

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

Content in Christ

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1 Corinthians 7:17-40

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Introduction:

Open up your bibles with me this morning to 1 Corinthians 7:17-40. It is on page 955 of your pew Bible. The past few weeks we've been looking at what God has to say about marriage and divorce. Paul has been intentional in showing the distinctions between the specific cases of marital unions that may occur and how it should be handled when they consider divorce. When we get to our current passage it seems at first glance to be a digression that does not relate to marriage, singleness, or sexual purity. Then he jumps back into marital matters. Assuming that Paul is not ADHD, we should keep in mind that our passage is sandwiched in-between the context of marital matters and therefore immediately relates with marriage.

Let's read together verses 17-24:

"Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. Was 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. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor circumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God."

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

There appears to be an obvious digression from the immediate issue because we see things like circumcision and slavery. Commentators agree that Paul takes a step back but he does so for a purpose. He knows that they are struggling with questions that are numerous and diverse. So instead of giving them instruction on every scenario, he draws back to give them a principle, illustrates the principle, and then gives some applications for that principle in verses 25-40. This progression of giving some information, fleshing it out, and then having the reader think through how to apply is a common classical method of teaching. Paul takes a step back for a purpose: to teach them a foundational principle to keep in the forefront of their minds when working out their questions on marriage.

It needs to be in our minds as we think through marital issues as well. Paul lets the Corinthian church know that he is telling them something that he proclaims to all. He says that “this is my rule in all the churches”. All believers in every church were responsible to hear and to obey. So this morning we can be confident that God intends us to know and apply these things in our lives as well. As we look at the text, we’ll pinpoint the principle, understand the illustrations of the principle, and seek to apply the principle.

First we want to pinpoint:

What is the Principle: Live as You Were Called

Paul clearly lays out the principle when he states in verse 17,

“Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.”

He asserts that:

1. You are where you are for a reason

Paul tells those in the Corinthian church that God is not removed from their situation. God in His divine sovereignty intimately knows about your condition and has even placed you where you are in order to bring him glory. Regardless of how you think you got in the position you are in, it is ultimately by God’s divine plan that was ordained before the creation of the world. Granted we are not completely released from the responsibility in getting there but He is not alarmed and scrambling to pick up the pieces. He intimately knows the situation and has you there for a reason.

You will also later hear Paul tell them he feels that his position among them was assigned by God in 2 Corinthians 10:13:

“But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you.”

God apportions to us in order to have influence and reach.

Paul also tells the church here that God has called them not only to their external position but also by His grace to be a son or daughter in His Kingdom. They are new creations and have secured identities that are far deeper than their external life. No matter what happens to them in the world, they are more than conquerors. No matter their societal social status, they are a child of God. Positionally before God, married or single, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, male or female, makes NO DIFFERENCE. Our status before God is wrapped up in the redemptive work of Christ so there is no need to change our position in the hopes that it will leverage our relationship with Him.

So if God has put you where you are and called you to Himself there then:

2. Serve where you are. (Bloom where you are planted)

God has decided that he would orchestrate the conditions of putting each person in their situation and further call people in those situations to be His redeemed people. And the calling of God upon His people means that they are now ambassadors of His Kingdom. They are set in foreign land that is obviously not their homeland, for the purpose of serving there for His glory in bringing light to the darkest of places. Running to another country will still not be home – and may be a harder country to live in - and you will still need to be an ambassador there! Paul is telling the Corinthian church that whatever place they are in, be faithful there. If they are confident in the sovereignty and salvation of God then there is no need to be consumed in pursuing other things.

But because our external does not influence our position before God you are allowed to:

3. Change if you can

There's a clear proviso to this principle. Paul tells them that they should be content abiding with God in their current circumstance but if they are able to change then they are not sinning in doing so. Believers are not commanded to change unless the situation directly opposes the revealed will of God. But if the opportunity arises then feel free to take it.

Two illustrations help flesh this principle out, let's look at

Two Illustrations: Circumcision and Slavery

Paul is using agreed upon cases to further clarify the principle that we should live as we are called. These cases were readily understood by the Corinthian church just as a Jesus used

parables of agriculture and fishing to appeal to his audience. So he takes these two in order to elevate the principle out of the immediate context of marriage so they can see it more clearly.

He first says starting in verse 18:

“¹⁸ Was 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. ¹⁹ For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. ²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.”

