

**PERPLEXITIES IN PAUL:
THE TICKING CLOCK**

I Corinthians 7:29-31

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 25, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

So I've gotta tell you my inauguration story:

Maggie and I had standing tickets in the Blue Section. We stood in line a couple of hours, passed through security, and went to the place we had scouted out the night before. There was plenty of room in our section, but for some reason the entrance had been closed, and we were directed to a different entrance far away. But as we walked, we noticed a couple of college age guys, and a woman, helping people scale a stone wall into our section. The police and security guards were standing nearby, allowing it to happen, so we looked at one another and said: "Let's give it a shot."

Now it has been a lot of years since I've scaled what was probably a six foot wall. But I pulled myself up; Maggie pushed from behind; the three college kids helped pull me over; then she followed; we picked ourselves up off the ground; brushed off; and looked at the kids and their mother – they were a family from my former church in Iowa. Based on the reported attendance, the odds of that happening were 1 in 1.8 million, but we beat the odds!

It was a great day to see such a peaceful transition of power, a day to be proud of our nation, and a day that I, once again, am thankful for the privilege of serving in this community.

Let us pray: *Lord, we give you thanks for our nation, and for the texts that have shaped our identity – The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and even the oath of office. As we turn our attention to a brief text from the Apostle Paul, help us to live in it and it in us. In the name of Christ. Amen.*

Today's is the second in a "mini-series" of sermons called "Perplexities in Paul." As I indicated last week, Paul is one of two major people in the New Testament, the other being, of course, Jesus Christ.

- Paul lived a few years after Christ, but, unlike the disciples, never met Christ personally. A rising star within Judaism, Paul was responsible for seeking to stamp out the growing movement within Judaism seeking to embrace Jesus as Messiah. Paul first appears in the New Testament holding the garments of those who stoned Stephen to death.¹
- On a road to Damascus, Paul had a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ which led him to become an apostle for Christianity, taking it from its base within Judaism into Greco-Roman Culture.²
- Had it not been for Paul, Christianity would likely have remained a small sect within Judaism.

This mini-sermon-series focuses on some of the thornier issues in Paul's letters that have led some over the ages to write Paul off in favor of Christ alone, or even to write Christianity off altogether. What I seek is to place some of his more troublesome writings in context to see if by so doing Paul can speak to us today.

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¹ Acts 6:8-8:1a.

² Acts 9:1-19, 22:1-16, and 26:9-18; II Corinthians 12:1-10; Galatians 1:11-24.

There are perhaps no greater objections to Paul than to some of his words that surround or make their way into our passage today. Listen to some of what he wrote to the church at Corinth:

- It is well for a man not to touch a woman.³
- To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.⁴
- Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever.⁵

And finally, from our passage:

- Let even those who have wives be as though they had none.⁶

From these writings Paul seems to urge Christians who were enslaved not to seek their freedom and to argue that the only legitimate reason for marriage is as an antidote for passion.

In our culture, which so values freedom, which claims to be deeply aware of human sexuality, and which seems to place a premium on marriage, child-rearing, and family life, these words seem like an disheveled intruder at a fancy dinner party.

How can we understand these words, and in light of our understanding, is it possible for them to speak to us?

I.

First, throughout I Corinthians 7, where all these words appear, Paul makes a distinction between *his opinion* and *a command of the Lord*.

- I say this by way of concession [he says], not of command.⁷
- To the rest, I say – I and not the Lord...⁸
- ...I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion...⁹
- In my judgment...I think...¹⁰

Ask yourself this:

- When was the last time you heard a religious leader say: “I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion”?
- When was the last time you heard a leader say: “I say this by way of concession, not of command”?
- When was the last time you heard someone in authority say: “In my judgment,” “I think.”

It is unfortunate that in the history of the church’s preaching and teaching and lawmaking and rule-writing, we have sometimes failed to take Paul at his word when he says: “This is my opinion, not the Lord’s command.” In more times than the church is often aware or willing to acknowledge, Paul is speaking to *a given situation* and he is giving *his best advice*, but he is not equating his advice with God’s absolute and unbending will for all times and places.

“I have no command of the Lord,” he says, “but I give my opinion.”

What is important for us is this: When we read Paul, or when we listen to any religious leader, we must pay attention to whether that person is giving his or her best advice, or is claiming to speak a word from the Lord that is final and absolute.

- Even when the person is claiming absolute authority, we still have to use our own judgment.

³ I Corinthians 7:1.

⁴ I Corinthians 7:8-9.

⁵ I Corinthians 7:20-21.

⁶ I Corinthians 7:29.

⁷ I Corinthians 7:6.

⁸ I Corinthians 7:12.

⁹ I Corinthians 7:25.

¹⁰ I Corinthians 7:40.

- When the person is offering advice, we must acknowledge that the leader is aware enough of his or her own limitations to say: “I could be mistaken on this.”

More often than we might realize, Paul claims to be speaking for Paul, not for God. This can be liberating for us when we find what he is saying to be deeply contrary to the way we sense God is present and working in the world today.

II.

Second, the ticking clock.

In the three verses we read earlier in this service, Paul begins with these words:

- The appointed time has grown short

and ends with these words:

- The present form of this world is passing away.

Paul believed that Christ was going to return in his lifetime. He believed the Second Coming – or in the Old Testament phraseology “The Day of the Lord” – was imminent.

