 12 to 16, seek redemption, not rupture. Seek redemption, not rupture. How serious is the Lord Jesus about marriage?

He's so serious that he places it even above faith. Coming to faith doesn't take precedence over our marriage. I wonder if in Corinth, the pressure was that those who were married to unbelievers were second-class Christians, made unclean, tarnished, tainted by their close and intimate association with an outsider.

[32 : 22] And so whether someone is converted and has already been married, or if a believer knowingly marries an unbeliever, Paul wants to say that the reality of that marriage is to be honored.

In either of those situations, it could be tempting to think that a change in circumstance is going to be the key to a flourishing Christian life. When your spouse undermines your bringing up your children in the faith, when he's obstinate about you taking your children to church, when she doesn't get your want to invest in relationships with your brothers and sisters, or your want to give of your time and your talents and your treasure to God and his church, or as you begin to grow in your understanding of the Bible, that it's just a source of friction that you see the world differently from one another.

It could be tempting to think there, couldn't it? It's my way to a better Christian life is to move on, to find a Christian husband or wife who'll be a spur and encouragement on these things.

Well, not Sue, says Paul. Verse 12, and notice when Paul says, I, not the Lord, saying this, that doesn't diminish his authority. He's simply saying that this is an application of Jesus' teaching that Paul's now giving to the church.

And he says, verse 12, it's the same. Don't think rupture. The sanctity of marriage is too significant. After all, marriage pictures the inseparable bond between Christ and his church, one that's at the very heart of the gospel itself.

[33 : 58] Instead of an unbelieving wife being a corrupting thing for a Christian man, a husband, as the Corinthians likely thought, Paul says the opposite. A Christian in a marriage brings holiness into it, verse 14.

Because through you, your spouse is in the orbit of the church. They're brought close to the Lord Jesus. They have the reality of grace brought into view any time you speak the truth to them and any time they come along to church with you.

And your life is an ongoing witness before them of the difference that the Lord Jesus makes as he's at work with his grace to make you more like him. A Christian brings their family into the sphere of the church.

It's not the other way around. You're not made unclean. You bring them into the orbit of grace. They gain an interest in the covenant through you. Verse 14.

Even the children of a believing parent are made holy, brought into the covenant. they gain an interest. A Christian parent doesn't have children who are outsiders, pagans, but insiders, belonging to the community of faith, brought up with an interest in it.

[35 : 14] That's really Paul applying the reality of infant baptism here, isn't it? Having a marriage with a believer and an unbeliever doesn't taint. It actually brings holiness to the whole family.

So Paul says, don't seek rupture. Don't seek a change of circumstances. That's not going to be the way to a spiritual triumph. You aren't tainted.

Marriage is sacred. And he says to us, you may even be the instrument, the means of your whole family coming to faith in the Lord Jesus. So don't think rupture.

Think redemption. True spirituality is dealing with the present in godliness, not wishing the past away so that things were different. But, Paul does say that if it gets to the point where your spouse can no longer take your faith if they leave, then Paul says to let them go.

He says, you're not enslaved. You're freed from that marriage. No doubt that will be with deep sorrow through many tears and a profound sense of loss. But very often what can make all of those things even worse is the nagging guilt that you should pursue and never give up that their salvation is at your door alone.

[36 : 33] But God says that's not the case. If you are deserted, if your spouse no longer consents to live with you, and I think that ill free is consenting to live has implications for other things like cases of real and serious abuse.

I can't go into all of that now. but if that is the situation, then a spouse is behaving worse than an unbeliever and isn't consenting to live with you. But that's an aside.

Paul says if you are deserted, if your spouse no longer consents to live with you, then you have to trust the Lord with that. Trust them to the Lord. Verse 16, how do you know whether you'll save your spouse?

That can go both ways, can't it? If you're the only Christian in your family, how do you know whether you might save your spouse and your family? You might. So think redemption, not rupture. But also if they leave, their salvation's not on you.

How do you know whether you'll save them? The truth is that the Lord works these things out far above us. He's much wiser than us. And we need to trust these things to Him, painful as they may be.

[37 : 49] Well, finally, Paul brings us round to say, be concerned about your sanctification, not your situation. Verses 17 to 24.

