

The Imperfect Church – 13  
The Content Church  
1 Corinthians 7:12-24

Introduction

1 Corinthians 7:12-24 - <sup>12</sup> Now, I will speak to the rest of you, though I do not have a direct command from the Lord. If a fellow believer has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to continue living with him, he must not leave her. <sup>13</sup> And if a believing woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to continue living with her, she must not leave him. <sup>14</sup> For the believing wife brings holiness to her marriage, and the believing husband brings holiness to his marriage. Otherwise, your children would not be holy, but now they are holy. <sup>15</sup> (But if the husband or wife who isn't a believer insists on leaving, let them go. In such cases the believing husband or wife is no longer bound to the other, for God has called you to live in peace.) <sup>16</sup> Don't you wives realize that your husbands might be saved because of you? And don't you husbands realize that your wives might be saved because of you?

<sup>17</sup> Each of you should continue to live in whatever situation the Lord has placed you, and remain as you were when God first called you. This is my rule for all the churches. <sup>18</sup> For instance, a man who was circumcised before he became a believer should not try to reverse it. And the man who was uncircumcised when he became a believer should not be circumcised now. <sup>19</sup> For it makes no difference whether or not a man has been circumcised. The important thing is to keep God's commandments.

<sup>20</sup> Yes, each of you should remain as you were when God called you. <sup>21</sup> Are you a slave? Don't let that worry you—but if you get a chance to be free, take it. <sup>22</sup> And remember, if you were a slave when the Lord called you, you are now free in the Lord. And if you were free when the Lord called you, you are now a slave of Christ. <sup>23</sup> God paid a high price for you, so don't be enslaved by the world. <sup>24</sup> Each of you, dear brothers and sisters, should remain as you were when God first called you.

As Americans, we have a distinct way that we view how life should go that is unique from the rest of the world. Because of the radical success of what some have called "The American Experiment," everything in our lives should show immediate and measurable signs of explosive growth. Because of a successful democracy and capitalism, we are so used to, and expectant of, everything in our lives to be constantly moving up and to the right. We get frustrated at things in life that go slowly. We get bored easily. We feel contempt for the daily ordinariness of life, instead longing to become famous, or change the world, or make our mark, or leave a legacy.

Whatever language we use, it is clear that we typically long to be more than we are. We loathe the ordinary. Author Rod Dreher observes, "Everydayness is my problem. It's easy to think about what you would do in wartime, or if a hurricane blows through, or if you spent a month in Paris, or if your guy wins the election, or if you won the lottery or bought that thing you really wanted. It's a lot more difficult to figure out how you're going to get through today without despair."<sup>1</sup>

This frustration with ordinariness is having a negative impact, particularly on the younger generations who have been fed flattery their entire lives. From Kindergarten on, it seems everyone has been told they can all be whatever they want to be, they are all going to be rich and important, and they are all going to change the world. The pressure of that is immeasurable. Tish Harrison Warren wrote a provocative post at the InterVarsity blog about this crushing pressure on her and those around her. She wrote about a college friend who dedicated his life to teaching in the most at-risk schools. After a nervous breakdown, he moved back to his hometown, working as a waiter. Gradually, he recovered from his fall from glory.

She writes, "When he'd landed back home, weary and discouraged, we talked about what had gone wrong. We had gone to a top college where people achieved big things. They wrote books and started nonprofits. We were told again and again that we'd be world-changers. We were part of a young, Christian movement that encouraged us to live bold, meaningful lives of discipleship, which baptized this world-changing impetus as the way to really follow after Jesus. We were challenged to impact and serve the world in radical ways, but we never learned how to be an average person living an average life in a beautiful way."<sup>2</sup>

As you heard her say, this desire for more, and the boredom with the ordinary, has infiltrated our faith. We are no longer content with the regular means of grace in life like faithfully attending church, reading our Bibles daily, loving our families well, while serving in average vocations for God's glory. We feel compelled to do something "big" for God. After all, that's what "real" Christians do, right? To really follow Jesus means to move to some village hut in Africa. To really follow Jesus means committing to personal poverty. Faithful following is out, radical is in. After all, we want our lives to count. We want to change the world for Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Rod Dreher, "Everydayness," Nov. 14, 2012 at [www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/everydayness-wallace-stevens/](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/everydayness-wallace-stevens/) (accessed July 7, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> Tish Harrison Warren, "Courage in the Ordinary," written Wednesday, April 3, 2013, at <http://thewell.intervarsity.org/blog/courage-ordinary> (accessed February 26, 2014).

