

Marriage & Singleness: A Series in 1 Corinthians 7

“Called to Contentment” (1 Corinthians 7:17-24)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 6/2/2013

Introduction

- ❖ This is the time of year for graduation and that means having to attend graduation ceremonies. It’s the time of year for young graduates to hear how special they are, how they need to shoot for the moon, go for gold, chase their dreams, nothing is impossible, etc. It’s that time in their lives where we fill them with aspirations of upward mobility, of moving on up in life, of climbing the professional or social ladder.
 - ▶ In our culture, to settle with where you’re at in life, to just accept what you’ve got, is to underachieve. You’re considered a slacker. We’re always pushing ourselves (or being pushed by parents or peers) to be better. No one settles for status quo. We want to better our situation with a better education, better job, better house, better family.
 - In our culture, this is normal behavior. These are normal expectations. So much so that, a passage like ours today probably won’t be well received, much less make sense to many people.
- ❖ Here in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is writing to Christians who are spiritually discontent. They’re looking at where they are at in life, and they’re having a hard time seeing it as a place where they can really live out the Christian life. A number of them are contemplating a change in scenery, a change in circumstances.
 - ▶ It’s surprising how much we have in common. Christians today can feel equally discontent. We look at our work life, school life, love life, or family life, and we have a hard time seeing it as a place where we can really live out our call as disciples of Jesus. We feel strongly that we need a change in life.
- ❖ If that describes how you’re feeling, then you’re probably not going to like what Paul has to say in today’s passage. It runs counter to the prevailing attitude of our day. **Instead of automatically assuming a change in life circumstances is the way to cure a discontented heart, Paul will say that we should actually stay where we are, and the change that is needed is a change in our perspective towards what it means to live out the Christian life in whatever situation you’re found.**
 - ▶ I’ve divided this message into two parts. First, we’ll examine the ancient biblical principle that Paul is laying out, especially seeing it in its original context. Then, we’ll consider some modern implications for us.

The Ancient Principle

- ❖ Now before I identify the ancient principle in our passage, let me remind you of the context in chapter 7. As we’ve gone through this chapter, we’ve seen that one of the problems going on in the church of Corinth was a misunderstanding of how devotion to Christ ought to affect ongoing relationships and statuses in life.
 - ▶ There were some in the church who believed that true devotion to Christ depended on one’s commitment to sexual abstinence, to a life of faithful celibacy (v1). That kind of thinking led some to contemplate severing the marital and social relationships to which they were tied.

- So there were married believers trying to live like celibate, single believers. Some couples thought of going so far as to change their marital status, to leave their marriages behind (vv10-11).
- ❖ Then there were those who became Christians but their spouse remained an unbeliever (vv12-16). For the sake of purity and devotion to Christ, should these believers make a change and dissolve their marriages?
 - ▶ Paul's answer is No. They should remain. They should not divorce their unbelieving spouse (vv12-13). But he does allow a change, if the unbelieving partner deserts the believer. In that particular case, the Christian is no longer bound. But again that's the exception and not the norm. The norm is to remain in the condition in which you were called and in this case, as a married person.
 - ❖ Now Paul has more to say to those who are seriously contemplating major life changes, especially those who were betrothed (engaged) to be married (vv25-38). They weren't fully committed to the married life, but they were practically there. Should they make a change and end their engagement in order to pursue a celibate, single life for Jesus?
 - ▶ Before Paul gets into that, he speaks directly to the underlying biblical principle that has been guiding his apostolic counsel throughout this chapter.
 - ❖ In our passage, vv17-24, Paul expresses this ancient principle three times in the span of eight verses. Notice in v17, "*Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.*" Then in v20, "*Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.*" And finally in v24, "*So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.*"
 - ▶ Let me sum it up for you. This is the ancient principle undergirding chapter 7: ***Each one should remain in the calling in which he/she was called (by God to Christ).***
 - ❖ Now before we can understand how we ought to apply this principle, we need to clarify a key word used frequently throughout our passage. It's this word "call" (*kaleo*). It shows up eight times in this chapter, seven as a verb and once as a noun.
 - ▶ That one noun is found in v20 and literally translates into the term "calling". Look there again, "*Each one should remain in the condition [calling (*klesis*)] in which he was called [*kaleo*].*" The word "calling" here refers to what theologians call your vocation, your station in life, or (as the ESV puts it) your condition.
 - ❖ Your calling could be that of a doctor, an accountant, a banker, a salesmen, a student, homemaker, a pastor. But a calling (a vocation or station) is not limited to just your form of employment. It also includes a calling to be single or married, to be a parent or child, to be Asian or Caucasian, to be white-collared or blue-collared. **Your calling encompasses all the circumstances of your life. It's who you are and where you are at right now in life.**

- ▶ **But notice how within this calling – within your particular life situation – another call reaches you.** “*Each one should remain in the [calling] in which he was called.*” Or in v17 if you translate it rather literally, it says, “*Only, as the Lord has assigned to each, as God has called each, in this way walk.*”
 - Paul is distinguishing between two calls. One call is your calling, that vocation or station the Lord has assigned to you. But the other is the call that God issues by which you come into fellowship with Christ through faith. Theologians call it the effectual call (or converting call) of God.

