

# **A Study of First Corinthians**

## **Week Six**

1 Corinthians 7:15-8:3

### **Day One**

15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? 17 Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. 18 Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised.

v. 15 – I was confronted with a situation when I was pastoring and I applied this verse but in reverse. Let me explain. A husband came to the Lord but his wife refused to stop dealing drugs. He had a previous drug problem but was walking clean and trying to stay clean and love his wife. She refused to repent or cooperate. In my mind, she had already left him, even though she refused to leave the house. So he left physically, but she had left emotionally and practically. This verse helped us make that decision. While the man loved her, he could not abide under such conditions. If his unbelieving wife had chosen to obey the law and not do drugs, then we would of course have counseled him to stay.

v. 16 – There have been some who have decided to stay in a difficult relationship with an unbeliever but I think this verse is saying that there are no guarantees that staying will ever lead to the other person's salvation. We would hope it would, but it doesn't always—that is in God's hands. So if the unbeliever doesn't want to stay with the believing spouse, it seems that Paul advised the believer to move on and start a new life.

As mentioned in previous studies, Paul had to address practical issues as he proclaimed, established and advanced God's kingdom—God's governing rule. Paul did not shy away from making pronouncements and teaching on the matters of work, family and children. If you look at many of his letters, he spent the first half on doctrinal issues and the second half on practical ones. That is about the mix that I think any of us should have in church work. We must not only help people study God but also know how to serve God on a daily basis.

v. 17 – My sense is that Paul would advise this so that the Way would not be maligned for being a sect that upset society. If believers were all to leave their spouses, leave their places of employment or make other radical changes immediately following their conversion, it would cause upset whole communities and lead to criticism. Plus, Paul probably knew that new believers weren't in the place to make these kinds of decisions until they had more understanding and maturity. So he laid down a rule that everyone

should stay in the situation they were in before they met the Lord until such time as they had a better perspective on God's will and Word.

v. 18 -- Someone from a Jewish heritage should not immediately abandon their upbringing, but someone not of Jewish heritage should not try to be like a Jew after salvation. Again I understand this that Paul was trying to limit radical and sudden shifts in lifestyle that would cause believers to become unstable. He also wanted others to come to the faith and didn't want the radical irrational decisions of new believers to scare off other converts. Paul was simply recommending caution and stability among those of faith without trapping them in difficult or dangerous situations.

### Day Two

19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. 20 Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. 21 Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you — although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22 For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave.

v. 19 – I am amazed at Paul's theological flexibility given his background and training. There were men called the Judaizers (saved Jews) who taught that men who were saved still had to keep the Law, including circumcision. Paul vehemently opposed these brethren, some of whom were probably former friends and colleagues. Paul was adamantly opposed to *anything* or *anyone* who took away from the primacy of faith in Christ for salvation. Thus he declared that circumcision had no meaning in the new economy of Christ. This shows the radical transformation that took place in Paul for him to make such a statement. There was nothing in him that was prepared to defend or maintain his past belief system. Paul was indeed a new man in Christ; the old had passed away.

**How about you? Are you a new person, or are you still clinging to past traditions or thought patterns that are contrary to faith and life in Jesus Christ? Don't answer too quickly. Ask the Lord to show you you and see if you measure up to the Apostle Paul where flexibility and change are concerned. Are you more committed to Christ or your traditions?**

v. 20 – Paul reiterated his previous advice that no one should make radical life changes as new believers. They should gain some maturity and then they will have the wherewithal to make the changes that the Spirit directs them to make. This is good advice for today's new believers as well.

v. 21 – Some have criticized Paul for his laissez-affaire attitude toward slavery. They reach back 2,000 years and want Paul to have been an activist when there were none. They also equate the horrendous slavery of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to that of Paul's day. I would urge you not to fall into this trap. It is absolutely impossible to judge Paul based on our

modern era or mindset. And modern slavery and ancient slavery had some similarities but also some major differences.

Paul urged believing slaves to obtain freedom if possible, but not to fret if that wasn't possible.

v. 22 – Paul was teaching here that a new order had definitely been established in Christ. Those who were termed “free” were now actually slaves—slaves to Christ, to righteousness and to Jesus’ commands. Those were termed “slaves” were now free—free to serve Jesus, trusting that He was in control of their lives and situations. Here are some verses about freedom in Christ. **Are you enjoying the freedom that is yours?**

“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36-37).

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1).

Because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free (Ephesians 6:8).

### **Day Three**

23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to. 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 you to remain as you are.

v. 23 – Here it seems that Paul is once again referencing one of his earliest themes in this letter: The schisms that existed because believers were divided into camps that took their identity from certain leaders in the Body. But let's look at this verse as it stands alone.

