

## FAITH REFRACTED: 2. IDENTIFY

SHERARD EDINGTON

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

“What time is it?” is a common question. To answer this question we usually glance at our watch or our iPhone and respond something like, “It’s 11:24.” When I lived in Scotland, I loved that the Scottish response was not 2:30 but “It’s half-two.” If we were at school, the appropriate answer might be, “It’s 4<sup>th</sup> period.” And for you here right now, the answer is “It’s sermon time.”

For most of us, time is simple. It progresses forward unchanging minute by minute, second by second. Time here is the same as time anywhere. A clock is a clock. But thanks to the theoretical work of Albert Einstein, we have been introduced to the idea that time is elastic, that passage of time is relative to the observer. Physicists have devised experiments which have proved Einstein's theories. For example, clocks that are in jets flying above the earth record time more slowly than stationary clocks. It’s imperceptible to us, but it happens. This becomes more pronounced as the closer one comes to traveling at the speed of light. Legend has it that Einstein devised his theory of time dilation while riding in a car with his children who kept asking “How much longer? Are we there yet?”

The ancient Greeks had two concepts of time—two separate words for time. The first word is *chronos*. *Chronos* describes the ordinary, linear progression of time from minute to minute. When we ask what time it is, we are asking for *chronos* time.

The other Greek word for time is *kairos*. There is no single word in English that encompasses the meaning of *kairos*. In Greek, *kairos* means “a good or proper time for action.” Its roots go back to an association with archery. In archery, *kairos* denotes the optimal time in which an arrow may be released in order to find and penetrate its target. *Kairos* is a decisive act predicated in precision.

*Kairos* is also present in our Bible. This word is found 86 times in the New Testament. In scripture, it refers to God and the appointed time of God's purpose. *Kairos* is when God will act. It may be a moment; it may be a season. *Kairos* is a time that we anticipate, a time that we watch for. And we find *kairos* in our reading for today from Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

The core of Paul's teaching revolved around *kairos*. Paul believed that *kairos* was near. God's great purpose would be attained at any time. Paul believed that the return of Christ was imminent.

Around the year 50 AD, the Apostle Paul, while on his second missionary journey, spent eighteen months in the city of Corinth gathering believers, teaching

them the gospel of Christ, and establishing a worshipping community. Once he felt that the church could stand on its own, he moved on to the next mission opportunity. But he kept in contact with the parish in Corinth, and from his connections, he learned that conflict and dissension were appearing within the congregation. There were issues having to do with sexual immorality, communion, the role of women and worship, eating food that had been sacrificed to idols, and more.

In response, Paul writes a letter back to the church filled with encouragement, guidance, and support. In this letter he seeks to address their concerns and their questions.

Our reading for today is brief—only three verses. But it is part of a larger section in which Paul responds to specific questions from the congregation about marriage.

Remember, Paul believed that Christ's return was imminent. Therefore, life should be led with great urgency. The people in Corinth were trying to integrate this belief with the ordinary events of their lives. In other words, they were trying to live their faith. If God's *appointed time* was near, was it therefore proper to get married?

Think about it this way. Let's say that you are planning to get married. You have found the perfect partner—your soulmate—and you've got the wedding all planned out. But then you learn that, with utter certainty, the second coming of Christ will take place just three days after your wedding. Do you go through with it? Do you get married? Yes? No?

Or how about this, your wedding is approaching, and you learn that the coming of Christ will happen six months following your wedding. Do you go through with it then? Or what if it's a year? Or this, what if you knew that Christ was coming soon, but you weren't exactly sure of the day? What would you do then? These are the questions people are grappling with.

In this section in Chapter 7, Paul addresses their questions. We would assume that Paul would be in favor of marriage, especially if it is between believers. But he doesn't say that. In general, in light of what he calls *the present crisis*, Paul favors marriage if only to satisfy personal passions.

To the widowed and the single, he suggests that they remain that way and not get married. To the married, he recommends that they remain married and not get divorced.