- ❖ It’s this second usage of the word “call” that is primary in Paul’s writings. Consider chapter **1:9**. There Paul says, “*God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*” Everyone has a vocational calling (a station in life), but if you’re a Christian, you’ve been called in another sense.
 - ▶ So the principle Paul is explaining in vv17, 20, and 24 is that a Christian should remain in the life situation you were in when you were converted, when you were called by God into fellowship with his Son. Or as we’ve already said: Each one should remain in the calling in which he/she was called (by God to Christ).

- ❖ Now I’m sure you have questions and objections flying around in your head. *Are there no exceptions here? This is a principle that is absolutely binding on all Christians?* Obviously no. We already mentioned the exception Paul gave to those whose unbelieving spouses deserted them. A change in their calling (condition) from married to unmarried is permitted.
 - ▶ As well, those who were converted in the midst of an immoral or criminal course of life were called to leave their sinful lifestyles behind. That would include a prostitute selling herself for money or a gladiator killing others for sport. Paul is not recommending they remain in that calling if they become Christians.

- ❖ But for the Corinthians, their confusion had to do with whether they should leave behind their callings when they became Christians. Paul’s answer in v24 is “*in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.*” **You don’t have to abandon your calling if you can remain in it with God.** If your faithfulness to God is not compromised, then you don’t have to change your calling (vocation).

- ❖ Having said that, I’m fully aware that Jesus did call twelve men to leave their professions (their fishing nets, tax collector booths, etc.) to become his disciples. But that was an exceptional call that was not normalized in the rest of Scripture.
 - ▶ For the most part, new converts remained in their callings. Lydia kept selling purple dye. Paul, along with Priscilla and Aquila, kept making their tents. Zacchaeus remained a tax collector, although he stopped cheating people. These disciples of Jesus kept their same families and same professions. That was the norm.

- ❖ **So Paul is not saying you *may not* change life circumstances but that you *don’t have to* change those circumstances in order to faithfully live out the Christian life.**

- ▶ He's not saying that you're locked into that situation for life. But he is saying that when you are called into fellowship with Christ – all of you is called. Not just your soul. Not just your spiritual life.
 - All of your life – your school life, work life, social life, love life, family life. All of it is sanctified (set apart). Now all of it can be a platform, a stage, upon which you live out your discipleship to Christ.

The Principle Applied to One's Ethnic Status

- ❖ Let's see how Paul applies this principle in two cases. In the first case, in vv18-19, he applies it to those attempting to change their ethnic status. Here Paul mentions circumcision and uncircumcision, which is theological shorthand for Jew and Gentile. His point is that neither needs to change their ethnic identity. **No one's ethnicity should be seen as an obstacle to living out our call to Christ.**
 - ▶ Let's read starting in v18, *“¹⁸Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. ¹⁹For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.”*
- ❖ Now most Jews who became Christians felt no need to reverse their circumcision. We never hear about that in the New Testament. But some, living in a prominent Roman city like Corinth, may have been tempted to hide their Jewishness in hope of enhancing their social status. Because Romans considered circumcision to be barbaric.
 - ▶ Now when it comes to Gentile converts to Christianity, we know that many were tempted to seek circumcision. In this case, not to improve their social status but their religious status. They were being told that to be true members of God's people, true sons of Abraham, you need the mark of circumcision.
- ❖ To that Paul says, *“For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.”* Now that is a radical statement, and it would have been an offensive to any Jew who took pride in his ethnicity.
 - ▶ In fact, Paul's words should offend anyone who takes pride in their ethnicity. Think about it, the way we would argue today is to claim that every ethnicity is special. *“Asian is special. White is special. Black is special. Latino is special. So why would you want to change your culture?”*
 - But Paul is arguing, *“Asian counts for nothing. White counts for nothing. Black counts for nothing. Latino counts for nothing. The only thing that counts is keeping God's commands. That's why you shouldn't change your culture.”*
- ❖ That's offensive. But Paul is willing to offend because of what's at stake. **To allow even the suggestion that any one ethnicity or culture is more conducive to Christianity or better enables a person to live out the call of God is to deny the gospel itself.** There is no privileged race in the kingdom of God – well that is, since Jesus came and died and rose again.