This boredom with the ordinary affects church leadership as well. Seemingly gone are the days when a church can simply be faithful to worship the Lord, preach the Bible, love hurting people, and shepherd the flock. All the metrics have to be up and to the right. Growth, growth, growth. This year's attendance, giving, baptisms, all better be higher than last year. If not, we are failing. I drank that Kool-Aid for years. But this fascination with growth and numbers is just an Americanized version of Christianity that focuses more on budgets than Bible, metrics than maturity, and fame than faithfulness.

We were part of a pretty large, metrically successful church. But it was never enough. We had to become an emerging megachurch (1,000-2,000). And we did. But it wasn't enough, we set our sights on becoming a megachurch (over 2,000). We were growing every year. But that wasn't enough. We had to be "rapidly growing." And we eventually were, sometimes cracking 20% per year. But it was never enough. We only had one campus, and that's not good enough. We had to go multi-site. And we did. But it was never enough. Jodie and I decided to get off of that treadmill and go plant a church. But even in that process we found this same Americanized version of the faith. We went to the major metropolitan area of Boston, home to more than 4.5 million people, but only about 1% evangelical Christian. Any progress in that context is a win for the kingdom. But as soon as we got into the planning of it all, we were told it wasn't good enough just to plant a church, we had to plant a "church-planting church." It's all about multiplication. Ok, so we start figuring out what that looks like. Then I go to some training that was centered around, not planting a church, and not merely planting a "church-planting church," we had to start a movement of church planting in our city.

When does it stop? When can we step off that treadmill, not just as churches, but as Christians? Listen, I admire churches that are culture-changing churches, that are rapidly growing and multiplying. I admire Christians who are indeed called by God to change the world and do "big" things for him. You will meet one of them this next weekend. My friend, Josh, has been called by God to India, and further to Asia, as a missionary. The things God has him do is mind-boggling. You'll hear about some of that next week. He and his ministry are responsible for tens of thousands of people coming to Christ every year, thousands of churches being planted, and countless lives being changed. There are few people in the world I admire more than Josh. I am not opposed to anyone doing "big" things for God. It would be great if more people did that very thing.

But here's the thing...most of us are not called to change the world. Most of us won't be called to change our city. Most of us have enough trouble trying to change ourselves. The vast majority of us are called to relatively normal, ordinary lives. And that's ok. We aren't failing God if we don't do something "big" for him. Michael Horton, in his great book, *Ordinary*, writes, "Like every other area of life, we have come to believe that growth in Christ—as individuals or as churches—can and should be programmed to generate predictable outcomes that are unrealistic and are not even justified biblically. We want big results—sooner rather than later. And we've forgotten that God showers his extraordinary gifts through ordinary means of grace, loves us through ordinary fellow image bearers, and sends us out into the world to love and serve others in ordinary callings."<sup>3</sup>

TS – these truths about ordinariness, and contentment in a life of faithfully following Jesus is at the heart of what he writes to the Corinthians in our text for today. Now let's remind ourselves of some context of what is happening in the Corinthian Church.

People are being converted to Christianity out of a very pagan culture steeped in Greek philosophy and the Greek/Roman pantheon of false gods/goddesses. A major issue facing them is that the Christian sexual ethic is quite different from anything they've heard before. The Gospel, the Good News of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, has profound implications on their personal and private lives. These new Christians have experienced a radical salvation by Jesus, and are ready to make some radical changes to their lives. But their passion is sometimes misdirected. As we noted in the text right before this one that we looked at last week, some of these Christians are looking at the overwhelming sexual immorality in their culture and even in their church, and are taking a hard left at Albuquerque. They want to go full celibate in the name of honoring God. Noble, but misguided. For those who are married this is not the God-honoring decision. The God-honoring decision is to understand that God has given marriage as a good gift to bring fulfillment.

