

Woods Chapel Bible Fellowship

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CONTENTMENT IN GOD'S CALLING—1 Corinthians 7:17-24

19th in a series of expositional messages from 1 Corinthians entitled "The Art of Living"

Main Idea: WHAT the Lord has assigned and WHERE the Lord has assigned we are to WALK in our calling WITH God.

INTRODUCTION

May I ask you this morning, "Are you happy with your life? Are you content with your circumstances and situations that you presently find yourself? Are you happy about your family? Are you happy about your physical features? Are you happy about your married partner? Are you happy that you are single, or are you living to get married? Are you happy about your job? Are you happy about your church? Are you happy about your house?"

Many of us spend most of our waking hours, most of our time and energy, trying to change our present situation to the degree that we forget about the opportunity to glorify God right now, where we are. We squander much of our lifetime wishing things were different and trying to change the external things around us all the while giving little attention to the internal and making little eternal significance. We have little to show except a lifetime of continued discontentment and frustration.

The apostle Paul has penned an inspired paragraph in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 on this very issue. As you know, 1 Corinthians is all about the ART OF LIVING LIKE SAINTS—instructing us on how to live up to our calling in Christ Jesus. In fact we are going to see the word *called* eight times in eight verses. God is speaking to us in His Word and longing for us to find CONTENTMENT IN HIS CALLING. As the result of this message this morning, I would like challenge each of us on whether we are trying to change the things God has called us to change. I would challenge each of us to walk with God—enjoying His presence—right WHERE He has planted us, with HOW He has made us, and in WHAT He has planned for us today.

Before we look at our text, let's remind ourselves of the preceding context. The very first word in verse 17 – *Only* – connects the paragraph to something earlier, but in a way that contrasts with it. One of the problems in the church at Corinth was the uncertainty about how faith in Christ should affect the ordinary relationships of human life. Some of the Corinthians thought that changing relationships would make them more spiritual. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7 the question was raised whether faith in Christ should mean that a husband and wife should abstain from sexual relations. Paul gives a resounding "NO" in verse 3. In verses 12 and following the question was raised as to a mixed marriage, where one partner is a believer and the other an unbeliever. Should the believer pull out in order to keep pure? Again Paul answered, "NO." In other words, coming to faith in Christ does not make a person want to abandon relationships appointed by God, but to sanctify them. The principle that the apostle is teaching is to stay in your God-ordained relationship, unless the unbelieving partner abandons the relationship. In that case, the believer is not bound to that relationship. Now Paul is going to discuss the principle of contentment in two other connections.

The outline for our passage is kind of like a Big Mac sandwich from McDonalds. Think of the principle repeated three times as the three pieces of bread in a Big Mac, and the in-between layers are the illustrations of the principle. We have principle (17), illustration (18-19), principle (20), illustration (21-23), and principle (24).

I. PRINCIPLE STATED (17)

Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches (17). Paul's words are a command; one he says is universal and taught by him in every church. It was not only given to the divided, prideful, and immature Corinthians, but to all the churches. The command is that we are to be SATISFIED to be where God has put us, to ACCEPT what the Lord has assigned to us, and to be FAITHFUL in whatever condition God has called us.

This does not mean that a converted bank robber continues in a life of crime. I have never heard of "The Fellowship of Christian Bank Robbers." This does not mean that a converted prostitute persists in her trade, or a drunkard keeps getting drunk. Obviously the apostle is not telling believers to stay in occupations or professions or habits that are inherently immoral or illegal. Everything sinful is to be forsaken. The issue is with believers being content in the social conditions and situations they are in when they are saved.

The word that occurs in each statement of the principle is the word CALLED. Paul is referring to a DIVINE CALL by which we are drawn to believe in Christ. We often use the word "calling" to refer to our vocation. My calling is to be a homemaker; my calling is to be a computer technician, my calling is to be a pastor, etc. But that is not the way Paul has used it. The calling Paul is speaking to is the calling of the Holy Spirit into fellowship with Christ. It is simply the call of God who converts the soul through the gospel. We first saw it back in chapter one, verse 9: *God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.* So all Christians, and only Christians, are called in this sense. This call of God put us into a believing, loving fellowship with Jesus (John 6:44, 45). It is seen in chapter 1, verses 23-24: *but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* The CALLED are not only those who hear the preaching, but those who receive it as wisdom.

