

*Sermon on 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 prepared for Grace Church by Jonathan Shradar*

Something very unexpected happened this week. If you had asked me last Sunday I would have even told you it would be impossible for it to occur. From where I was sitting it felt like a big enough deal that some people had been praying for it to happen and still others praying that it would never happen. But it did. Despite the odds, despite what those with opinions on it would say... I won a raffle.

I never win raffles or drawings or anything where the odds are never in my favor. That doesn't mean I haven't tried on occasion and likewise while attending a celebration of a year of business at Massage Heights, I figured a few dollars to support a great cause was well worth it - without hope of winning. And then I won - and Stacy and I reflected on the truth that we never win anything!

The challenge is that I don't believe in luck - at least what we would define as luck - random chance, the universe shining down on me... No I have been awakened to the truth of God's sovereignty and his complete control in even the little things. But that belief doesn't keep me from wanting to win. To succeed, to get to the next level... whether it be income bracket or spiritual maturity... And so I can find myself trying to rig the system... maybe if I can just say the right prayer or accomplish the right task, become righteous by my own strength, then the one at the helm of the cosmos will grant me just one victory, one breakthrough, one raffle win.

If only I can make God happy with me... then I would be rolling in it. You can probably make your own list of the things you do to make God happy - maybe that is even why you are here this morning. And it totally makes sense. That is how the world works, shoot, that is how living in my house works. But then I open the Bible and I am brought to beautiful reminder after reminder that this is not exactly how God works, how he pours out favor, what he expects from those he calls his own.

And it is to one such reminder that we turn this morning in our study of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24. The gospel, the life, death and resurrection of Christ is such a game-changer that there are significant implications that follow. And here, the church, claimed by Christ, recipients of his grace, are asking about those implications - 'how now should our lives change because we are in Christ?' 'What do we have to do to be "solid Christians?"'

Paul's answers is simply 'be owned by Jesus and stay where you are.' In our study this morning of these verses, the big idea that should come shining through is:

**The Christian can live on mission where they are because God is already pleased with them in Christ.**

**1 Corinthians 7:17-24** This is God's Word.

Paul, the author of the letter and the first pastor of the church in Corinth, has transitioned in his letter to the questions the church had for him and the first he tackles is the realities of marriage once someone becomes a believer in Jesus.

Practically none of the Christians in Corinth “grew up in a Christian home” and so their experience is vastly different from many of ours - they came to the realization that the radical truth of the gospel brought radical change to their lives and they wondered if they should stop having sex all together or maybe everyone should become single - at the least separate from their unbelieving spouses. And Paul says no. Stay married if you can and let God use it to make you holy and affect your family.

For the church, these questions of how should life change, what should we do, come from a genuine desire to rightly follow Jesus, but are also tainted by the idea that they would be more spiritual or favored if they could only accomplish change in this way or that. As if self-righteousness would earn for them a new status, a new station of life or at least pay back the gift of grace they had been given.

And still Paul says, stay where you are... yes life changes, your identity and reality, what you live for will shift but your location and vocation may not and that is pleasing to God. The Christian life is about living as assigned, on mission with God and being owned by Christ.

### **1) Living As Assigned**

“Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned... to which God has called them.” “Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.”

Here Paul is continuing the thought that comes just before, married people sticking to it, remaining in relationship, because God might use them to save others. This then becomes the same point in remaining in the physical condition and even in the work that they do. And he uses now two specific examples to show that they are not what matters but something else is to be a priority.

Before we think through those two things though we have to understand the “calling” he is describing here. When we read this, with a modern American eye, we might be inclined to think of the grand calling of our lives - we articulate it by what we were made to do; and God does make that kind of call on lives, we see it elsewhere, based on gifts he gives to those in the church they will be called to take on specific roles. But that is not the calling Paul is talking about here.

Here it is Kaleo... being called out, being summoned into something, into relationship with Christ. So we could rightly read these verses as - stay where you were when God saved you - when you were awakened to the gospel and the gift of grace than redeemed you. So the sense is that the Christian is assigned where they are... how they are... moving from married to single does not matter... you are to live the life of a Christian where you are.

This isn't remaining in sinful things... biblically there are plenty of calls to holiness, setting aside sinful patterns. Paul is not saying if you were saved when you were a habitual liar, go on lying. This is about staying in your current situation.

