

Did you know that we’re under the two-minute warning? The Apostle Paul hears the clock counting down the last few ticks before Jesus comes again. With the future of God’s judgment and the salvation of the human race looming, people should behave “*as if they do not...did not...were not...*” With these words Paul seems to suggest that Christians live a kind of detached life, even those who most surely have spouses, who certainly mourn loved ones, who often have things to rejoice about, who at times buy possessions, and who inevitably interact with and use “*things of the world.*”

Yet while Christians are doing all these necessary things for normal human life, their reasons for living are not limited to only things such as these, nor are these matters their most urgent preoccupations or highest concerns. They live for their Lord Jesus, who is invisible, but who is Lord of all nonetheless, and he will soon be visible and his reign vindicated. In light of the sure and certain future that the Apostle envisions, everything in the present matters only as it is relative to the coming of the Lord. All that we have in this life is temporary, as Paul sees it. How can we argue with that? “*In its present form [it] is passing away.*”

Verse 29 says that, “*the time is short.*” The verb also means “to wrap up” as in wrapping the bodies of those who have died, as was and is the custom in the Middle East. But in the context of time being short it makes a nice connection in English with our sense of completion that we express when we talk about “wrapping it up.” Verse 31 speaks about the world “*in its present form.*” The cognate verb is used by Paul in Romans 12:2 in a text that may help us interpret this one: “*Do not be conformed to this world...*” The early Christians struggled, as we do, to learn how to live with a “detached involvement.”

In the second Christian century a letter was sent to a person named Diognetus. Nothing is known of the author or exact circumstances of the writing. “The Epistle to Diognetus is addressed to a person who wants to learn about the Christian view of God and the Christian lifestyle, and also how Christianity differs from the beliefs of both the Greeks and the Jews” (Rodney A. Whitacre, *A Patristic Greek Reader*, p. 48). In explaining Christians and the Christian life, the letter states: “They live in their own native countries, but as aliens; they participate in everything as citizens, and yet they endure everything as foreigners; every foreign country is their native country, and every native country is foreign...Christians live in the world, but they are not of the world” (*Ibid*, p. 210).

These few verses of Scripture are the heart and the interpretive key to chapter 7. Whether Paul is referring to the end of the physical universe or the end of the “world as we know it,” he’s asking the Christians at Corinth to make a “leap to unfaith,” not a flight from reality. He’s advocating for Christian freedom.

Making what is close to a 180 degree turn from the discussion of our bodies that we read last week in chapter 6, Paul asks them not to believe that life as we see it and experience it is the ultimate reality. Our source of life is not in this world and our goal is not found within this world. Our allegiance, and ultimate loyalty, is beyond the patterns of human interactions, the structures of power, and overarching cultures that maintain the world system. What seems stable to those around us is fluid to us—passing away. We might say that the water in the world’s bathtub is already circling the drain.

We might also read this with Paul’s later counsel in Ephesians 5 for those who are married as a way of showing reverence for Christ. But in verse 29 we hear him say, “*From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not.*” His suggestion about marriage here in 1 Corinthians makes me think of a school teacher and her young students on the next to the last day of school on a beautiful sunny spring

day. She's ready to finish the school year and so are the students. They are biding their time, because their hearts are elsewhere—at least their eyes are elsewhere: looking outside beyond the classroom at the beckoning world. The Christian attitude of having possessions but not being possessed by them can be described as “holding on, but holding on lightly.”

The theme in our Scripture this Sunday is that everything in our lives is made to be relative to the Christ-event. Like in marriage, so in mourning, and in rejoicing, and in buying things. Paul is not meaning to shock his readers, but rather to give them perspective from which they can live more meaningful Christian lives. Ruth from Omaha wrote to the *Reader's Digest* last year, saying: At a recent wedding I attended, the groom and groomsmen stood at the altar in eager anticipation of the bride's arrival. My three-year-old niece, sitting next to me, was also filled with anticipation. Pointing at the two men standing in front of everyone, she shouted, “I wonder which one she'll pick?”

We have the choice of holding on to this world with a death grip or *holding things lightly*. The meaning of 1 Corinthians 7 is that Christians should live in this world as it has been transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus so as not to be ruled and dominated by the deceptive demands of this world. All our concerns in this life are relative to God. All things should be held lightly.

Of course, it's not wrong to have a family, to be in business, to rejoice or weep, or to buy things. The church teaches that we can serve the Lord and grow in holiness through any honest task, whether we are single or married. We do these for the Lord; we inwardly detach from them. Our daily activities are placed on the altar, offered up to God as a gift.