So, when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:17, 20, and 24, that we should remain and live with God in the state in which He called, he means to remain in the state you were in when you were converted, when you were drawn by God into that believing, loving fellowship with His Son. According to Scripture, ultimate prosperity is belonging to God. It's when He holds us with the power of His right hand, no matter what happens, like a father who holds the hand of a little child as they walk down the street. If the child stumbles and both feet go flying out from under him, he still has the stability of his father's strength. If you have been CALLED you are in Christ, indwelt by His Spirit, and know the guiding, helping, protecting presence of Almighty God. If you have Him, you have it all. That is the secret of CONTENTMENT. God is enough.

Several areas of discontentment were prevalent in the Corinthian church. Some believers wanted to change their marital status—from single to married, from married to single, or from an unbelieving partner to a believing one. Some were slaves and wanted to be free. They had misinterpreted, and often abused, the truth of Christian freedom—taking it to mean freedom to do as they pleased, instead of freedom to do as God pleased.

Christians can be Christians in a dictatorship or in a democracy. Christians can be Christians whether we are a man, a woman, a teenager, a child, married, single, divorced, Jew, Gentile, slave, or free. We can be Christians if we are a white collar worker or a blue collar worker. Whatever we are and wherever we are, we can be

Christians and walk in a way that pleases the Lord Jesus. The command is that we are to be SATISFIED to be where God has put us, to ACCEPT what the Lord has assigned to us, and to be FAITHFUL in whatever condition God has called us.

Let's see how Paul applied this principle in his day and what it means for us today. Paul's first applicational of the principle is not to vocation, but to circumcision and uncircumcision.

II. PRINCIPLE APPLIED (18-19)

Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God (18-19). Paul applies it like this: if you were converted as a Gentile, don't try to become a Jew. If you are converted as a Jew, don't try to become a Gentile. That's basically what circumcision and uncircumcision stood for. This has far reaching cultural implications: if you are black, don't try to become white; if you are white, don't try to become black; if you are Mexican, don't try to become Chinese. If you are Chinese, don't try to become Mexican.

I have the image of Kermit the Frog sitting on a wall and looking up to heaven and saying, "It is so hard to be green." For some it was hard being a Jew. For some it was hard being a Gentile, because they believed Jews had the inside track with God.

Paul wanted to the Corinthians to get their theology strait on this issue. Verse 19 says it clearly: *Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is everything.* That is what really matters.

That was about the most offensive thing Paul could say to a Jew: Circumcision is nothing. And if we understand the broad cultural application it offends all of us. But it's truth that we need to own. Notice how radically different Paul's rationale is for keeping your cultural distinctive than the rationale current in our day. We say, white is beautiful, black is beautiful, red is beautiful, brown is beautiful, yellow is beautiful; therefore don't try to switch cultures. Paul says, white is nothing, black is nothing, red is nothing, brown is nothing, yellow is nothing, but keeping God's commandments is everything; therefore don't try to switch cultures. Stay where you are and obey God. Paul is radically God-oriented. Everything, everything falls before the priority of God.

Paul is teaching that spirituality has nothing to do with circumcision. Circumcision was an external thing, a sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:1-14), and it was also required by the Law of Moses (Exodus 4:26; Leviticus 12:3). It was required of those Gentiles who wanted to enter into the religion of Israel (Exodus 12:44, 48). It was a symbol of what should and must take place in the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16). God promised to circumcise the hearts of His people, so that they would love His law and obey it from the heart (Deuteronomy 30:6). The New Testament makes it clear that circumcision as a rite has been superseded by the reality which it symbolized (Colossians 2:9-19). Circumcision was of no value because what it pointed to—the removal of the old unregenerate and rebellious state against God—has come through Christ. To seek to change one's status by means of circumcision or uncircumcision is simply a waste of time and effort. Stay the way you were when you were saved.

Paul is not pronouncing a blanket condemnation on all who adopt aspects of other cultures and give up aspects of their own. He was showing that obedience to God's commands is much more important than any cultural distinctive. In other words, don't make a big deal out of whether you are circumcised or not, Jew or

Gentile, whether you are white or black or red, but instead make obedience to God's Word a big deal. Then and only then do your cultural distinctives become beautiful and meaningful.

