**1 Corinthians 7:29-31** January 21, 2018

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Epiphany 3

*1 Corinthians 7:29 What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; 30those 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; 31those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Priorities**

The time was short, very short. He had four seconds. The ball was in his hands on the 30 yard line with four seconds left and he was supposed to step out of bounds to stop the clock. If he just followed the play, they could *maybe* tie the game with a field goal. But he could see thirty yards of green in front of him. If anyone caught him on those 120 feet of grass, he would be the goat. Time would run out. They would lose. He would bear the blame. Four seconds. In a split second he had to make a choice. Yes, I am talking about a football game from last week with its unbelievable ending. He decided to run for the end zone, and he made it for the win!

What would I have done? Four seconds left, a fraction of a second to decide, a team’s destiny in the balance, millions watching waiting to judge me as an idiot or a hero based on a single split-second decision. Glad I don’t have that choice in front of me! Or do I?

God’s word today appeals to Christians on the basis of a similar urgency, though not quite that much urgency, but higher stakes. ***“The time is short,”*** God’s word tells us. It is time to stop playing around, to stop wasting time and get our priorities straight. We thank God that we have more than three tenths of a second to change our course of action, more than four seconds to reach our goal. But like a game clock, our time will come to an end.

When Paul tells us to realign our priorities due to the shortness of time, we need to be clear what Paul is talking about here—and what he is not talking about. Paul is not talking about coming to faith, to being saved. This book of the Bible is directed at Christians who already know and trust Jesus as their Savior. These people are under God’s grace and forgiveness. They have eternal life. Which is exactly where you and I are, right? We don’t have to *hope* that *maybe* we will get to heaven, because we are already under grace.

These words of God *are* saying to Christians, “Now live like it!” Live like people who are going to heaven. Live like you owe God your life and more. Live like you heaven is your home, your treasure; and that the treasures of this world are Christmas-tree tinsel by comparison.

One of the ugliest things in the world is privileged people who take it for granted. People who waste money, just because they have it. People who are really smart and never apply themselves because they can get by without studying or putting the time in. People who disrespect people of a lower social status, and view them as a lower form of humanity. Taking privilege for granted is about the ugliest thing in life, against which there is no law, though it is offensive to all, not least of all God.

And that is what Christians are like who don’t make God a priority. I am talking about people who know their Savior, and are lazy Christians precisely because they are sure they are saved. We know that faith in Christ saves. We already have it, so why get all worked up about it, why spend weekend leisure time or disposable income on it. Do you see a privileged person who takes it for granted?

Putting God in second place to what I want, that is breaking the first commandment. God is to be in first place in our lives. Every time he is not, we have sinned against our God who has saved us. And if we toy with God’s grace, we may find God one day yanking the grace away from us.

Paul, when he tells Christians that the time is short, he is talking about our life as Christians. He tells Christians to keep the end in sight, the goal line, the joys of heaven. Let us live like saved people who are thankful for what they have been freely given.

We daily make choices about how we will use our time, our talents, our treasures. God’s chief reminder about the things of this world is that they all pass away, and quickly. Last year’s clothes fashions are now ordinary, next year will look hideous. The funny video that made you laugh, by the end of the day you probably won’t remember it. Cars that cost us half a year’s salary or more will rust and stop running. No matter how impressive you exercise regimen, you cannot put off death more than a couple extra years. Stop putting your hopes in this world’s short-lived treasures.

Which is not to say that these pursuits are without value. We need clothes and transportation. Games can provide quality time with family and friends. Funny videos add laughter to life; the Bible itself tells us *“A cheerful heart is good medicine.”* These things have their place. But their place is second place or lower because, ***“this world in its present form is passing away.”***

Now it sounds like I am talking out of both sides of my mouth. On the one hand I say that things of this world have no intrinsic value, then I call them blessings. What is that?