Be concerned about your sanctification, not your situation. Godliness, true spirituality, doesn't come through tweaking or fiddling with our circumstances.

We've seen that the whole way through, haven't we? It's through our commitment to our Savior and His commands. These verses can seem somewhat random in chapter 7 if we do think it's a Christian's pocket guide to relationships.

What on earth has circumcision and slavery got to do with it? But actually, these verses are at the heart of this chapter. The Corinthian measure of spirituality brings pressure to enhance your spiritual credentials.

So they say, don't be defiled by sex or by a spouse who isn't holy. But look at what Paul says three times in these verses. He says, remain.

[38 : 53] Verse 17. Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to which God has called him. Do you think you know better than the Lord?

He's our loving Father. He's assigned these things. He's called you to them. Verse 20. Each should remain in the condition in which he was called.

Verse 24. Remain. Paul is making clear it's not our circumstances that count. What counts is verse 19.

Not circumcision. He says, stay in the condition you're in. It's not godlier to go back and it's not godlier to get rid. He says, look at what counts.

Verse 19. What counts is keeping the commands of God. He says it may be advantageous from time to time to change some things to take some opportunities but they aren't what counts.

[39 : 53] You see verse 21. Were you a slave, a bond servant? Don't be concerned about it. That doesn't preclude godliness.

That doesn't negate the possibility of a life of faith. If that's your circumstance, so be it. He does say, if you can gain your freedom, fine, go for it.

It's likely to your advantage but it's not essential. Our status in Christ is what counts. If you're a slave, well in Christ you're free.

Don't be concerned about it. Be concerned with your sanctification not your situation. Were you free when called? Well, you're a slave now but a slave to Christ.

A far better master. Paul's point is that in Christ we have real freedom. Circumstances will never limit our life's purpose.

[40 : 51] They are not ultimate. Our life situations are not the arbiter of how spiritual we can really be. No, no. They're the arena in which we display and grew in our sanctification.

it's not circumstances that count but keeping the commandments. And there's great freedom in this, isn't there? We don't need to wish for other than what we have.

It's not uncommon for a new Christian to suddenly want to take the fast track to maturity in that thriving spiritual life and so very quickly sights can be set on something like overseas mission or theological training or a change in jobs so it's more fulfilling and more meaningful or finding a spouse and a family or a prominent means of serving in church or getting ahead somehow, standing out, being elevated, finding the fast track.

Paul says these aren't what count. Some of these things may be helpful, may be good, may be wise but don't go chasing them as a silver bullet. But this chapter tells us about so much more than sex and relationships.

It helps us put the whole of this life in perspective. We're living for eternity. That shapes everything and we know the pattern of life that we're to follow.

[42 : 16] The truth is that none of us, none of us are lacking what we really need to flourish now and what we need to flourish for eternity. It's not out of our reach.

Fiddling around to find some greener grass isn't the answer you don't need to. And as we realize that it relieves pressure on all sorts of things, things like marriage.

Marriage isn't the answer to all of life's problems. It isn't the key to a better life. In truth, if that's what we think about marriage, it will struggle to withstand that pressure. Nor is work the answer or things or credentials or titles.

verse 23, we've been bought at a price so live free. Free from the designs of man.

Free from prescribed patterns of the real holy and prosperous life as other people see it. Free from searching for the thing, the key that you lack to unlocking our better life.

[43 : 18] Paul says, no, no, in your cross bought freedom, don't go hitching yourself to some sort of faux spirituality. You've everything you need.

Just follow the commands of the Lord. Verse 24, Paul finishes by saying, so brothers, in whatever condition each was called, let him there remain with God.

With your new master, your better one, who has made it possible to have a full life and who tells us what really matters in this life. So live free. Don't go searching for something you're lacking.

Live free. Live the life of faith patterned after the law of liberty. Whatever circumstances he gives you, godliness is what counts.

Let's pray. Lord God, we do ask that you would preserve and protect the marriages in our church.

[44 : 31] May grace abound. May the Lord Jesus be emitated in them. But we also ask that you would grant to us your grace to help us long for your eternal kingdom and to live for it.

and to be so marked by it that we would have no greater treasure than to keep your commandments. And in doing so that we would know in our midst right here a foretaste of your coming kingdom.

So help us in this we pray for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. May the Lord be with us