The danger is that we may find ourselves more committed to the externals than to the internal reality. That kind of externalism leads to an undue concern for outward appearances and to a false set of standards regarding spirituality. When the Lord evaluates our spirituality He puts the tape measure around our hearts.

III. PRINCIPLE REPEATED (20)

The principle is repeated in verse 20: *Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.* Paul emphatically states that God has sovereignly allowed the condition/the status/the position in which each believer finds himself. Remain in that status because it does not affect your status with God. The command is that we are to be SATISFIED to be where God has put us, to ACCEPT what the Lord has assigned to us, and to be FAITHFUL in whatever condition God has called us.

Paul applies the principle again in verses 21-23: *Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.* Paul is going to illustrate the principle in the institution of slavery. Circumcision had to do with spiritual or religious status; slavery had to do with social status.

IV. PRINCIPLE APPLIED (21-23)

Slavery is an outward, earthly condition which is irrelevant to one's spiritual standing before God. Whether you are a slave or a freedman, use it—use that position to obey Christ. This is not a prohibition against accepting freedom, nor is it a command to seek freedom. The point is: when you are called into fellowship with Christ you gain a new set of priorities—Christ-centered priorities.

May I remind you of Joseph, who due to circumstances largely beyond his control, became a slave in the land of Egypt. During his years as a slave, he effectively served his masters and his God. So far as the biblical record is concerned, the only time Joseph made any effort to bring about his freedom was when he spoke to the butler, asking him to remember him in his incarceration (Genesis 40:14-15). Although Joseph did get out of prison, he remained a slave of Pharaoh to the day of his death. God used Joseph in tremendous ways among the Egyptians and among his own family of Israel. God was glorified through the life of Joseph. Had winning his freedom been his preoccupation, he would have had little time or energy to minister to others as he did.

In no earthly society of which I am aware are slavery or servanthood places of high status. Our Lord turned that view on its head. He became a servant to save us, and because of His humiliation, God elevated Him to a position of the highest status (Philippians 2:5-11). Jesus did not view menial service too demeaning for Him to perform (John 13). We are called to Christlikeness and so we are called to servanthood. Servanthood is to be our identity.

Some of us are concerned that our job is not one that is as highly esteemed as other professions? Paul says, "Don't worry about it." Don't worry about it?

Verse 22 tells us why Paul says, "Don't worry about it." Paul again puts his theology to work. He is saying that the gospel is an antidote for despair in menial jobs and an antidote for pride in highly esteemed jobs. He looks to the slave who may feel hopeless and says, "IN CHRIST YOU ARE A FREE MAN. You were bought with a price.

Let no man enslave your soul. Rejoice in the Lord and hope in Him and you will be freer than all the anxious nobles." Then he looks to the noble, the free man and says, "IN CHRIST YOU ARE A SLAVE. Don't become proud. There is One who has authority over you and you must be submissive to Him." This is precisely Paul's point in Galatians 3:28: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

Many people distort Paul's teaching in that verse. He is not saying that all earthly distinctions have been eliminated in Christ. There are still distinctions between slaves and free men, between employees and employers, between male and female, and even between Jew and Greek. But in Christ all these different categories of men and women are one in terms of their standing before God. All men are one in their sin and condemnation; all who have trusted in Christ are one in their standing before God—all clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

There is no room for conceit or pride. If driving that nice car makes you feel superior or act superior to others of lesser means, then change your attitude or sell the car. If what you make or what you do makes you feel superior you need to know that is pagan values to the core.

The bottom line is that whether you are a slave or a free man, whether you hold a menial job or one highly esteemed by the culture, you ought to be able to say, "I don't worry about it." One should not boast if he is a doctor or lawyer or an executive; and he ought not to be in a pity party or depressed if he has a job that society esteems less highly. When all is said and done, and all the externals are stripped away, there are no class distinctions in Christ. Every single believer has been saved by grace through the blood of Jesus Christ. All of us have been bought with a price (1 Peter 1:17-21). If the approval of God is our goal, and not the applause of men, then matters like race or job will not consume us. We will simply serve God wherever He has placed us. Why would we seek the honor and esteem of men by conforming to their values when God has bestowed the greatest honor on us by saving us with His precious blood?

Paul concludes by repeating the principle one more time.

