

Remain with God

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Good morning, it's good to be with you. We'll be picking up our 1 Corinthians series in chapter 7, with verses 17-24, if you want to open your Bibles there.

For the sake of any who may be unfamiliar with how we do things at EBC, it is our practice to simply preach through books of the Bible. What that means is that we pastors, primarily Grant, seek the Lord on where we think He'd have us go, and then Pastor Grant divides the book up in preach-able chunks, and those passages get spread across the calendar. One of the things I love about this approach is seeing how God orchestrates things. Because we have no idea what the future holds when we pick a book to preach through, or when Grant decides which passages will be preached on which weeks, and yet, it is amazing how often the passages we look at on a given week are incredibly timely.

For instance, I don't believe we had decided that today would be a baptism Sunday, and yet our focus this morning goes so well with the observance of baptism. Our focus this morning is going to be on how the presence of God transforms our lives, and this is exactly what baptism is a picture of. Baptism is a picture of the fact that when God comes into a person's life, it creates a change so profound it can only be likened to a dead person coming alive again. In fact, we would say that spiritually, that is literally what happens when God comes into someone's life.

Beyond this, we of course had no idea our church would experience the level of tragedy it did this week, and yet the theme of God's presence impacting life is exactly what we should be reflecting on in the wake of such tragedy. You see, the promise of the Bible regarding tragedy is not that we will get all our questions answered. We aren't told why this happens to this person or that. Rather, comfort of Scripture is that we have a God who shows up when tragedy strikes. We have a God who is *present with us* in tragedy. Now, that doesn't always strike us as the comfort we need initially, until we realize that this is the God of creation and resurrection, the God who brings goodness out of nothing and life out of death, and so to have that God be *with us* in tragedy should give us profound comfort and hope. And so, this morning we look at the fact that the presence of God in our lives can change any set of circumstances.

Perhaps my favorite Christian book aside from the Bible is C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Written shortly after World War II and based on talks he gave on the radio during the war, *Mere Christianity* is Lewis's attempt to present an argument for and description of Christianity in its bare, or mere, essentials to the British public. Now, nearly 75 years later, it is still incredibly timely, speaking to many of the objections and confusions about Christianity with a clarity that is unrivaled, in my opinion. My experience of reading it consists of my thinking over and over again, "That's the best explanation of that point I've ever hear."

One of those moments occurs at the very end of the book. Lewis argues throughout the book that Christianity is all about making new men in the image of Christ. He then goes on to respond to the reasonable thought that if this is the case that must mean that Christians, the new men (and women), will all be very alike. Therefore, to become a Christian means we must give up being ourselves, that thing we think of as "me". But Lewis pushes back against this idea using two (admittedly imperfect) illustrations.

The first is that of light. He asks the reader to imagine trying to describe light to a group of people who had lived in perfect darkness their whole lives. If you explained how when they came into the light they would reflect it, and so be visible, would it not be a reasonable misunderstanding of theirs to assume that since they all were reflecting the same light in the same way, they would all look the same? And yet, those who have experienced light know that light actually enables us to see and appreciate differences more clearly.

Similarly, and secondly, Lewis uses the illustration of salt. Imagine you gave someone who has never tasted salt a pinch of salt to eat and then told them that where you're from it was used generously in virtually all cooking. Again, it would be very reasonable for that person to then think, based on the strong flavor of salt they have just experienced, that every dish where you're from must taste the same if you added salt to it. Yet, we know that salt

actually draws out the flavors of foods, so that, as Lewis puts it, “They do not show their real taste till you have added the salt.”

According to Lewis, this is how it is for the person who comes to Christ. Of course, as he notes, unlike with salt and light, you can’t add too much Christ to a person’s life; in fact, I would point out that when someone comes to faith in Jesus, it is not just that Christ is added to us, but we are taken up into Him as well; it is a complete, double absorption. But the effect to our selves, to what we think of as “me”, is still that our true selves are drawn out by that dual absorption, not overridden by it.

And so, Lewis concludes the section saying, “At the beginning I said there were personalities in God. I will go further now. There are no real personalities anywhere else. Until you have given up your self to Him you will not have a real self. Sameness is to be found most among the most ‘natural’ men, not among those who surrender to Christ. How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different are the saints.”