Some of them were even considering leaving their spouse in the name of following Jesus. Yet again, seems like a noble intention, but misguided. If you are married, your marriage is already part of your religious devotion. If you want to honor God in your marriage, staying in your marriage is the only way to do that. Now, Paul takes on a subset of that very issue, one that had not been addressed before.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2014), 14.

What about those who have converted to Christianity, but their spouse has not? How are we to view a spiritual mismatch in marriage?

v. 12-13 - <sup>12</sup> Now, I will speak to the rest of you, though I do not have a direct command from the Lord. If a fellow believer has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to continue living with him, he must not leave her. <sup>13</sup> And if a believing woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to continue living with her, she must not leave him.

There is no direct command from Jesus about this because he never faced this scenario. Jesus' ministry was exclusively within Israel. As he taught the Jews of his day, there was no such thing as a Jew being married to a non-Jew. They all shared the same basic faith foundation. But Paul's commission from God to go to the nations with the Gospel has created this new circumstance...a new Christian finds themselves now married to an unbeliever. Now what?

This kind of spiritual mismatch causes tremendous pain. For those of you are currently married to someone who doesn't share your faith, you understand more than the rest of us why this is a problem. When someone becomes a Christian, they discover a new way of life, new standards, new loyalties, new priorities, new desires. They are, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5, a new creation. What was maybe once a marriage with multiple layers of compatibility, now finds two lives that are, in many ways, out of sync.

This mismatch is equally problematic for the non-Christian spouse. They can feel like the victims of a bait and switch. This is no longer the person I married. They can feel betrayed and even abandoned. Davis Prior writes, "A Cape Town brain surgeon put it most movingly. When asked what he found so difficult about his wife's new-found faith in Christ, he stressed two things: first, she was no longer the person with whom he had originally fallen in love and whom he had decided to marry; secondly, there was another Man about the house, to whom she was all the time referring her every decision and whom she chose to consult for his advice and instructions. He was no longer the boss in his own house: Jesus gave the orders and set the pace."<sup>4</sup>

This is tough stuff. And do you know what is easier than having to endure it? Just leave. Again, the ugly scenario arises again in Corinth...in the name of honoring God, is it best to abandon your spouse?

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<sup>4</sup> David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 125.

After all, doesn't the Bible condemn marrying a non-Christian. Yes, yes it does. Ironically, it is written to this same church.

2 Corinthians 6:14-18 - <sup>14</sup> Don't team up with those who are unbelievers. How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness? <sup>15</sup> What harmony can there be between Christ and the devil? How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever? <sup>16</sup> And what union can there be between God's temple and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God said:

"I will live in them  
and walk among them.

I will be their God,  
and they will be my people.

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, come out from among unbelievers,  
and separate yourselves from them, says the Lord.

Don't touch their filthy things,  
and I will welcome you.

<sup>18</sup> And I will be your Father,  
and you will be my sons and daughters,  
says the Lord Almighty."

To those of you who are dating or engaged...this is God's Word to you. It violates God's will to enter into a one-flesh union with someone who isn't a believer. 1 Corinthians 7:39 says that if a woman wants to get married, it should be "only if he loves the Lord."

But that's not what we are talking about in our text for today. This isn't talking to single people. It is talking to those who are already married. In this we see God's very high view of marriage (which he should have since he's the one who invented it). Your marriage is to outweigh the other considerations. You are already in a one-flesh union with this person. If you are already married, stay that way. And he offers only one exception to this teaching...if the unbeliever wants to leave, let them go. V. 15 - <sup>15</sup> (But if the husband or wife who isn't a believer insists on leaving, let them go. In such cases the believing husband or wife is no longer bound to the other, for God has called you to live in peace.)

