

This World Is Passing Away
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1 Corinthians 7:29-31

²⁹I 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, ³⁰and 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, ³¹and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

When Paul writes, “the present form of this world is passing away,” he expects Christ’s imminent return, ushering in a new world order. This language is not unlike Jesus saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.” What are we to do with these readings when we know that Paul was off, when we regularly dismiss those who would predict a specific date for the end of the world / Christ’s return? Do Paul’s suggestions hold any weight whatsoever in our day?

What do Paul’s suggestions even mean? Whatever you are or do, behave as if you weren’t or don’t. All because the present form of this world is passing away and the appointed time has grown short. Why would that make us change our ways? His instructions are not different from Jesus saying, “repent, and believe in the good news.” Behind it all is a reorienting toward God.

Some have understood Paul’s words to mean that we should leave everything behind because soon we won’t need it anyway. But I, and others, would counter that and suggest that his meaning is not so simple. And his instruction is not only relevant if Christ is returning any day now. Instead, Paul’s words rightly serve as an everyday reminder. This reorienting toward God affirms above spouse, above temporary grief and temporary joy, above stuff, above all worldly things should be a relationship with God. To repent is to re-prioritize God above all else. Re-prioritizing does **not** make everything else of no value, as some might interpret Paul. Re-prioritizing simply puts everything else in its proper place,

beneath God. Another way of putting it would be as Professor Ruthanna B. Hooke says, “All other aspects of our lives – relationships, possessions, or any and all other dealings with the world – must be ordered toward the mission of God.”¹

Professor Ted A. Smith speaks of the way that Simon and Andrew re-ordered their lives when Jesus called, saying, “Jesus does not just ask them to add one more task to their busy lives. He calls them into new ways of being. When Simon and Andrew leave their nets, they leave a way of life.”² For us, each day as followers of Christ we are called into new ways of being. Each day. Their lives, and ours, are to be ordered toward the mission of God. In that context, let’s revisit what Paul says.

“Let even those who have wives be as though they had none.” Do not make of your spouse a god, for one. Perhaps the more universal challenge in marriage is not that but refraining from somewhat of the opposite. How often is it said that we take out our frustrations, our anger, our disappointments with the rest of the world on those we love? If we are ordered toward God’s mission, a mission of love and honor and respect for all as equals, then our call is to extend that same care especially toward those closest to us. Over the years working with youth, I’ve observed how much easier it is for youth group advisors to love kids exactly as they are because the advisors don’t need to tell the kids to pick up their socks off the floor, aren’t invested in whether they practice their bassoon or not, don’t see them at their grumpiest selves. It’s not so easy to focus first and foremost on loving our kids when we get wrapped up in the raising of them and it’s not so easy to focus first and foremost on loving our spouses when we get wrapped up in our expectations of them. If we reorient toward God, though, we must be willing to love them as if they weren’t our spouses, as if they weren’t our kids, as if they weren’t our parents.

“Let...those who mourn [be] as though they were not mourning.” Paul offers an explanation to his own writing in another letter, his first to the Thessalonians. “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”³ There is nothing wrong or inappropriate with mourning. If we are reoriented toward God, our hope in the promise of the resurrection is the lens through which we view our loss.

“Let...those who rejoice [be] as though they were not rejoicing.” There is equally nothing wrong or inappropriate with rejoicing. Reorienting prompts us to ask if what we rejoice would also be what God rejoices. The birth of a child? Certainly. A great deal on shoes? Not so much. That we have made strides in feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless? Yes, and even more so when all are fed, when all have homes, not only in this country but in this world. When we begin to look at life shaped by God’s mission, we begin to feel the urgency in the nearing reign of God. With that viewpoint, Professor

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 282.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 287.

³ 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

Hooke says, “this urgency can give us a healthy dissatisfaction with those structures of the world that hinder God’s coming reign, and spur us to devote ourselves wholeheartedly to changing those structures as part of our participation in God’s work in the world.”⁴ Our rejoicing changes because we seek greater things to rejoice, our hopes of what can be rejoiced grow.

“Let...those who buy [be] as though they had no possessions.” This comes back to the rejoicing, doesn’t it? A now converted shopper-for-the-thrill-of-the-deal, a woman named Kristin had taken a trip through Laos and Cambodia and her worldview was changed. She writes, “With eyes wide, I realized my selfishness. For wanting, and wanting, and wanting. And never, ever, thinking about the impact that my want had on the rest of the world.”⁵ She continues, “I slowly saw the impact of my consumption taking a toll on the environment, and on others. It became a personal thing. And I realized that minimalism isn’t just a lifestyle decision, but a chance to *save humanity*. That’s a pretty bold statement: *minimalism will save humanity*. But over the following year, I became more convinced of the power that lifestyle choices have on changing the world. My time abroad changed my perspective—not only on what it means to live with less, but to *live*. To live is to make choices, day in and day out. And for a long time, I chose a good bargain, retail therapy, and new trends over the chance to reduce pollution, carbon emissions, and landfill waste.”⁶ When we reorient toward God, which means re-prioritizing the value of the lives of others, the value of possessions changes.

“Let...those who deal with the world [be] as though they had no dealings with it.” If we are aligned with the mission of God, we can do nothing but change the way we live in the world. We cannot continue valuing what the world values when we are mindful of what God values. We are compelled to repent. We are compelled to leave one way of life in order to take part in a new way of being, as invited by Jesus.

You see, because Christ has come the present form of this world has already begun passing away. Even if you were to only once remember the values of God over any others, that is one more occasion, one more way in which this world is becoming closer to the reign of God fully realized. Multiply even just one occasion by all those who trust that what Jesus taught was the way to bring us to God and then how much closer God’s reign comes. Then consider that, for most, one occasion is only the beginning of a lifetime of attempts at reorienting, and remembering to reorient, our lives toward God. The present form of this world is passing away!

Each time you heed Paul’s words, treating your spouse as you would treat others, mourning with hope, rejoicing with caution, buying with others in mind, dealing with the world as we believe God

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 282.

⁵ <http://www.theminimalists.com/kristin/>

⁶ *Ibid.*

would, as we know Christ did, the appointed time grows shorter and this world is ever more quickly passing away. So may it be in each of our lives.

Let us pray: Loving God, help us feel the urgency to live as you have created us to live, we pray. Amen.