Because of this belief, Paul basically said:

- Slaves, it is not worth your spending your remaining time and energy trying to secure your freedom.¹¹
- People not married and widows, it is not worth your spending your remaining time planning a wedding, a reception, and a honeymoon.¹²
- “In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.”¹³

Paul believed that the clock was ticking so fast toward the return of Christ that he urged people to spend their days serving the Lord fully rather than seeking to change the circumstances of their lives.

- To me this is understandable. If the present form of the world is about to pass away, why not just wait it out?
- What is not acceptable, to me, is why the church has often taken Paul’s advice as law while ignoring the fact that his advice was given in light of the ticking clock.
- It is one thing to ask slaves to remain in their current condition when the world that gives rise to that condition is about to change; it is quite another thing to believe that the world is not going to change and then ask slaves to accept their servitude.

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It probably needs to be the topic of another sermon as to what we do with Paul in light of the fact that he was mistaken about the second coming.

- Suffice it to say at present that his mistake about the Second Coming cautions us about believing or following any number of people who throughout history have prognosticated that the end is near, including the wildly popular *Left Behind* Series.
- Suffice it to say as well that not every theologian, religious leader, preacher, or teacher has been right about everything all of the time, including the one standing before you – just one more reason to exercise our responsibility as individual Christians to make up our own minds about who and what we believe, something, I might add by way of a commercial, that Presbyterians do very well at our best!

III.

Even though Paul by his own admission was often giving advice rather than command, and even though he was mistaken about the imminent return of Christ, there is still a message in these verses for us. That message is contained in two words he repeats five times: “As though.”

¹¹ I Corinthians 7:21-24.

¹² I Corinthians 7:25-28.

¹³ I Corinthians 7:20, 24.

“Let...those who deal with the world [be] as though they had no dealings with it.”

Paul uses this phrase in a litany which includes

- Marital relationships
- Cycles of mourning and rejoicing
- Our holding of possessions and entering financial transactions.

What Paul is saying is “Let us so live for God that even these most important relationships, these most significant activities, these deepest commitments become penultimate – one notch below what is ultimate.”

In other words, Paul is saying:

- Let your commitment to God be so important that it exceeds even the deepest beauty or the greatest pain you have experienced with the human being you love.
- Let your relationship with Christ be so important that it transcends even your deepest loss.
- Let your sense of the Spirit of God be such that it exceeds
 - The greatest rejoicing you have known
 - The greatest abundance of possessions you have experienced
 - The most frightening economic vulnerability you have known
 - The most charged up or beaten down you have been because of financial transactions.

“Let... those who deal with the world [be] *as though* they had no dealings with it.”

As though, as though, as though.

IV.

We do not have to believe that Christ is about to return to experience the ticking clock. The clock can also tick for us when we come face to face with our own mortality.

In a later letter, this one to the church at Rome, Paul, nearing the end of his life, wrote: “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”¹⁴

As the Southern novelist Clyde Edgerton wrote: “We are history longer than we are fact.”¹⁵

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Since high school, I have followed with mixed reaction the career and writings of Richard John Neuhaus.

- Neuhaus was an inner-city Lutheran pastor in Brooklyn who in the 1960s was active in the civil rights movement and founder of a group called Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam.
- He marched at Selma, campaigned for Eugene McCarthy, was arrested demonstrating at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968.
- Over time, Neuhaus changed his thinking and became a leading voice in the religious community for neoconservative positions in foreign policy, for the pro-life movement, and for a religious voice to be heard on the public square.
- He also evolved from being a Lutheran minister to becoming a Roman Catholic priest.

Neuhaus lived long enough, and his positions evolved enough, to where if you remained static in your theological or political views, at some point you agreed with him.

When I was away at the Moveable Feast I read of his death on January 8th. When I returned January 9th and sorted through a week’s worth of mail, my copy of the journal he edited, called *First Things*, awaited.

¹⁴ Romans 14:8.

¹⁵ Paraphrased by Bob Dunham, in his paper on I Corinthians 7:29-31, for the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, January, 2009, from Edgerton’s novel *In Memory of Junior*.

The final words of that edition were, as always, his:

As of this writing, I am contending with a cancer, presently of unknown origin. I am, I am given to believe, under the expert medical care of the Sloan-Kettering clinic here in New York.

I am grateful beyond measure for your prayers storming the gates of heaven. Be assured that I neither fear to die nor refuse to live. If it is to die, all that has been is but a slight intimation of what is to be. If it is to live, there is much that I hope to do in the interim...

[T]he question has occurred to me that, if I have but a little time to live, should I be spending it writing this column.

I have heard it attributed to figures as various as Brother Lawrence and Martin Luther – when asked what they would do if they knew they were going to die tomorrow, they answered they would plant a tree and say their prayers. (Luther is supposed to have added that he would quaff his favorite beer.)

Maybe I have, at least metaphorically, planted a few trees, and certainly I am saying my prayers. ... [I pray that] we will be pondering together the follies and splendors of the Church and the world for years to come. But maybe not. ...

To that end, I commend myself to your intercession, and that of all the saints and angels who accompany us each step through time toward home.¹⁶

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Whether or not
We have a sense that Christ is about to return,
Or a sense of our own mortality,
We can live “as though”
The present world is passing away,
Because it is, however slowly.
The clock is ticking, however imperceptively.

“We are history longer than we are fact.”

But while we are fact,
We can live fully and completely in the arms of God,
Fully and completely in the arms of the world in which God has placed us,
“pondering together the follies and splendors
of the Church and the world.”

Amen.

¹⁶ *First Things*, February 2009, 71-72.