

"God Wants Me to Do What?, Part 2" 1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Introduction

- Miriam and I are *Wallace and Grommit* fans. Do you remember the movie, *Chicken Run*? In this stop-action movie, dozens of chickens are held captive in the concentration camp of Tweedy Farms. The diabolical Mrs. Tweedy has hatched a plan to make chicken pies with the help of an enormous gravy-spraying, vegetable-chopping, crust-baking contraption. The chicken coops she houses her birds in look like the barracks of a German P.O.W. camp. Vicious dogs patrol fences topped with razor wire. Circumstances are not good.
- And after multiple escape attempts and stretches in solitary confinement, the irrepressible Ginger still refuses to accept her poultry fate. She dreams of something more and urges her British birds of a feather to do the same and not give up hope. But success to Ginger is escape.
- One day a cocky American rooster named Rocky flies overhead and crash lands in their pen. Convinced that Rocky can teach these chickens to fly to freedom, Ginger agrees to let Rocky hide out with them in exchange for his services. However, he really can't fly. He's just been shot out of a cannon from a nearby circus.¹
- In the end, none of the chickens ever learn to fly. Yes, Mrs. Tweedy is defeated in the end. But not because the chickens escaped their circumstances. In fact, it was only when they learned contentment in their circumstances that things really changed.
- I believe God wants us to...

Proposition

- **Be content to live out the Christian life in whatever circumstances He has placed us**
- Let me say it differently. Follow Christ wherever you're at. The Christian life is not a matter of vocation or status or circumstances; it's a matter of character and obedience. It's not about escaping your coop of a prison—whatever that might be. It's about contentment in Christ. Think about your vocation for a second. In God's eyes, grinding it out in the factory ten hours a day is just as high a spiritual calling as standing before people and preaching. Or somehow do you think that what I do is more spiritual than what you do? Taking orders at McDonalds is every bit as spiritual as leading worship. Status, be it vocational, marital, socio-economic, ethnic, it doesn't matter to God. Status of any kind is irrelevant to God.
- The problem I see when I talk to people is that they divide life into two compartments, the sacred and the secular. Most people think you've got the spiritual, churchy things, like pastors and ministry related stuff. And then you've got the non-spiritual things like work and recreation and family. And the two rarely mix. The problem is that's a false distinction. It simply isn't true. And it becomes a huge issue when you think about the mission of the church. If you separate life into two compartments, the spiritual and unspiritual, the mission

¹ *Chicken Run* (Dreamworks 2000), directed by Nick Park and Peter Lord; produced by Aardman Animations, David Sproxton, Nick Park and Peter Lord; written by Jack Rosenthal, Karey Kirkpatrick and Peter Lord.

of the church, making disciples and teaching people to obey, then gets separated from the real day to day of life and it's then left to those who are quote unquote "in ministry." Just as bad, a sacred-secular distinction also produces a class Christianity where a select few are elevated because of what they do for Christ.

- That division between the sacred and the secular is just not a biblical concept at all. In all honesty, that's a very non-Christian way of looking at things. From God's perspective, all we do in life—whether we eat, sleep, work, play, preach, whatever, God calls all those things spiritual. In Christ we do all things to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31, right? For the Christian there is no sacred—secular division. There is no spiritual—non-spiritual division.
- What this means is that you need to stop trying to be something you're not and instead be content to live out the Christian life in whatever circumstances God has placed you. Work out your salvation right where you're at. Be Christ at the factory. Be Christ at the post-office. Be Christ at the grocery store. Be Christ at the ballgame. Be Christ at school. Be Christ while you're cooking dinner. Follow Christ wherever you're at.
- Right now we are smack dab in the middle of an entire chapter, chapter 7, which deals with circumstances and contentedness. The Corinthians got sucked into the trap where they thought that by changing their circumstances they could make themselves more spiritual. Spirituality, they believed, was tied to circumstances. For those who were married, if they stopped the sexual part of their relationship, 7:1-7, they'd be more spiritual. Last week we talked about being content in whatever marital status you have. Changing your marital status doesn't somehow fix things. Follow Christ where you're at. If you're single be content with that and follow Christ. If you're married, be content with that and follow Christ. If you've been widowed, be content and follow Christ.
- Again, this doesn't mean God disallows change. If you're a teen and you've never been married does that mean you must always remain single? No. God may lead you to be married. But he does want you to learn how to be content and follow him until that change comes. Paul's point in this entire chapter is that, ultimately, your status, marital or otherwise, vocational, ethnic, socio-economic. Your status matters little to God. "God's call to be in Christ transcends [all] such settings so as to make them essentially irrelevant."² The issue is being content and following Christ where you're at.

Background and Setting

- Look at [verse 17](#). Verse 17 is connected with the passage from last week by the word that starts the verse and is translated *nevertheless*. In other words, Paul, looking back at our passage from last week says in cases where an unbelieving spouse abandons their believing spouse in a marriage relationship, the Christian in that case is not bound to the marriage. A change in status is okay. "Nevertheless." And then he outlines the principle. *Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him*. In other words, the general rule is no change in status. Be content to stay in your social condition at the time of your conversion.³
- This passage, I think, deals with an issue with which many new Christians struggle. Is it more spiritual to serve God in full time Christian ministry than in a secular vocation? As if,

² Fee, p. 307.