- ▶ According to the gospel, there once was a privileged race, Israel, the Jewish race. Yet in the fullness of time, God sent one True Israelite who faithfully kept his covenant and obeyed his commandments. This man was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. This Israelite was no ordinary man. He was the Son of Man, the Son of God, who died for the sins of men and rose again to reconcile them to God.
 - The gospel says all who unite with Jesus through repentance and faith are now spiritual descendants of Abraham and co-heirs with Christ. It doesn't matter what race you are or culture you come from. Christ is all and in all (Col. 3:11).

- ❖ *Do you see why Paul could not assign circumcision or uncircumcision any religious significance?* To do so would be to diminish, even to negate, the significance of the cross (of Christ crucified) – calling insufficient the grace of God in Christ. You need Jesus AND you need to adopt this or that culture. That amounts to a false gospel.
 - ▶ **So Paul's point is that whatever ethnicity and culture you are in when the grace of God found you is perfectly conducive to live out the Christian life.** Do not privilege Western culture, American culture, or Chinese culture as more favorable or more representative of the Christian faith. And therefore do not try to adopt another ethnicity or culture, not your own, thinking it'll be better for you spiritually.

- ❖ Missionaries have learned this valuable lesson. In the past, Western missionaries made the mistake of trying to convert natives to both Christianity *and* Western culture. But in the past generation, they've applied Paul's principle in the various ways they contextualize Christian preaching and discipleship to the ethnic culture of the people they're reaching. Because every ethnicity, every culture, is compatible with Christianity. That's Paul's point.
 - ▶ Now there is also a lesson for us, as members of an 2nd-generation ethnic congregation in America. **If Asian counts for nothing and American counts for nothing, then we must never let allegiance to our ethnic culture trump our allegiance to God and his commandments.** If allegiance to our Asian heritage prevents us from keeping God's commandments – like loving our neighbor as ourselves or making disciples of all nations – then we've violated this principle. May we be convicted to prioritize our identity in Christ and obedience to his Word.

The Principle Applied to One's Social Status

- ❖ Next, in vv21-23, Paul applies the principle to those who want to change their social status. He's going to address Christian bondservant (i.e. slaves), and what he has to say might surprise you because his message is basically, "*Don't worry so much about gaining your freedom, focus rather on serving the Lord where you're at.*" Just listen to v21, "²¹*Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it.*

- ❖ *Now how could Paul say it's nothing to be concerned about?* We're talking about slavery! Was Paul pro-slavery? No, Paul never commends slavery as a God-pleasing institution. But he does speak often of regulating the practice. There is a big difference between endorsing a practice and regulating it within a particular social and cultural context.

- ❖ There is also a big difference between 1st-century New Testament slavery and 17th-19th century New World slavery. In the 1st-century, one common reason you were a slave is because you voluntarily chose to be. It was usually to either pay off a debt or to gain Roman citizenship, but either way it was a choice.
 - ▶ These slaves could also reasonably expect an eventual release. Freedom was usually offered by the age of thirty. Also, unlike New World slavery, this kind of slavery was not race-based. You couldn't tell someone was a slave by the color of their skin.

- ❖ **My point is that New Testament slavery was more favorable than New World slavery. But at the same time, being a New Testament slave was still not as favorable as being a New Testament free person.** The Bible never commends the practice and neither will I. In all forms, slavery is a denial of the full personhood of individuals created in the image of God. To treat anyone more as property than as person is inherently wrong.
 - ▶ And that's why Paul doesn't command the slave to remain a slave (as he commanded the circumcised/uncircumcised to remain as is). Instead he says not to be concerned about it, and then adds a parenthetical statement at the end of v21, "*(But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)*"

- ❖ So if your master offers you a chance at freedom, then take it. **But his point is that being a slave does not put you in a worse position when it comes to your discipleship to Christ.** Just as Paul was telling the married believer that he should not make celibacy his central ambition in life (thinking it will improve his spiritual life), the Christian slave should not do the same with freedom. A change in status alone won't improve your walk with God.

- ❖ Now in vv22-23, Paul backs up his words with a theological basis. "*22For 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. 23You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men.*" The theological point he's making is that, for those called in the Lord, the status of slave is no longer what defines you. Your new identity is the Lord's freedman.
 - ▶ In v22, it literally says, "*For the called-in-the-Lord slave is the Lord's freedman.*" *Called-in-the-Lord* is like a modifier describing the unique identity of this slave. He's not just any old slave. He's a *called-in-the-Lord* kind of slave.