Circumcision being the external sign of the Jew, we see that Paul illustrates:

1. Jews need Jesus, as do Gentiles. Therefore stay where you are

Paul’s vision of church transcended the ethnic boundaries so that both Jews and Gentiles were considered united one in Christ. Therefore, if they were one body, saved by the work of Jesus, then changing from Gentile to Jew or Jew to Gentile did not make a difference. Gentiles did not need to be circumcised to become a part of the people of God. It was not by circumcision that one was saved but by grace through faith. Paul says in Romans 11 they have been grafted into the root to comprise one people of God. On the other side, Jews did not need to try to hide their identity as if Gentiles had an upper hand. As long as they based their hope in the cross, their Jewish background and status are just ways that God has allowed them to influence a distinct set of people while at the same time be unified with others in one faith. Paul sums this same thought in Galatians 5:6 where he says,

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”

Because Jews need Jesus and Gentiles need Jesus, if one were to change to become outwardly the other then the distinct group of influence would shift but not the nature of the call. For both, Paul says there is no need to change so stay where you are. You are both together under the Lordship of Jesus so remain to display the beauty of the Gospel that embraces diversity and crosses worldly boundaries.

The second illustration of slavery shows that

2. All men are subject to God and all men need salvation. Therefore don’t WORRY about your status.

Starting in verse 21, Paul tells the Corinthians,

“²¹ Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² 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.* ²⁴ *So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.”*

The social status of a person does not change the nature of a person. Every person who lives on this earth must face the reality that we are all under the authority of a God who rules supreme. We must also face that because of the fall of Adam and our sinful desires we need salvation that only Christ can bring. Those are true whether you are the Queen or an illegal immigrant, a lawyer or a McDonalds burger-flipper. Our nature before God does not change with our social status. Slaves need the salvation that only comes through Jesus and freedmen need the salvation that only comes through Jesus. Moving up the social ladder would not change that.

Further, when are called, our positional justification before God does not necessarily reflect an upward societal movement on this earth. So Paul tells them to not worry if their situation doesn't change when their heart changes. Whether you are a slave or a freedman who has come under the headship of Christ, do not become anxious that your place in this world does not change.

Now it's important to note that Paul is not advocating slavery here and saying that they should always remain slaves. If you look throughout Scripture you see that he does not advocate that in any way. In fact, in Philemon he tells a slave owner to let his slave go. He even says here that if slaves have the opportunity to be free then take it. He is here illustrating that a person, whether free or not, should not be concerned before God if you do not have the occasion to change. In the Corinthian world, it mattered less that someone was a slave than whose slave one was—and we are slaves of Christ.

These illustrations are summed up by Paul when he tells the church of Galatia in Galatians 3:28,

“²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Paul is reiterating that being children of God through faith is what matters. Don't bang your head against the wall to change things that do not really matter. Your circumstance does not determine or diminish your place or service before God so be content in the hand of God and find purpose where you are until an opportunity emerges to minister in a new way.

We've looked at the principle and the illustration that has lifted it out of the context in order to see it clearly now we need to see the principle,

Applied: To Marriage (In Difficult Times)

The rest of the chapter, verses 25-40 give the marital application of this principle. Just as there is no need for Jews to become Gentiles or Gentiles to become Jews or slaves to become free or free to become slaves SO there is no need to change your marital status.

The Kingdom of God needs single people. The Kingdom of God needs married people. Serve where you are. Change if you can do so. Understand that it doesn't really matter. There are two things that we can clearly see applied in these verses:

1. Embrace your present circumstance

Because our marital status does not make a difference in our position or effectiveness for God we should be persistent in leaning in to glorify God wherever we find ourselves. Paul says in verse 26,

²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is."

He tells the Corinthian church that life is hard, our time is short, and in Christ we have a purpose that supersedes our current condition. We need wisdom and discernment to understand the times so that we can know the best way to glorify God. Our divinely given purpose is to bring glory to God so whether you're married or single this should be our singular focus. So don't get diverted by spending all your time and resources scheming how to get out of your situation. Remain there. Serve there. Glorify God where he has put you RIGHT NOW.

i) Are you married? Seek the salvation of your spouse. Some of you are in marriages where you feel stuck with a man or a woman who do not see eye to eye with you. It may be hard, frustrating, and sometimes even hurtful to live day to day in that kind of relationship. Be comforted sister and brother by this principle of Paul that you are not there by accident. God has put you in that position and you can serve him just as faithfully as if you were outside of it. Let it spur you further to live as a called child of God so that your behaviour and gospel witness might be used as a vessel of salvation to your spouse.

I know there are wives in this church that feel "trapped" and "unfulfilled" in their marriage. I have spoken to some with tears in their eyes that are consumed to get out because they see the seemingly greener grass on the other side of the fence. In verse 28, Paul tells us that we will have worldly troubles in every marriage that we enter into. The problem is that we are all sinners in need of the grace of God. Going into a new relationship will only mean that you get to live out and proclaim the Gospel constantly to a new person. So persevere in living according to

the grace God has given you and in the capacity that He has placed you. It pleases God to glorify Him there just as much as if you were with another or single.

ii) Are you single? Seize upon the benefits of focused service.