It is not a call to stop pursuing change for good reasons - providing for your family. He is saying don't think that updating your status will give you more righteousness or earn for you some earthly reward...

In Corinth, they allow their discipleship to become a matter of following accepted practices, certain patterns of behavior, cultural currents. "The Corinthians were seeking social works-righteousness. They wanted to gain acceptance from their peers and God by changing the externals." Um

Paul puts down the judaizing of Christianity that was common in the day. For the Jews that came to faith in Christ, they desired for all the Gentile believers to take on the traditions, customs and patterns of Judaism - otherwise to them there is no way you could be a Christian. So seeking the uncircumcised to be circumcised was adding something to believing in Jesus to be in the faith. It is not circumcision or uncircumcision that counts for anything.

So the physical reality you are in, is not what you should be concerned about. He also says our vocational reality is not what we should worry about...

"Were you a bondservant, were you a slave, when called? Do not be concerned about it."

Now slavery in the first century was not as we might imagine from the tragedy that was American slavery and even modern human trafficking. When we think of slavery, we view it as individuals or groups of people taken in forced labor against their own wishes. In Corinth and the rest of the Roman world however it would have been more like a working and patron relationship. For a price, perhaps to pay a debt servants would be exchanged, or a person would sell himself into slavery. And the patron or owner would provide for the servant as they labored for him. Many servants would essentially buy out their own contract and become freeman, and many would choose to remain in servitude because it was better than fending for yourself.

Paul is saying if you were a servant don't stress about it. And remaining there is not absolute, if you could gain your freedom, go for it, but changing your status is not earning God's pleasure.

"Paul's concern is not that they retain their present social setting, but that they recognize it as the proper one in which to live out God's call." "Paul means that by calling a person within a given situation, that situation itself is taken up in the call and thus sanctified to him or her." Fee

Precisely because our lives are determined by God's call, not by our situation, we must learn to continue there as those who are 'before God' ... and let the call of God sanctify to oneself the

situation, whether it be mixed marriage, singleness, blue-or white-collar work, or socioeconomic condition.

And it is in these situations that we live on mission with God.

## **2) On Mission With God**

“For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.” v. 19. Each is to remain in the station of their calling and live faithfully toward the Lord, following his word and his purpose for our lives.

This is the place in which Jesus is not a mere buddy helping us get the wants and desires of our flesh or heart, he is Lord reigning over all things and giving us an assignment to pursue.

“In a word, the application of Paul's principle to cultural distinctives is this: Don't fret and don't boast about your present state of cultural distinctives; they are of little importance to God compared to whether you are devoting yourself, soul and mind and body, to obeying his commandments, which are all fulfilled in this: "Love your neighbor as yourself.” Piper

In his letter to the Galatian church, which is focused primarily on this issue, adding burden to belief, and he says

**Galatians 5:13-14** “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. [14] For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In our text by saying that keeping the commandments of God is important, and in Galatians saying the law is fulfilled, “he implies that Christians still have a moral obligation to follow the moral standards found in God’s “law” in Scripture. Obedience is not a means of justification, but it is a crucial component of the Christian life.”

And we have to be careful, we can slip and view this new obedience as the way of righteousness, as if I could boot-strap myself to earn more from God. Which honestly could lead me to despair because honestly I have not been all that good at obeying... at living this mission. But Paul doesn't say that obedience is earning either, he says that it is all a response to a transaction that already happened. You can not gain God's approval of you by your location or vocation... or even your obedience wherever you are... you live in obedience because he already approves of you and has claimed you as his own.

One's proper response to grace is obedience to the will of God... This obedience then is our mission in the place that God has placed us.

Luther's view of the Christian as genuinely bi-vocational. "He is called first through the gospel to faith in Jesus Christ and he is called to occupy a particular station or place in life. The second sense of this calling embraces all that the Christian does in service to the neighbor not only in a particular occupation but also as a member of the church, a citizen, a spouse, parent, or child, and worker. Here the Christian lives in love toward other human beings and is the instrument by which God does his work in the world."

Normally a believer is not called to a new occupation; her old occupation, her station, location and vocation; is given new significance.

There are any number of New Testament texts then that we can visit to hear more of what obedience looks like for the Christian. Right in the previous section in reference to marriage with unbelievers, we see that obedience may lead to salvation hinting at its purpose.