And *that* is why I love *Mere Christianity*. I start with this because I believe this reality underlies the call of our passage this morning, so let’s look at it together.

Last week, Pastor Grant took us through the first 16 verses of chapter 7, where, in response to a question from the Corinthians, Paul gives instructions surrounding marriage. When people began coming to faith in Jesus in first century Roman society it resulted in a number of different marital situations that raised questions. Add to that the fact that there were also a lot of interesting doctrines making the rounds within the Church as well, and the Corinthians had a lot of questions. Paul begins addressing them in the verses we looked at last week, and he will return to the topic of marriage and singleness in verse 25. But in verses 17-24, he goes on a slight tangent in order to outline the general principle that is governing his instructions in this chapter.

Verse 17 tells us what that general principle was, “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.”

Paul will go on to flesh this principle out in our passage, restating it twice. But the basic idea is that, generally speaking, people should accept their lives the way they are at the time of their call into Christianity. In fact, Paul says that this is a rule for him in all the churches with which he’s connected. Although, we will see that it is not a completely inflexible rule. He then goes into a couple of case studies to illustrate the principle, beginning with the issue of circumcision in verses 18-20.

“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 uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.”

Both of the case studies Paul brings up deal with societal dynamics in some way. And circumcision was one of those things that was important at the time, especially in the society of the early church. Circumcision was a significant thing in the Old Covenant. It was the thing that set Jews apart as God’s people; it was the sign of the covenant. And so, it became a topic of great debate within the early church.

We know from Paul’s other letters that the “circumcision party” was running around at this time. This was a group within the early church that taught that in addition to trusting in Jesus, a man must be circumcised to be saved. It’s important to note, as it often is, that Paul is writing to a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles, and that the teaching of the circumcision party would have mostly been targeted at the Gentiles within the Church. Paul took great pains to combat this false teaching, and he had some strong words about those who taught this doctrine, such as in Philippians 3:2-3.

“Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...”

He calls the circumcision party “dogs”, “evildoers”, and mutilators of the flesh; those aren’t exactly terms of endearment. In fact, those were derogatory terms that Jews would sometimes use for Gentiles in Paul’s day, so he’s using some clever irony there. And then he makes clear that the true mark of covenant with God in Christ is not a physical circumcision, but a spiritual one that cuts off confidence in human effort, so to speak. He makes a similar point in our passage, saying that those who have covenanted with God in Christ will show it by their obedience to Him.

On the other side of the circumcision issue were those, primarily Jews, who may have thought they should reverse their circumcision for one reason or another. This could have been for the sake of fitting into Roman society better. It could have been thought to be a way of distancing themselves from Judaism, which was the tradition that ultimately killed Jesus. Or something else. Whatever the case there were some who were considering this option.

Paul applies his general principle to both. If you’re circumcised, stay circumcised. If you’re uncircumcised, don’t feel the need to be circumcised. He says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything when it comes to the New Covenant; what matters is if you obey God. This echoes Romans 2, where Paul makes circumcision a matter of the heart. The idea being that the sign of the New Covenant is not physical, but spiritual; it is a heart that is bent toward obeying God. Galatians 5:6 says it this way, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”

The message is that what Jewish and Roman society are telling them doesn’t matter, even within the Church, only what God tells them matters; therefore, don’t worry about changing your status to fit societal standards. And so, Paul restates the principle for the first time in verse 20, “Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.” Then he moves on to the second case study in verses 21-23.

“Were you a bondservant 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 bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men.”

A few notes. Anytime the issue of slavery comes up in the Bible it’s important to note that it was a different form of slavery than that of the Transatlantic slave trade. First, slavery in the first century was not perpetrated on the basis of race, but came about largely as a way to pay debts or as a result of war. Second, slaves in the first century could hold a variety of roles within society from being doctors to teachers to musicians, and some were highly educated. Third, there was a process called manumission by which slaves, with the cooperation of their master, could purchase their freedom. None of this is meant to justify the slavery of the first century, in which much injustice and abuse was perpetrated, it is simply important for us to recognize it was different than the slavery that plagued America for so long.