When Paul says, “*the time is short*” I think that he means that all the time we're given must be relative to God. Those of you that are J.R.R. Tolkien fans will remember a scene from *The Fellowship of the Ring* where Frodo and Gandalf are in the Mines of Moria and Frodo is wishing that things could be different. One of the most beautiful parts of the movie, in my opinion, is Gandalf's answer to Frodo's anxieties and concerns. “I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo. “So do I” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

Remember in the story of Jesus calling his first disciples: *They dropped everything and followed him?* There are two Greek words for time in the New Testament. The word for “time” used here in 1 Corinthians is not *chronos*—as in minutes and hours and days—but *Kairos*, “opportune time.” *Kairos* time does not tell us what time it *is*, but what time is *for*. Our time here is to serve the Lord by ministering to the oppressed, the lonely, the forgotten, and to love God and love our neighbors. When Jesus called the first disciples he promises that these fishermen would now fish for people for the benefit of their salvation. He was indicating to the fishermen from Galilee that it was the right time for them to engage in a more advanced kind of fishing.

Similarly, in our lives the time that we are given is meant to be used relative to God's purposes. Jonah was a prophet who learned the hard way how to use the time that the Lord gave to him. In Jonah's story let's remember the example of the Ninevites. The prophetic message is very short (one simple sentence, only five Hebrew words). “*Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed.*” When we consider the Ninevites as an example, we too can turn our lives around when we're given warnings. We get implicit and explicit warnings: from our own bodies warning us of problems and from our doctors warning us about unhealthy habits, some which we choose to ignore. In relationships we also get implicit and explicit warnings, some of which we ignore.

The Ninevites were apparently ready to turn to God at that time after a *Verbum sat sapienti*, meaning, “A word to the wise is sufficient.” The word sent is from Yahweh, a genuinely prophetic message, and is ecstatically received by the Ninevites. Belief. Public fasting. Sackcloth. Turning from evil ways. They literally turned themselves around. It wasn’t regressive, but a progressive forward movement. It was clearly the beginning of a new way of living.

You’ve probably never heard of Elisha Grey. Elisha Grey was an Illinois electrical engineer who had the silly idea that two people could speak with each other from distant points using nothing but liquid-based microphones and wire. In the year 1876 he strung a large spool of telegraph wire throughout the Highland Park Presbyterian Church to showcase his latest invention—the telephone. Low and behold, the crazy thing worked. The sound of the first telephone was born. And, in church no less!

But Grey had a much harder time swaying his investors, especially his dentist—a fellow church-goer! And, to make matters worse, the simple-minded dentist went public by saying the telephone was “a waste of investor’s money!” So Grey’s invention went nowhere for two years. He missed the Kairos moment for securing a patent for his invention.

During that two-year downtime, another inventor was working on a similar concept. All of you know this fellow’s name...? And as Grey brought his plans to the patent office, he learned that Alexander Graham Bell had dropped off his own plans and applied for a telephone patent just two hours earlier. The courts later found in Bell’s favor and awarded him the rights to the telephone invention—all because Elisha Grey was two hours late with his application.

From the opening moments of Pentecost, the church was designed to be distinct from the world. God designed it that way. Scripture underscores this distinction with words like “peculiar” and “transformed” and “unblemished.” We’ve been called to be separate, yet we seem to be terrified of being different. We feel the need to popularize the church, to broaden its appeal. Rather than claiming our spiritual birthright, we work overtime to hide any distinction.

Remember the Rich Young Ruler who asked Jesus, “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Mark’s gospel says “*He went away sad because he had great wealth.*” Jesus didn’t offer him easy-believism—even if it meant losing a great prospect. To the Savior, the gospel was not cheap. The multitudes came from far and wide to hear Jesus, because the multitudes desperately wanted something the world couldn’t offer.

Paul is offering something the world cannot offer. Things will not always be as they are. “*The time is short.*” Even legitimate things in the order of this world pale in significance with the in-breaking of the holy. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus describes our new priority as “*the kingdom of God and his righteousness*” As for the kingdom of this world, it will be dissolved: “*The earth and everything done in it will be laid bare*” says Peter in his second epistle (2 Peter 3:10).

How then are we to live? I believe the implications of the gospel for God’s people in any generation are crystal clear—that we should not try to live on such a high spiritual plane that we ignore the things of this world. But instead, while we are in this world, we should absolutely “hold on lightly” to the things of the world. Why is that so important?

“*The world in its present form is passing away.*” Amen.