**1 Timothy 2:1-6** "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, [2] for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. [3] This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, [4] who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. [5] For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, [6] who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time."

Live where you are... live good, in quiet, kindness, in peace that your neighbors will notice...

**2 Corinthians 5:20-21** "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. [21] For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

The mission we are on with God, the commandments we keep, are about loving our neighbors as ourselves. Being agents of reconciliation between God and man - instruments in the process.

This is obedience we can do wherever we are, right where we are. But it is hard. And that is why it is not about earning but responding.

You can only be on mission with God because you are owned by Christ, you have been bought with a price.

### **3) Owned By Christ**

**7:22-23** "For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. [23] You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men."

This is what truly matters. Those that believe in Jesus have been purchased by his sacrifice for us. He now has full and permanent claim on us, he owns us. And in that ownership or union with Christ, he has given us his righteousness, his favor, his ability to stand before God, to be with God.

Through His representative union with us, Jesus assumed our obligation to perfectly obey the Law of God and obeyed it to the letter.

By Jesus' perfectly obedient life lived for us, by his death on the cross as our substitute - his meeting the wrath of God against our sin, by his earth-tilting resurrection, we have forgiveness, new life, purpose and the power to live it. And it is meant to be lived, right where we are. Any man or woman in Christ has been so remade that earthly status, or lack of it, is irrelevant.

The striving to prove our worth; The attempts at self-righteousness; The revolving effort to be good enough for grace, it is all over and done with. And we dare not return to the old slavery of makeshift ladders to God... we are Christ's.

“Our calling has eliminated the option of belonging to ourselves. We belong to another, Christ.”  
*Fee.* To Jesus, all we owe is total allegiance... right where we are. Right where he puts us. And we can do it, because we are his.

**The Christian can live on mission where they are because God is already pleased with them in Christ.**

Where are you? How might you live this mission? How might we apply this to our lives today?

**Live from God's pleasure** - We often hear remarks like “you have to live for something...” the gospel though call us to live FROM something. From the cross, from Christ's redeeming work to own us.

If you don't believe in Jesus this morning, all you have to hope in is your own ability to arrive, to elevate your status to something valuable to give you credibility and earn some level of respect from other people. Know that no matter how far you go, it will never be enough, and it will never make you right with the One who created you. But he came to clear the way for you, to update your status based on his effort and his expertise. Believe in him, be granted this identity and live.

Believer, God rejoices over you in Christ. He is pleased and approves of you. You are now free to live! To choose obedience, to reflect his grace to the world, to love your neighbors. Not to prove your worth but to reveal his. Be reminded of his pleasure in you. Remind other believers and live.

**Don't waste your place** - "Wherever we are, we need to be faithful. Where we are right now, that is our call at this moment, and we need to remain and be faithful. Our present is loaded with significance because God is with us." Um

"for you younger people who have not entered a profession yet, the implication of our text is this: When you ask yourself the question, "What is God's will for my life?" you should give the resounding answer: "His will is that I maintain close fellowship with him and devote myself to obeying his commandments." God's revealed will for you (the only will you are responsible to obey) is your *sanctification* (1 Thessalonians 4:3), not your vocation. Devote yourself to that with all your heart, and take whatever job you want." Piper

**Lean into it** - This mission, this obedience is not easy and we won't always keep it... But we can get back up time and time again and lean into obedience because we belong to Jesus, and he is the good patron that provides for us, shelters us and empowers us to do it. "We must remember that ultimately the work of securing our identity with God has already been finished. That is where our true rest lies. Our true rest lies in the already finished work of Jesus Christ." Um

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Seth's story - master degree, experience, proven track record, and yet he finds himself in transition having moved back to his home state, valeting cars to pay the bills... he could spend all of his energy focused on the vocation he deserves.. Or the one that would make him more appealing to God. But he would miss the opportunities he has had to share Jesus with his co-workers, to talk about what is really important in life. And he would miss the joy of abiding with God...

Just as Jesus said in the great commission, 'as you go, where you are, make disciples... and I am with you until the end of the age.' Paul tells us that "in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God." Experiencing the presence of God, experiencing the joy of knowing him and never being alone as we live his mission.

May the Lord awaken us to the value of where we are that we would experience his presence, his joy, for his glory and our good. .