A fourth distinctive of 1st century slavery is that sometimes it was voluntary. This would happen when a slave completed the repayment of their debt, or other terms of service, but wished to stay on with their master. The Greek term “doulos” that Paul uses here could refer to either the voluntary or the involuntary form of slavery.

The concern for the servants whom Paul addresses, whatever specific situation they were in, might have been that their subservience to an earthly master would be considered disloyalty to Jesus, or that their status as servant would reflect poorly on Jesus. Paul puts these concerns to rest, simply by telling them not to worry about it. He is communicating, just as he did with the circumcision issue, that societal standing has no bearing on standing with God. It’s also important to recognize the dignity Paul gives to these servants by addressing them, which reinforces the point that the Kingdom of God is different than the kingdom of man.

Here too is where Paul seems to indicate that his rule for the churches is not without exception by saying bondservants should take the opportunity to be free if they get it. The Greek here is a bit ambiguous on this point, which has led some scholars to take the interpretation that Paul is actually telling these slaves that even if they can gain their freedom, they should remain enslaved. However, most scholars, or at least the ones I read, take the view

that Paul is actually encouraging them to be freed if they can do so reasonably. Based on what Paul says in verse 24 this reading makes most sense in my opinion, so we'll come back to it in a minute.

In verse 22 though, Paul shows why servanthood, just like circumcision is incidental to salvation and our lives with the Lord. He says that anyone who is saved when they are in bondage has been set free in a far greater way: they have been set free from their bondage to sin and death. Conversely, those who are free when they're saved have been slaves to Christ. The point is that no matter your circumstances at salvation, it will have an effect on you, requiring you to wrap your mind around your new identity, which is now the identity that truly matters. Slaves must come to realize that they are free in the ultimate sense. Freemen must realize they now have a master. And in verse 23, Paul gives the rationale for this reality. Interestingly, he begins with the exact same phrase he used in chapter 6 as the rationale for honoring God with our bodies: "You were bought with a price..." Now, obviously, in the context of a discussion around slavery, this takes on new significance. He's saying that you have been purchased out of slavery to an evil master, into the service of the best master imaginable. So, someone does own us, and it's Jesus.

This provides the reason, both for the slave to gain their freedom if possible, and for freemen to realize their new status as servants. For the slaves, recognizing their new master is Jesus should lead them to want to remove any competing loyalties from their lives. For freemen, recognizing their new master is Jesus should lead them to submit their whole lives to His will, which is really the same call as the one to the slaves: remove all competing loyalties to Jesus from your life, including loyalty to yourself.

Again, Paul is dignifying the servants and, as he's been doing throughout 1 Corinthians, undermining the status mongering of Corinthian culture. He specifically mentions in verse 22 that those who are called are "in the Lord", which erases the class distinctions which were so important to the Corinthians. So, when he tells them to "not become bondservants of men", he's not just speaking literally, as in "don't become a literal bondservant", he's also calling them not to subject themselves to the systems of their culture that are in conflict with Gospel reality.

Finally, in verse 24 he concludes the passage by restating the general principle another time. "So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God."

This is exactly the same in the essentials to Paul's previous restatement, except for those two significant little words at the end: "with God". The call of God changes our entire lives. Not by calling us to rearrange our lives to make them more acceptable to God. But by God entering our lives and transforming them, as light transforms a landscape or salt transforms food; the landscape and food remain the same in principle but are revealed for what they truly are by the addition of the light and the salt. So too, we remain ourselves in principle when we come to Christ, and yet, at the same time, the presence of God changes everything, drawing out our true selves.

This is why we are not called to change our circumstances (except when they are in explicit contradiction to God), because God's presence transforms any circumstance. Subsequently, this is why Pastor Grant has grounded this whole series in 1 Corinthians 1:9, "God is faithful, by whom *you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*" We have been called into fellowship with Jesus!

Jesus has knocked and continues to knock on the door of our lives, offering to come in and transform them by His glorious presence. Offering to transform marriages, whether good or bad, into miracles of sanctification and salvation. Offering to transform singleness into the gift of more intimate relationship with Him than you could ever have with a spouse. Offering to transform our hearts and make *them* what marks us as God's people. Offering to transform slavery into freedom, and freedom into the Kingdom greatness of servanthood. In other words, you don't have to change your life, God is offering to do it for you, by joining you where you are.