Think of it like vacation. When you go on a vacation, you usually have a main goal. Let’s say you want to get to Disneyworld in Florida. Now, that might not be the only thing you want to do. You have a dear aunt in Nashville you haven’t seen for a couple years, you have always wanted to see the civil war battlefield at Chattanooga, and take a tour of the Coca-Cola headquarters in Atlanta, etc. but you are definitely going to get to Disneyworld. So you only do those other things *if* you can still get to your major objective. If not, then Coca-Cola, Chattanooga and your aunt will just have to wait. You prioritize.

Our reading mentions some of the things we need to keep out of first place: ***“From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; 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; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them.”***

There is nothing wrong with any of the things that Paul mentions. ***“Those who have wives should live as if they had none”*** is not advocating mass divorce. Just a few verses earlier he had said, *“Each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.”* The verse after our reading adds context, *“An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs… But a married man is concerned about… how he can please his wife… and his interests are divided.”* God’s word says that “family” and “marriage” are blessings, but not excuses to avoid your obligations to God. (Don’t let your tour of Coca-Cola keep you from getting to Orlando.)

***“Those who are happy [should live] as if they were not.”*** And yet elsewhere Paul says, *“Rejoice always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”* Happiness is a tremendous blessing, but don’t make it the goal of life. (Don’t get spend all your time in a truck stop that specializes in tourist trap memorabilia. Sure you have to stop there to fuel up. But get back on I-75!)

God’s many blessings do have a place. God blesses us with food and clothing, maybe even sometimes with luxuries. But don’t get wrapped up and lost in them! All of these blessings, even though they are from God, are part of the present form of this world. They are passing away.

There is an overused saying, “You can’t take it with you.” It is a cliché, but it still makes the rounds because it is so true. There will come a time when we must leave this world. You can be buried in your favorite car. In won’t go where you are going. You can have them stuff your coffin full of cash if you want. It won’t buy you a thing in the afterlife. You can be like the Egyptian pharaohs and have rooms full of gold and food and chariots and even servants. None of it goes any farther than that hole in the ground. When Jesus comes and all are raised from the dead, all the things of this world will be consumed in fire. All that will cross over to that world is your soul and your resurrected body.

These words of God encourage us to live for that future life. Jesus said it this way: *“Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys”* (Luke 12:33). Be heavenly minded.

This is what we see happening in our other readings. Did you see Elisha? He is out there plowing his field, getting ready for the spring planting, dreaming about how, with God’s blessings, he could have a really great harvest this year. Then this man (Elijah) comes out of nowhere, puts his jacket on him as a signal to leave it all, and Elisha leaves his partially planted field.

Simon, Andrew, James and John were in their boats enjoying the freedom of being their own bosses, owning their own fishing business, and Jesus tells them to leave it to follow him, and became “fishers of men.”

Or if the Bible is too removed in space and time… about 150 years ago there was a Chinese man named Lough Fook. He was a Christian who felt compassion for his fellow Chinese working as indentured servants in the South African mines. So Mr. Fook sold himself as an indentured servant, essentially a slave, for a term of five years term. His goal was to carry the Gospel to his countrymen in the mines. He toiled in the mines and preached Jesus. Before his five years were up, Lough Fook died; but not before he had brought many to their Savior.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Elisha, Jesus’ disciples, Mr. Fook, all embody verse 31 of our reading, ***“Those who use the things of the world [should live] as if not engrossed in them.”***

Don’t misunderstand God’s word here. There was nothing wrong with being a farmer or fisherman. Jesus did not tell James’ and John’s father to stop fishing. No, Zebedee could keep on fishing. Elijah did not call all of Elisha’s servants; just Elisha, to be a prophet. Mr. Fook became a slave to save some. Not all of us are. And that is ok. Who would play the piano? Who would defend our nation? Who would serve as judges and teachers and full-time mothers if we all did that.

Let judges, teachers, full-time mothers, soldiers and musicians remember that this world in its present form is passing away. Now that Jesus has been revealed to us, our first priority is live for God, wherever he has put us in life.

We offer this service, not because of a pastor who laid a guilt trip on us, but because we know what our God has done for you, and will do for you. Amen.

1. Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (pp. 1175–1176). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)