I have come to realize that much of my adult life was spent doing or not doing things according to what I thought others would think of what I was doing. Would they misunderstand? Would they think I was being egotistical? Would they approve? I was particularly concerned about how my leaders would perceive what I wanted to do. In some cases, it was something that I felt God wanted me to do but I would not do it if my leaders disagreed or disapproved.

As I look back, I was overly concerned with this issue: in some ways I was a slave to men and their approval. Don't get me wrong. I think we need to consider the opinions of our leaders and always respond to their requests where it is appropriate and possible. But we must not surrender the control of our life that belongs to the Spirit to anyone else—family member, leader, friend or supervisor. **In that sense, are you a slave to men and what they think, or are you a slave (in the best sense of the word) to God?**

v. 24 – Paul wrote what I just wrote: You are responsible to God for your purpose, productivity and role. I don't think anyone can ever hear more clearly about the will of God for you than you can. It is my opinion that prophets can confirm God's will for you, but they seldom present God's will to you. I know that the prophet revealed God's will to Saul, David and Elisha. In my thinking, those were special occasions for men who had unique roles to play. Not every king was appointed like Saul or David, were they? Not every prophet was identified like Elijah chose Elisha.

You are responsible to hear from God for yourself, and to help others to the same as God would direct. But you cannot hear for them; they can only hear for themselves.

v. 25 – For the second time, Paul identified his counsel as a personal opinion and not something that he received from God as a command for the church. Wow! Paul had unlimited power and influence, and could have positioned anything that he wanted to take place as a “word from the Lord,” but he chose not to do so.

Of course, Paul's opinion was important and emanated from a unique position of experience and insight. This made it something that had to be carefully considered when making any decision. Here he was issuing an opinion on the unmarried, probably answering a question that was raised in the letter that the Corinthian church had sent him.

v. 26 – Paul saw the times in which he wrote as troubled times. New believers were under tremendous pressure from their culture and from the devil himself who was trying to oppose the work of God among the Gentiles. With that in mind, Paul urged that anyone who could stay single should stay single. Of course, he had already advised that this not be done if someone could not control his or her sexual appetites. He urged those people to marry.

Paul addressed practical issues that his churches asked him. He did more than just preach from a pulpit; he was involved with the people and their everyday needs. I observe many leaders who believe that they are addressing the needs of the church when they speak, especially at a conference or special event. That may be the least effective means of dealing with personal issues, if my counseling experience is any indication. If you are a leader, do you get “down and dirty” with your people? Or do you stay above the fray, speaking on matters of importance to you from a place of emotional and personal comfort and safety?

I urge you to consider Paul's approach to ministry and imitate it as you meet the perceived needs of the people among whom you serve.

#### **Day Four**

27 Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? 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, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; 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.

v. 27 – Remember that Paul was offering his wise counsel, but he recognized that this wasn't a directive from the Lord—just his wise opinion. Here he urged everyone to stay in the marital condition they were in when they met the Lord, whether single or married. It is easy to forget how tenuous the early church's position was. The Jews increasingly hated them. Paul wasn't that popular even among believing Jews and leaders in Jerusalem. There was no state persecution at this point, but Paul must have seen it coming as the kingdom of God was on a collision course with the Roman Empire.

Yet the Church survived the next 200 years of persecution just as the Church has survived in totalitarian regimes throughout the ages. Of course, this is due to the power of the Spirit to maintain the Church against every enemy and foe.

v. 28 – Paul made it clear that anyone who married did not sin. Yet the traditional position of the Catholic Church on the superiority of a “vocation” to the ministry and celibacy has made many ambivalent about marrying. This requirement of celibacy has cost them, in my opinion, many priests and others who would have served in ministry had it not been for that stipulation, which has no justification from a biblical point of view.

Yet Paul had wisdom, for marriage and having children is tough enough without having to deal with cultural pressure and persecution. And I think he was speaking prophetically, for the trials would increase in the ensuing years as the State increased their persecution against Christians. I have always read these verses and thought, “Paul was right. It would be better not to marry. But who can do that!”

vs. 29-31 – Paul advised that as many as possible be detached from all earthly concerns as much as possible. I think he definitely sensed the urgency of the moment, which probably helps explain Paul's urgency in carrying out his missionary work. He saw the storm clouds and knew that a day would come when his work would be difficult if not impossible for his successors. And indeed it was.

**Paul knew how to read the signs and recognize the seasons. What season are you in right now? What do you need to do to respond to this season? I pray to be like the sons of Issachar:**

Men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do—200 chiefs, with all their relatives under their command (1 Chronicles 12:32).

**It must be possible to know “the times” like Paul and the man of Issachar. I want to be among those who know what time it is today. Do you?**

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 thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years 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 even 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.

## 1 Corinthians 8

8:1 Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2 The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. 3 But the man who loves God is known by God.  
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