³ Fee, p. 309.

somehow a person's vocation might bring them closer to God. Are ministry things, churchy things more spiritual than a so-called normal life? No. Once you become a Christian there is no such thing as a normal life. There is no such thing as a more spiritual vocation or status. All of life is made spiritual under the lordship of Christ. All of life is ministry. You are in ministry right now if you're a Christian. If Paul were here today he'd tell you to serve Christ right where you're at—regardless of the circumstances.

- In fact, three times in this section, in verse 17, in verse 20 and in verse 24, Paul says just that. Look at [verse 20](#). *Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.* [Verse 24](#). *Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.* Again, Paul is not laying down a rule that prohibits all forms of change. But he is saying, and I like how [Craig Blomberg](#) put it, "whatever state we are when we come to the Lord, we should function faithfully in that state without immediately seeking to change it."⁴
- I want you to flip back to 1 Corinthians 1:26-29. These verses directly bear on the advice Paul gives in chapter 7. What does he say way back in chapter 1? *Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him.* God chose the Corinthians as they were. The foolish to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong. God's call did not hinge upon status—that's a very worldly way of looking at things. God's call came to them solely on the basis of His purposes and grace.
- Therefore, thinking now of the passage in chapter 7 and those who are discontent with their status; it would discredit God's call if they were to try to change their status, if they were to try to become wise, powerful, and of noble birth. Why? Because that effort reveals they regard those things as more significant than God's grace.⁵ In your circumstances, are you fighting the grace of God right now?

Transition

This morning, I want to share from 1 Corinthians 7:17-24...

Organizational Sentence

- **Two results of being content with whatever circumstances God has placed us in**

Transition

What happens when we actually live contented lives? Look at [verses 17-19](#). *Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. 18 Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.*

⁴ Blomberg, p. 145.

⁵ Garland, p. 307.

Main Points

- The concept of "calling" is a way of describing Christian conversion. When that word is used—calling—it doesn't refer to vocation but salvation. So as I talk, just think of your situation, your circumstances under which your conversion to Christ happened. Paul's point in this section is that what you were at the time of your call to follow Christ shouldn't necessarily change. Paul uses the example of the circumcised Jew undergoing a medical procedure to undo his circumcision after coming to Christ. Or the opposite scenario; an uncircumcised Greek becoming circumcised after coming to Christ. In both cases, Paul says, don't change your circumstances. Circumstances have nothing to do with following Christ.
- Instead, the top priority for the Christian is spelled out in verse 19. What does verse 19 say? Look at the text. *Keeping God's commands is what counts*. Keeping God's commands—contentedly in the place God has called you—that's what counts. Live out your calling to follow Christ in whatever situation God saved you. And that's the [first result](#) of being content. Obedience. When we're content we learn what it truly means to live an obedient Christian life. If you aren't content where you are at right now what in the world makes you think you'll be more apt to follow him after a change of circumstances? If you're not content with where God has placed you it will be near impossible to be obedient to God because your focus will be on your circumstances and not the Lord.
- I'll never forget the conversation I had with an acquaintance of mine when I was in seminary. This guy, Erik, was a few years older than me and he was an RA while I was at Wheaton. Later on he went on to do his Ph.D. at Trinity and our paths crossed again when I started my studies there. During his studies, Erik worked as a security guard at the same company Miriam worked at during our time in Chicago. And he would talk to me about this one guy at Hewitt, that's the name of the company. He would talk to me about this janitor at Hewitt that he would regularly spend hours talking to about the Lord. Not witnessing to this man. Erik was being disciplined by this man—this janitor.
- Here was a man who was in a dead end job. Who had little or no opportunities ahead of him from the world's point of view and yet he was content to live out his calling to follow Christ right where God had placed him, mopping floors and emptying trash cans. And this janitor, who was content to find his satisfaction and fulfillment in his relationship with God, not in what he did or in his circumstances—was shaping and molding this guy who now teaches and influences others through his position as Professor of Systematic Theology at Talbot Seminary in LA.
- That's what Paul is getting at in these verses. What's at stake with this issue of contentedness? Your obedience to Christ. You can't serve two masters. Circumstances and God. Be content with one and give your full attention to the other—to God. Is your view of God large enough for you to see your situation and your circumstances as the perfect place to serve Christ? Most of us think our circumstances keep us from properly serving God. If we just had a change. When God wants us as his missionaries right where we're at.
- Someone once made the wise comment, "Contentment is the ability to stand constantly and consciously in the presence of God so that He can transform any task into something meaningful."⁶ That is your challenge; more so than mine. It's much easier for me to see the eternal impact and spiritual significance my work has. But for you, when you make that

⁶ Richard Nelson Bolles, author of [What Color Is Your Parachute?](#) in *Leadership*, Vol. 11, no. 3.

sales call, when you punch that clock, when you work on the line, when you serve that meal, when you take that order, when you clean that house, you are doing the most profound spiritual work in the world—because you're a Christian. If you're always wishing you were somewhere else doing something else you'll never be able to serve Christ right where you're at. If you want to be obedient, you've got to be content.