So, here's our main idea: Generally speaking, believers should not seek to change the non-sinful circumstances of their lives when they are called into Christ, because the coming of Christ's presence into a life can and will change any circumstances for His glory and the good of the believer.

What does this mean for us, practically? Well, let's consider circumcision and slavery again. For the Corinthian's circumcision or uncircumcision was being mistakenly viewed as an external sign that distinguished

them as God's people, and we have things like that too. We are still prone to think externals play a role in distinguishing a person as one of God's people. For instance, perhaps you got saved out of a rougher background, came to a church like ours, looked around, saw a lot of clean-cut, tattoo-less, put-together people, and thought, "Uh oh, I better get a haircut..." or "I better have my tattoos removed..." or "I better buy a suit."

If that's you, or if you feel like some other aspect of your appearance doesn't "fit" in church, let me just tell you on the basis of God's Word, those things are not what distinguish you as one of God's children, one way or the other. There are plenty of people with tattoos from head to foot that are far more like Jesus than I am. And there are even more people who cut a very nice figure but are much further from Christ than the average houseless person, prostitute, or addict. Now, there's nothing inherently wrong with dressing up for church, and if your former gang symbol is tattooed on your forehead, maybe get that one removed, but we must not fall into the trap of thinking any external aspect of our person is what does or does not distinguish us as one of God's people. So, let go of thinking and acting like externals mark you as a Christian, because that distinction is a matter of the heart, not the appearance.

Similarly, for the Corinthians slavery was viewed by some as an inappropriate or wasteful vocation for a Christian to hold, and once again we can fall into thinking similar things. Before I came on staff here at EBC, I worked at Lowe's for eight years, and let me tell you, I thought it was a waste of who God had made and called me to be. If only someone had preached this sermon to me at that time...Stan! I'm just kidding, he actually did preach through 1 Corinthians at one point, so apparently, I wasn't listening very well.

Of course, in my head I knew God was sovereign and it wasn't ultimately a waste, but I really struggled with thinking and feeling that way during my days of playing my part in the monster of consumerism. But what places need Christians more, than the places that are devoid of Christians? What places need examples of Kingdom values more than places that operate opposed to Kingdom values?

So, maybe you think the way you spend your days currently is a waste of God's grace; if that's you, please reconsider that thought. Even if you are bed-bound, God's presence in that situation can transform it. God has you where you are on purpose; so, don't fixate on seeking a change to your circumstances; rather, seek that purpose within your circumstances.

Even within the church we can elevate certain positions over others, which may lead us to think, "If I'm not doing that, I'm not really serving the Lord." As an example, growing up, I felt like true Christians should want to be missionaries. This terrified me, because I didn't feel drawn to being a missionary, and was even nervous about some aspects of it, so I felt like I wasn't really committed to Jesus. Turns out, I was really committed to Jesus, He just wasn't planning on using me as a missionary (at least, not yet), and so He didn't give me what I needed to do that role.

Now, of course, being a missionary is a glorious and essential role within the Body, and we should all be praying for God to raise up more workers to go into the fields of mission work, and those prayers should include the question, "Do you want me to go?", but that doesn't mean everyone should, much less needs to be a frontline missionary. In fact, it would be detrimental to the mission for someone to become a missionary when God was calling them to do something else. Just as in any war effort where the frontlines are dependent upon a complex and extensive support system, so too, those on the frontlines of the war between the Kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of hell need a support system behind them. It takes all kinds to make up the missional church, from missionaries to administrators, pastors to plumbers.

So, in conclusion, whatever your life looks like right now, don't seek to change it (unless there's obvious need or opportunity to do so for the better), remain there with God, and seek His presence and His purpose within it.

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Main Idea: Generally speaking, believers should not seek to change the non-sinful circumstances of their lives when they are called into Christ, because the coming of Christ’s presence into a life can and will change any circumstances for His glory and the good of the believer.

1. Are there any external aspects of your person you have been thinking marks you as a Christian? Write down any that come to mind.
2. Are there any aspects of your current position in life that you feel are a waste of who God has made and called you to be? Write down any that come to mind.
3. How might God’s presence in your life affect your understanding of the things you wrote down? How might He want to use those things for His glory and your good?