V. PRINCIPLE REPEATED (24)

Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called (24). That little phrase, *with God*, is crucial. What matters in life is staying close to God and enjoying His presence—*with God*. What matters is not whether our job or our status is high or low or approved or unapproved in man's eyes. What matters is whether we are being encouraged and humbled by the presence of God. The command is that we are to be SATISFIED to be where God has put us, to ACCEPT what the Lord has assigned to us, and to be FAITHFUL in whatever condition God has called us.

Since walking with God and obeying His commandments are vastly more important than what your culture may applaud or what your job situation may be, you should feel no compulsion to change your position. You should not be driven by fear or despair to change your status, nor allured by wealth or pride. You should be able to say to your status, "Don't worry about it. You are not my life. My life is to obey God and enjoy His presence."

LIFE APPLICATION

1. God is much more concerned with the way you do your job than He is on whether you get a new job.

We have in this congregation nurses, teachers, carpenters, artists, secretaries, lawyers, accountants, social workers, administrative assistants, physical therapists, engineers, plumbers, salesmen, military personnel, counselors, housewives, missionaries, pastors, computer technicians, business owners, and many more. And what we all need to hear is that what lies most on the heart of God is not whether we move from one job to another but whether in our present work we are enjoying God's presence and obeying His commands in the way we do our work.

Are you enjoying the gifts God has given you? If God has blessed you, learn to enjoy what He has given without guilt or apology. He richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. It is interesting how we quickly apologize for the things we have. If we feel true guilt for something we have, we should get rid of it. If not, we should enjoy it as a gift from God.

2. God's command to remain in the state you are in is not absolute, but contentment in whatever state you are in is.

Paul is not condemning all job changes. We know this because Scripture depicts and approves such changes. There is a provision for freeing slaves in the Old Testament. We are familiar with a tax collector who became a preacher and fishermen who became missionaries. The question at Corinth was: When we come to Christ what should we abandon? Paul's answer is: You don't need to abandon your vocation if you can stay in it with God. We can have fulfillment in Christ regardless of our job status. This is not popular teaching in contemporary western society, because it cuts the nerve of worldly ambition. We need to think long and hard about whether what we communicate to our children about success is biblical or just American. I am convicted in this area. My son, Keith, has been anticipating a promotion in his company. It has not come as quickly as he would like. When I talk to him, much of my conversation is about this promotion. I wonder if I have subtly communicated to him that he has more value in my eyes if he gets that promotion than if he is walking closely to the Lord every day.

God would love for us to take all that ambition and drive that we pour into our upward mobility and pour it instead into a spiritual zeal. Rather than spending much fruitless energy agonizing about such changes, we should simply trust God to bring about those changes.

3. God's will is that you devote yourself to keeping the commandments of God.

When you are asking yourself the question: What is God's will for my life? The answer that pleases God is: His will is that I remain in close fellowship with Him and devote myself to obeying His commandments. God's will for you is your sanctification not your vocation (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Devote yourself to walking with God with all your heart and take whatever job you want. I have no doubt that, if all of us are making every effort to stay close to God and to obey His commandments, God will place us in the world exactly where He wants our influence for Him.

4. God's assignment for you right now is where He has you.

Read verse 17 again: *Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.* God is sovereign. It is no accident that you are where you are. Proverbs 16:9 – *The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.* We need to look at our jobs, where we live, how God has made us, as

His ministerial assignment. How you and I fulfill the demands of that job, how you and I fulfill our responsibility has His witnesses in our neighborhood, is just as essential in life as what you and I do here on Sunday.

It is here that many in the faith movement lead many saints astray. They do not teach or encourage men to accept their circumstances as God's assignment and to joyfully serve God in them. They assure their congregations that God does not want any of His children to experience pain or sorrow or lack of anything we desire. They tell us that if we have sufficient faith and employ right techniques, God is obliged to give us what we want, and to remove us from difficulty and adversity. They are dead wrong. That teaching is from the pit of hell. Obviously, those teachers have ignored much of the Bible and certainly our passage of study. The things which they promise for the here and now are most things God has promised us in the hereafter.

Some of us are trying to change things in our lives which God does not want changed. The changes God desires in our lives are not so much our circumstances, but in our character. Let us change that which God has condemned, our sinful nature, and put on deeds of righteousness.

Let's all pray before we start our day: "Lord, go with me today and keep me conscious of your presence. Encourage my heart when I tend to despair and humble me when I tend to boast. O God, give me the grace to obey your commandments and please You in every circumstance. Amen."