

Sermon 1 Corinthians 7: “Don’t back off. Don’t jump in”

Rev. Bruce Stanley. Sermon text and audio available for download from www.stphils.org.au

We’ve been to Tasmania twice as a family. One of the best things we did both times was to visit the “zoodoo” zoo in Richmond. At the zoodoo zoo, you have, shall we say, a lot of freedom...

You can say hello to kangaroos, you can get close to the alpacas, feed the emus, and pat a **zebra!** BUT they also have lions... which you can feed... with barbecue tongs... through a wire fence. It’s one of those times when you think: “Should I really be doing this?!”

In today’s world, that’s not a bad question to ask when it comes to our daily life – “Should I really be doing this?” This is the sort of question Paul is answering when he writes to the Corinthian church.

Corinth was a society full of sexual immorality. If they had the internet, it would have been absolutely terrifying I think! There were religious cults with temple prostitutes. Divorce and adultery was common.

And so the Christians were struggling. So Paul wrote them this letter to answer some of their questions. They were asking questions about marriage and divorce, remarriage, sex and circumcision.

Some of them wanted to back right away from the lion’s cage, and others wanted to jump in!

And that’s what we need to think about today. Some of us are backing away from the world, perhaps TOO much, because we are afraid of slipping into worldly ways and worldly thinking. So we back RIGHT away from the world, and expect every other Christian to be as cautious as us. But some of us are stepping *inside* the lions’ cage. Jumping in with whatever the world does.

Paul wants them to be able to stand at the fence and recognise what’s OK and what’s not. But there is an important context to his answers:

Verse 26: “Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is.”

What is “the present crisis”? This is a young church. Corinth is a city of sexual immorality, prostitution, and divorce. There were issues of incest and adultery within families – including church families (see chapter 5).

On top of that, there was a food shortage, so food was very expensive. The Emperor created an imperial cult – so the government told people which gods to worship. So there was a lot of pressure on these new Christians.

So, **because of this present crisis**, Paul says that it’s not a bad idea to just: “remain as you are”. Stay at the fence. Let’s have a quick look at some of the questions and answers:

- **Question 1: Should I get married or stay single?**

It doesn’t matter! Make up your own mind. There’s no wrong or right. But if you stay unmarried, there are a lot less things to worry about in life and you can spend more time focusing on God! But it’s up to you.

- **Question 2: Should I stop having sex with my husband or wife? Should I divorce them?**

Context is important here! There were a lot of marriages in Corinth where one person had become a Christian. So now they are married to a non-Christian. And the Christian is thinking: Is it wrong, now, to sleep with this non-Christian? Is it wrong to be married to them? And Paul says:

Stay married. Sex is part of your relationship together. You belong to each other. Don't deprive each other of sex, unless you both agree to stop for a short time.

But also, God hates divorce (10-16). So if you do separate, try and reconcile your relationship. Jesus allows divorce, in Matthew 19 (verse 9), when a spouse is unfaithful. It could be sexual unfaithfulness. It could be other types of unfaithfulness – such as domestic abuse or violence. Today, our church has a firm stance on domestic abuse. We always encourage reconciliation, BUT we **never** encourage people to stay in a dangerous, abusive or harmful relationship. God hates divorce. It doesn't mean that it's not allowed. It means he hates it because of the sin that makes it necessary sometimes.

Paul also says that if you stay married to a non-believing spouse, you can share your faith with them and they might be saved. And you're also able to bring up your children in the faith. BUT, if the unbeliever chooses to leave, if they walk out on you, you're free from that marriage.

- **Question 3 (vv18-20): What about circumcision? Should I get circumcised? Or uncircumcised?**

Stay as you are! Circumcised or uncircumcised makes no difference to your faith!

- **Question 4 (vv21-24): What should slaves do?**

Keep calm and carry on. Of course, if you can **legally** gain your freedom, that's great. But if you remain a slave, you can still follow Jesus. It makes no difference to your faith.

- **Question 5: (vv39-40): What if my spouse dies?**

Then, Paul says, you're free to remarry. But you must marry a believer.

So you can see the overall pattern here. There is a lot of confusion for new Christians living in a Corinthian culture. Some want to step **right back** from the fence and others want to step **inside** the fence.

So Paul's advice is very practical to their situation, "because of the present crisis", stay where you are. Stay at the fence. Verse 17 is a great summary for us:

- **17: "Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them."**

Wherever you are in your life at the moment, get married or don't, but listen to God's call in your life **NOW**, and live as a believer.

We suffer from the same problem as the Corinthians – some of us are stepping back from the lion's cage, and others are jumping in. Instead, be faithful right where you are, right now.

- **Billboard**

This billboard was up near Sydney airport a few years ago. The business, Ashley-Madison, encourages people to use their "dating service" to have an affair.

THIS is the lion's cage of our culture. One of many. Some Christians are stepping into that lion's cage. Others are stepping back.

Obviously, we don't want to step into that. Adultery is bad! But many Christians are. Continually. Not just with sex. But with pornography. And lust. Lying. Cheating. And what about other sins of indulgence? Over-spending on things we don't need. Over-indulging in anything we desire.

Perhaps as you spend up big on a holiday or clothing or cars or entertainment or food, you might think “Should I be spending this much on these things?”

Perhaps as you finish another week of work, you ask: “Should I be working this many hours?” Or “Is this job ethical?” Or “Am I just in this for the money, or the power, or the prestige?”

Perhaps you reflect on your relationships and think: “Am I honouring my parents? Should I be spending more time with my children? Am I obsessing too much about getting married, or having kids?”

Maybe you ask questions like the Corinthians: “Should I leave this marriage? Should I get married? Should I stay single?”

Some of us are backing right away from the fence. Others are jumping in the cage. But Paul’s answer is right there in verse 17:

- 17: “live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned...”

Today, you are in THIS situation. Live as a believer in THIS situation. Right here. Right now. Today.

If you struggle with the ethics of your workplace, you may have to leave. But while you’re there, be faithful. Have a Christian influence on the people around you.

If you’re in a struggling marriage, perhaps you may be able to work things out, or perhaps there will be circumstances when you need to leave. Perhaps it will come to that. Until then, live as a believer in your situation now.

Why does Paul say this? Verses 31:

- 31 For this world in its present form is passing away.

When the kingdom of God comes, there will be no more marriage, or mourning, or sadness, or possessions... the present form of the world is not permanent! The order of this world is passing away. It doesn’t mean your job or your marriage isn’t important. Just remember that these things are part of a **temporary** world.

Too often, when life is difficult we say: “I need to put God to one side JUST FOR A MOMENT to focus on other things. “God will take second place **just for a moment.**” But our relationship with God is of **first** importance! He is the **permanent** one in our life. This world is temporary.

So Paul asks: Where has God called you right now? Are you living as a believer in that situation **right now**?

There is going to be a time this week when you have to make this decision... **back away** from gospel opportunities, or **jump in** with the world, or **stand firm** at the fence. God has placed us IN this world right at the fence. Don’t back away from where he has placed you. But don’t jump into the cage. Don’t back away from the world. Don’t jump into it.

Where God has placed you, right now, BE a Christian. Live as a believer. Live **deliberately** and **intentionally** as a believer. Don’t back away from the world. But don’t go along with it. Stand at the fence, and stand firm.

Let’s pray.

- *Where we are backing away... and losing focus.*
- *Where we are going along... and jumping in.*
- *Help us to stand firm.*