But what about those who are betrothed (or engaged) and committed to marrying someone but not yet married? What should they do? Paul says that even if it means that they will lose their deposits with the caterer, engaged couples should

call it off. He is clear that it would not be a sin for these people to marry. Instead, he says, *those who marry will experience distress in their life, and I would spare you that.*

So, what does he mean by distress? We all know that marriages, at times, can be difficult. Paul has surely witnessed this. What I really think he is saying here is not *distress* but distraction—that marriage is a distraction from preparing for the coming of Christ.

Although the issue Paul is addressing here is marriage, as in most things, the issue is not really the issue. It is more. Marriage might be a distraction for a follower of Christ, but it is not the only distraction. This is Paul's underlying message to the Corinthians: how do they live lives focused on God and not distracted by the ways of the world, whether that distraction is marriage, or grief, or possessions, or more?

In our reading for today, Paul informs the people that the *kairos*, the appointed time, has grown short. Paul is turning up the dial on the urgency of the peoples' lives. The time of God is closer than they think. His advice to them is to respond accordingly, to live with urgency.

Although the initial inquiry that the Corinthians had made to Paul was about marriage—should they or shouldn't they—Paul uses their question as a segue to the larger issue. The real issue here is not does one get married in the face of *kairos*; the real issue is how do we live our lives in God's time? If God is like an archer with the bowstring pulled back just waiting for the optimal time to let the arrow fly, how should we live our lives knowing that this could happen at any moment? How do we live in Messianic times?

And this is where we get to our reading for today. In response to the imminent *kairos*, Paul offers the believers in Corinth five examples of model behavior, five ways they should live as Christians. Each of these five pivots on a phrase which when translated literally means *as if not*. The followers of Christ should live their lives differently than the world lives them. They are to live *as if not*. Paul uses marriage as the segue into this section. He says that:

1. The Christ followers who are **married** should live *as if not* they are married. The Christ followers who are married should live as if they had no spouse.
2. Likewise, the Christ follower who is **mourning** should live *as if* they are *not* mourning.
3. The Christ follower who is **rejoicing** should live as if they were not rejoicing.
4. The Christ follower who **makes a purchase** should live as if they owned nothing.

5. The Christ follower who **deals with the world** should live as if they have no dealings with it.

Why are Christ followers to live in this way? *Because*, as Paul states, *the present form of this world is passing away*. There is an urgency in the Christian life.

This is the heart of Paul's thinking. This world is in transition. It will soon pass away. We are to live our lives under the immediacy of *kairos*. This is not to say that we are to ignore the world. No. What Paul is saying is that the followers of Christ should disengage from the distractions of daily living so that they can engage the world as one who is *in Christ*. They should be able to step back and disentangle themselves from the messiness of the world and look at the world through fresh eyes.

The obvious problem for us is that Paul wrote this letter two thousand years ago. And, well, here we are. It is difficult for me to preach the urgency of *kairos* over a span of 35 generations in which Christ has not returned, in which we have not experienced the fullness of the resurrection as Paul expected. But that does not mean that Paul's words are empty. Far from it. As Christ followers, we should live our lives disengaged from the distractions of the world yet fully engaged as Christians. Our faith should be our identity. It should be the prism by which we look at the world.

We should live as if the *kairos* has arrived and God's arrow is flying through the air. We should live in that moment between the letting loose of the bowstring and the arrow striking its intended target.

The irony is that it is our nature to do the responsible thing—to make intricate plans for the future, to always save for a rainy day, to construct buildings that will not fall, to build congregations that will not falter. Our obsession with the future distracts us from the demands of the present. As Paul writes, *The kairos has grown short... the present form of this world is passing away*.

As Christians today, we should live our lives in the light of the coming values, relationships, and justice of God's kingdom. We should not live in ordinary time; we should live in messianic time.

In this, the first month of the year, when the world is blanketed in white snow, it is a perfect time to reassess our purpose, to look to the future, but also to the present, to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit within our midst, to ask ourselves, "What time is it?"