

## I Corinthians 7:29-31 Having As Having Not (Again)

There is a book of sermons from the 1950's by a German theologian named Paul Tillich, who emigrated to The United States in 1933 to escape the Nazi regime in his homeland. The title of the book is, "The New Being," and is taken from the second sermon, why not the first I do not know.

In the sermon, Tillich wrestles with the meaning of the phrase from Galatians, "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters, but only a New Creation." It is a powerful sermon. Once read, I have never been able to forget it. One of the reasons I have not forgotten is because of a very suggestive line in it about how to have a healthy spiritual life. The line is, "Having as having not."

I was moved enough by it that I named a sermon after it (at least once). Although I have not done so in the 2 1/2 years since coming to Delaware, I may have mentioned it once or twice. And so again today.

But today I would like to read a larger section from Tillich's sermon to give it more context, just a few sentences, because it seems to me that in our text in I Corinthians Paul is saying the same thing.

Here is the larger set of sentences,

"Having as having not - this is the right attitude toward everything great and wonderful in life, even religion and Christianity. But it is not the right attitude towards the New Creation. Toward it the right attitude is passionate and infinite longing."

## I Corinthians 7

In Galatians, Paul is talking about "New Creation" in the context of a debate about a religious ritual, circumcision, and what he says is very challenging, and in its time, controversial. What he says is that circumcision doesn't matter very much.

Here In I Corinthians Paul is talking about marriage and his view of it is that, with respect to what for him was the present situation, marriage doesn't matter very much either.

This discussion is the one place where Paul openly admits that he is not giving a word from the Lord, but only his own opinion about things. He believes that marriage and family is a distraction from the Lord's work, allowed to us only because we are unable to control our sexual desires, and he believes marriage to be okay for those who need it, but also that it is clearly better to be single, and singly devoted to one's calling in the Lord.

It is in the context of this discussion about the usefulness of marriage that Paul made the statements

that we have read this morning, and they represent a sentiment not only similar to Tillich's in his sermon on The New Being, but serve also as a point at which Paul crosses back over from his opinion to God's Word to us. We should listen.

“What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives (or husbands) 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.”

Paul Tillich did not say it, but this text may well have been the source of his language, “having as having not.” Live the life you have been given, accept the bad things but do not be strangled by them. Celebrate the good things but do not strangle them, holding on so tight as to squeeze the stuffing out of them, refusing to let them go when it is time to move on. Have them, but do not possess them. Do not be possessed by them.

### Time Is Short

The driving force of Paul's idea here is clearly his interpretation of the Christian belief that we are in the Last Days and that the time is short.

Nearly every generation of Christians has people in it who are convinced that the shortness of time means

the end of time will come within their lifetime. This immediacy is clearly what Paul believed. He thought there was no time for marriage and family because the end of the age was upon them.

Paul was wrong. The time *is* short, but one must not conclude that it is so short the end will come in our lifetime.

I, of course, make no claim to know when the end will come, either sooner or later, but I would caution against too strong a notion that it is immediate or that it is so far away as not to be a concern. Accepting the fact that we do not know is part of spiritual health.

What is clear is that regardless, becoming too attached to this life and its things will get a hold of us, those concerns wrapping their fingers around our necks and squeezing the life out of *us*.

### The World Is Passing Away

According to the scientists who have educated the world about geological time, the universe in its present form was created by an explosion they call the Big Bang around 14 billion years ago and the galaxy and solar system and the planet Earth were formed about 4 billion years ago.

On the measure of this geologic time scale, if this 14 billion year span was spread out over a year, the

appearance of humans has occurred in the last second. In terms of one year, humans showed up on December 31 at 11:59.59 pm.

They also tell us that our star is old and will one day die. Long before that happens, life on earth will become impossible. In terms of geologic time, the time is short, the end is near, even if it is still millions of years away.

When Paul says the time is short he isn't really talking about the same thing. But either way, the world is passing away, it is best not to become too attached.

This is the great spiritual lesson, whether one is thinking about the importance of religious rituals, marriage and family, the proximity of the end, or something else; wealth, and power, education, pleasure, it does not matter.

Can we learn it?

Having as Not Having

We are left with this suggestive phrase, "having and having not." It tells us to live in the present, to enjoy the blessings of life, to accept the meaningfulness of life, to have courage in the face of loss, and to give thanks; and it tells us, like so many other texts in the Bible, not to be afraid.

It tells us not to fear change or try too hard to achieve a perfection here on earth, there is no such perfection. It allows us to work for the betterment of ourselves and our world without becoming either obsessed or discouraged.

And it, most importantly, points to the most important thing, a relationship with the source and meaning of life, the author and finisher of our faith, the one and only hope.

Many times in the scriptures the instruction is given:

"Seek the Lord, and live," Amos 5:6

"Now devote your heart and soul to seeking the Lord your God," 1 Chronicles 22:19

"But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul." Deuteronomy 4:29

". . . you who seek God, may your hearts live." Psalm 69:32b

"Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness . . ." Matthew 6:33

"And all these things shall be added . . ." but let this seeking out of God and the New Creation that God has brought to us in Christ, be the only infinite and passionate longing that we have.

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