Transition

I want to take a look at the second result of being content. Look at verses 20-24. Listen. *Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. 21 Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you--although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22 For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.* What's the second result? Freedom.

- There are few things more freeing than contentment. Isn't it refreshing to talk with someone who's totally content with where they're at in life? Now picture the opposite. The person who is frantic, panicked, anxious, bitter about their circumstances. We've all been there at one time or another. When you live like that, the picture that comes to mind is slavery. If you can't learn contentment and follow Christ where you're at then you are in some sense enslaved—enslaved to circumstances, enslaved to other people, enslaved to being upwardly mobile, enslaved to an elusive, fictional, ideal set of circumstances that fixes all your problems.
- The key phrase in this section, 20-24, is the phrase *Don't let it trouble you* in [verse 21](#). Don't let what trouble you? *Were you a slave when you were called?* In other words, even if your situation at the time of your conversion was that of a run-of-the-mill, bottom rung on the ladder house slave, what's Paul's advice? Remain in that situation. *Don't let it trouble you.* I mean, isn't Paul's recommendation astonishing? Basically he's saying that in Christ your circumstances are irrelevant. Were you a slave when God called you? Don't worry about it.
- Sure, if you can gain your freedom, if you can better yourself, yeah, take advantage of the opportunity but that's not going to make you more spiritual. That's not going to make it easier to follow Christ. Again, Paul is not speaking against personal betterment, but he is stressing that the Christian must live in his or her present situation *without anxiety*. That's what that phrase means. Don't let it trouble you. There are far too many anxious Christians running around like chickens with their heads cut off who are troubled by their circumstances, enslaved to their circumstances, and thereby unable to follow Christ. The rest of the world lives like that. They need to see something different. The world needs to see more contented Christians.
- Some of you need to repent of the fact that you've been rebelling against your circumstances. Some of you here are so uncomfortable, even ashamed of your circumstances, or your background, what you do, what you have or don't have. Don't be. Those things simply don't matter—they have no bearing whatsoever on the really important issue. Following Christ. So follow him. Cease striving and know that God is Lord of your circumstances.

Conclusion

- Once upon a time, a stonecutter lived all alone. Though he had acquired great skills, he was very poor. He lived in a tiny bamboo hut and wore tattered clothing.
- One day as the stonecutter worked with his hammer and chisel upon a huge stone, he heard a crowd gathering along the streets. By their shouts he could tell that the king was coming to visit his humble village. Joining in the procession, the stonecutter gazed on as the king, dressed in marvelous silk, was greeted by his subjects.
- Oh, how I wish I had the power and glory of the king, he thought. He has soldiers at his command. There is no one more powerful. His cry was heard in the heavens, and immediately the humble stonecutter was transformed into a powerful king. He found himself riding on a great horse, waving at the crowds of people who had flocked to see him. This is power, he thought.
- As the summer progressed, however, the new king watched the effects of the heat upon his people. Men and animals became weary, and plants withered under the powerful rays of the sun. As he looked at the sky, the new king realized that the sun was more powerful than any earthly ruler.
- How I wish I were as powerful as that, he thought. I wish I were the sun. Immediately, his wish was granted.
- The stonecutter relished his new role as the sun. He gloried in the power he felt as he surveyed the kingdoms below. As he sent his bright rays to earth, he watched kings and princes hide under their parasols; he watched as powerful warriors became weak under his gaze. Even the crops in the field were under his command.
- Then one day a tiny cloud moved over the land, shielding the earth from the sun's bright rays. Seeing that there was something more powerful, he thought, I want very much to be a cloud.
- Again, his wish was granted. Now he blocked the sun's rays and felt important. He gathered all his strength, becoming a gigantic cloud, and began to pour down rain on the earth. Rivers formed where previously there were none, and water flooded the streets of the cities and the farmland. Everything—trees, animals, people—seemed to be awed by his power. Only the massive rocks were unswayed.
- There is nothing, he thought, as powerful as a rock. How I wish I were a huge stone. His wish was granted. As a stone he remained motionless and powerful, unmoved by sun, wind, or rain. He felt exempt from all the forces that shaped the existence of those around him.
- Then one day a man approached, carrying a bag. When the man stopped, he pulled out a chisel and a hammer and began to chip away at the rock. Realizing that the man with the tools was more powerful than any rock, he cried out, "Oh, I want to be a stonecutter."
- Once again the heavens heard his cry, and he became a stonecutter. He returned to his bamboo hut and made his living with hammer and chisel. And he was content.⁷

⁷ Martin Thielen, pastor of Olivet Baptist Church in Honolulu, Hawaii, Leadership (Fall 1993), p.27