Paul says in verse 35,

*“I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your **undivided devotion to the Lord.**”*

As a man who has been single for most of my life I know deeply the desire to get married. I’ve often thought and some of you that are single might be thinking, “I’d be so much happier if I were married.” Or “I could serve the Lord so much more if I were married.” If that’s you then you need to talk to some married folks. Neither marriage nor singleness is devoid of struggles and battles for contentment. Further, the benefits that you receive by being married come at a cost of your divided attention and anxiety. One is not superior to the other. What is most important is if you are leveraging your current situation for the Lord. Right now you are positioned to serve unhindered by another’s demand on your time. You can take risks that families cannot take. You can show the world a contentment in the Lord that the world finds baffling. Don’t resent this gift that God has given you. Whether he has given it to you for a season or he has given it to you for a lifetime, at the moment he has given it to you for a reason—to glorify him through it.

If I were married two years ago, the likely possibility of me being in this place today but by a mighty work of God is slim. After seminary the only reason that I applied to places around the globe was because I told the Lord that I would go anywhere and do anything that he called me to because I was in the place to answer the call unconstrained. God walked me through some hard times of discontented singleness so that I could be ready to walk through the hard door that he had set before me. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that God does not know where you are or what your future holds. Your situation may be preparing you to be content in your singleness so that you may be able to go into a context where the Gospel is desperately needed. Treat it as a gift from God until you are given a new one.

Stay as you are and be zealous in radical obedience to the Lord. But just as the slavery illustration to the principle affirms,

2. If an opportunity for improvement is offered to you, take it as a gift from the Lord.

Paul makes it clear that to marry or not is not a matter of sin but of discerning what is best. He says concerning the single person in verse 36,

”³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.”

And in verse 38,

“So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.”

IT DOESN'T MATTER! Don't think that your current marriage or singleness is a “bad gift” from God. Don't think that if God provides a different gift that it is wrong to take it and use it for His sake. The proviso just as with the illustration of slavery is that if God provides a better gift that would allow you to be in a better position to bring him glory, TAKE IT!

i) If your unbelieving husband/spouse wants to leave, let them go. Be blameless before the Lord and seek to reconcile but if they leave then embrace that God has provided another opportunity for serving Him in a better way. Resist thinking that not being married will lessen your meaning in life. Marriage according to Paul is not central to your identity, it is being “in Christ Jesus”. He says in 1 Corinthians 1:30,

“³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

If you are a believer then your constant identity and boast is found in Jesus Christ, not your marital status. You ought to be able to say, “whether my spouse leaves or stays, my unwavering hope rests in the loving work of Jesus.” So let them go if it would allow you to proclaim that louder and broader.

ii) If a Christian partner emerges, you are free to marry. Go into a bookstore and look at the relationship section. There are books sold to counsel you on the troubles of singleness and there are books sold to counsel you on marriage. Paul says to expect it starting in verse 33,

“³³ But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife,³⁴ and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.”

So know that you're entering into something that will not alleviate all your problems or not require more from you. But if your passions are strong and you see a companion that would run alongside you in your mission to serve God wholeheartedly—PUT A RING ON IT!

There are people on both sides of the fence that today are hurting and struggling with where they are relationally. As a church we need to recognize that and fulfil Galatians 6:2 where we are told to, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” Single people, seek out married people. Go to lunch with them, hear their stories, spur them and encourage them with your undivided devotion. Married people, seek out single people. Buy them coffee, show them

how marriage is a mystery of Christ and the Church, and support them in radical obedience. We need each as one body in Christ so let's strive to edify and sanctify one another to apply this principle well in our lives.

The Corinthians needed the reminder that their time is short and their marital status did not make a difference in their position before God or their ability to spread the gospel. We need that same reminder. Brothers and sisters, the time is short. We are as a mist that will soon vanish and the fields are white for harvest. It is foolish to spend your life fretting, angry, or lacking in joy concerning if you have a marital partner or not. There are billions on this earth that are headed to an eternity of unending wrath. If you are single, take the freedom and extra resources to blaze trails that will echo into eternity. Consider going to a foreign mission field, serve in the church sacrificially, and mentor all the young people you can. If you're married, use your combined resources to sponsor missionaries, begin a ministry together, and join collected to disciple your children. Whichever you are, the times are hard and short so take hold of the grace given to you.

Conclusion:

Paul tells the Corinthians in all things, serve the Lord. You are purchased with the price of God's only begotten son and are secure in the powerful hand of God. Your external or societal situation does not effect that. So offer your bodies and your life, however it looks, as an offering before the throne of God. Seek to exhaust the gift that he has given you for as long as he offers it to you to bring Him Glory. This is how we live according to our calling and This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.