- ❖ And now his identity is rooted in being the Lord's freedman. In Roman society, *freedman* was a specific term of former slaves who had been released, but they still had an obligation towards their former masters. Of course the relationship has changed.
 - ▶ Now it was between a patron and servant. The freedman owed his patron (former master) lifelong allegiance and would occasionally offer his services or gifts. And likewise, the patron looked after the welfare of his freedmen.
 - Paul's readers understood the significance of what it meant to be the freedman of a great and generous patron. Some freedmen took so much pride in their patrons that on their tombstones they would add that they were the freedman of so-and-so.

- ❖ So Paul is telling Christian slaves to not be concerned with their status as slaves because the truth is – you’ve been bought by Jesus, that is, he’s paid the price to redeem you from slavery and the price was his own life that he gave up on the cross. The truth is your true identity is as a freedman of the Lord, who is looking out for your welfare and well-being.
 - ▶ And those of you who were free when you became a Christian, you were actually bought by Christ with the price of his own life. The truth is your true identity is as a slave of Christ and he is your new master.

- ❖ The point is that Christians have a new identity that supersedes their present social status. Paul goes on to say, “*Do not become bondservants of men.*” In other words, if you know your true identity, then don’t be enslaved again by human reasoning disguised as a form of high spirituality that tries to dictate changes in your social status in order to please God.
 - ▶ Again Paul is not saying you must remain in the social circumstances you were found in when converted to Christ, but he does mean that these circumstances will not hinder your calling to live out the Christian life.

The Modern Implications

- ❖ Let me conclude then by offering some modern implications of this ancient principle for Christians today. **1) God is not against life changes per se but against life changes triggered by a lack of faith in the sufficiency of Christ for us.**
 - ▶ As we’ve already said, the command to remain in the calling in which you were called is not absolute. Students, for example, by the very nature of their calling will experience an eventual change in vocation. You’re not to be a student for life. Eventually you change your status from student to worker.

- ❖ It's important to also clarify that God is not against all attempts to change jobs. **But his point is that you can experience a spiritually-fulfilled, spiritually-blessed Christian life whatever your job is.** You don’t have to change jobs for that reason. To do so would indicate a lack of faith in the sufficiency of Christ for you.
 - ▶ Ephesians 1:3 says that Christians have been blessed by every spiritual blessing available because we are *in Christ*. That’s it. It’s not “in Christ” AND quit your job and become a missionary or work for the church. It’s not “in Christ” AND become a monk/nun living a celibate life. You can live out a blessed and abundant life no matter what your circumstance so long as you have Christ.

- ❖ That leads to our second implication. **2) The call of God is not an opportunity to switch your life situations but a chance to sanctify them.** Paul told the believer who was married to an unbeliever to not see your new found faith in Christ as a reason to leave your spouse but as a chance to sanctify him (7:14). That is, to set him apart in order for the gospel to potentially do a mighty work in him.
 - ▶ Well the same goes for any life situation you’re in – whether its your marriage or job or relationships. **Stay where you’re at and let God blow you away by the mighty work he can do through you in that relationship or that job.**

- ❖ Yes, this goes against the grain in our American, “Be all you can be”, success-oriented culture. But as Christians set apart for God, let’s live different. Let’s take all our ambition and drive that we would normally put into our upward mobility, and instead let’s focus it on experiencing God and the fullness of his blessings in Christ in the place we’re at right now. What a witness that would be!

- ❖ Let me end with a final implication for those who are seriously contemplating a change in career, specifically a call into “the ministry”, into full-time church work or parachurch or missions. **3) The call to “the ministry” should not be considered more spiritual but should be esteemed as extraordinary.**
 - ▶ It’s extra-ordinary, not because it’s a spiritually better option over “secular” work, but because it takes a man or woman out of the ordinary pattern of the Christian life. It is a job but it’s not like any other job.

- ❖ No one is naturally suited for the ministry. You don’t just sit down one day with a guidance counselor and consider your academic abilities, personality, interests, and personal ambitions and then simply decide to be a missionary or pastor. That might work for most career paths. But the ministry is different in this sense.
 - ▶ There has to be an inward call of God – where you feel constrained to preach Christ, to commit yourself full-time to the ministry of the Word and prayer – and that inward call is then outwardly ratified when affirmed by your church.

- ❖ That won’t be the path for most Christians. **The normal Christian life – both statistically and biblically – is not the ministry but the life of discipleship as a programmer or physician, a maid or mechanic.**
 - ▶ And the few who are called to the ministry are not to take their unique calling and lord it over other believers. Rather, they are to use their calling to humbly serve other Christians by helping them be faithful and consistent disciples in their particular calling, wherever they’re at. That has been my aim this morning.