Paul offers 2 reasons for the Christian to stay right where they are in their marriage:

- 1) Your family is now set apart. V. 14 - <sup>14</sup> For the believing wife brings holiness to her marriage, and the believing husband brings holiness to his marriage. Otherwise, your children would not be holy, but now they are holy. In some way, and he doesn't spell out the dynamics of it, your spouse and your children are set apart (that's what the word

for 'holy' means. Your unbelieving spouse has some sort of unique relationship with God because of your faith. This does not mean that your spouse is saved because you are...that contradicts the very truth of the Gospel. This is likely Paul defending the fact that a Christian is now having a sexual relationship with a non-Christian. Remember, this church is filled with religious zealots looking to do radical things to honor God. Now that someone has become a Christian, aren't they now unclean by uniting with a pagan? In chapter 6, Paul taught that very truth about uniting with a prostitute. He said it's a sin against your own body, you are already united with Christ, how could you combine the holy with the unholy? Isn't that what these new Christians are doing? No. Apparently in marriage, it works the other way.

William Barclay – "The two have become one flesh, and the wonder is that in such a case it is not the taint of the idolatrous beliefs but the grace of Christianity which wins the victory. Christianity has an infectious quality which involves all those who come into contact with it...In a partnership between a believer and an unbeliever, it is not so much that the believer is brought into contact with the realm of sin, as that the unbeliever is brought into contact with the realm of grace."<sup>5</sup>

John Calvin - 'The godliness of the one does more to "sanctify" the marriage than the ungodliness of the other to make it unclean.'<sup>6</sup>

This special "sanctifying reality applies not only to your unbelieving spouse, but also to your children. Are your children to be looked down upon because one of their parents isn't a believer? Not at all. They are set apart and marked by God as well. Holiness is contagious.

- 2) The possibility of conversion. V. 16 - <sup>16</sup> Don't you wives realize that your husbands might be saved because of you? And don't you husbands realize that your wives might be saved because of you? Though this is a challenging reality to live out in normal, everyday life, this is a very real possibility, and is not to be taken lightly. 1 Peter 3:1-2 - In the same way, you wives must accept the authority of your husbands. Then, even if some refuse to obey the Good News, your godly lives will speak to them without any words. They will be won over <sup>2</sup> by observing your pure and reverent lives.

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<sup>5</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 75.

<sup>6</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Black's New Testament Commentaries, A. & C. Black, 1968), 165.

Michael Green sums up the entire issue like this: "If one of you has been converted since marriage, then there is reason to suppose that the good Lord is at work in your family. And you pray, and you try to live a consistent life, so that if your partner is not won by your word, he/she may be won without a word having been said by the godliness of your life."<sup>7</sup>

TS – In the name of honoring God, their frenzied religious devotion made the Corinthian Christians want to make some radical move in their life. Paul's instruction was simple... stay right where you are. Live faithfully in the ordinariness of the marriage you already have. And if this commitment to living in the ordinary wasn't clear in this text on marriage, he makes it abundantly clear in the next couple paragraphs. Notice the repetition:

v. 17 – **17 Each of you should continue to live in whatever situation the Lord has placed you, and remain as you were when God first called you. This is my rule for all the churches.**

v. 20 – **20 Yes, each of you should remain as you were when God called you.**

v. 24 – **24 Each of you, dear brothers and sisters, should remain as you were when God first called you.**

One scholar called v. 17-24 a club sandwich. Between these three statements in v. 17,20,24, he inserts two illustrations...circumcision and slavery. These were the two primary dividing issues in their context. Circumcision was a means of religious division, between Jews and the rest of the world. Slavery was a means of social division, between the aristocracy and everyone else (something like 80% of the Roman Empire were slaves). Apparently these Christians wanted to jump into new religious and social categories in their society. Again, what is Paul's teaching? Stay right where you are.

Following Jesus does not mean that he will uproot the existing you and put you into new circumstances. What is much more likely is that he will put a new you into your existing circumstances. Maybe the way to making your life count is let God change you in the midst of your normal, everyday life, and work in and through you in your home, your marriage, your job. Notice how Paul phrased it in v. 17 – **This is my rule for all the churches.** That's the first time that phrase is used in the Bible. So the first "rule" of Christianity is to be faithful where you are. Following Jesus doesn't have to be radical. Maybe 'radical' in our world looks a lot like faithfulness.

## COMMUNION

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<sup>7</sup> In a sermon preached in St Aldate's Church, Oxford, in December 1979, as quoted in David Prior, [\*The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church\*](#), *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 128.