

Sermon 25: 1 Corinthians 7:17-24: Remain as you are Called

OUTLINE

Circumcision
Slavery

INTRODUCTION

For many of us getting saved was the most revolutionary moment in our lives. A change from death to life; from lies to truth; from self-rule to being ruled by God; from proud to humble; from indulgent to self-controlled; from selfish to loving. Some of us may have even experienced a major lifestyle change. Because of this radical reorientation many of us may have even over reacted and sought to put away legitimate things. Overreaction is part of the human condition. We are not good at a slow and steady change staying on course until we have gotten through so we adopt radical procedures like full amputation. You have probably heard the advice given to those who have recently undergone a sudden change like the loss of a loved one; or having gotten fired; or divorced, the advice is don't make any big life changing decisions for 6 months. That is because we tend to try and overfix with overreaction. This overreaction is a typical problem and part of what is driving the problems in Corinth. Many cults use this pattern of overreaction to try and isolate their new converts from their old lives and connections to better control them. For some becoming a Christian means that they have to opt out of society and live in a holy communal setting where they will no longer be polluted by the things of this world. For others it might mean giving up their day job to live life in a convent or some sort of holy orders that are not considered secular. Many a young Christian has thought that now that they are a Christian they must become a missionary or a martyr. Many a zealous Christian gripped with a desire to serve God, or seeing the needs of the world has entertained a radical change. Paul in speaking to the Corinthians in a chapter full of answering questions about marriage related matters takes an 8 verse break to address this problem of overreaction. Some might think that these verses are a change of topic but in fact they are not. The Corinthians have been troubled with wrong ideas about needing to divorce in order to serve God properly. Paul has brought the teaching of Jesus to bear to show that marriage is a good thing and that they ought not to divorce. In v25-40 Paul is going to come back to the topics of those who are single; engaged and widowed. But sandwiched in between is our section where Paul outlines a key principle which is guiding him in his advice. In other words the master teacher is not just giving us the answer but showing us how we can get to the answer ourselves. The key principle is: remain as you are called. Your identity as a Christian is determined by your salvation and your obeying of God, not in external changes to your domestic (single or married); racial (Jew or Greek) or social situations (slave or free). Paul is going to help the Corinthians sort out not only their marriage questions but all of these other questions as well by looking at this idea that we are to remain as we are called. He wants to bring calm to a group of people that are unsettled and feeling forced to make radical adjustments that may be though necessary to salvation; Christian identity; or personal contentment. As we look at these verses we will see Paul demonstrating the application of this truth in the case of circumcision and the case of slavery.

Circumcision

V17, '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.' To counter the false ideas that God commands people to divorce Paul pushes back with some important theological truths. Firstly, that each individual must live the life that God has assigned to them, this word assigned has the idea of God deliberately apportioning and arranging our lives by His providence. This bears the weight of 'you can't be out of the will of God if you are already in it.' Secondly, Paul adds and reinforces this idea by speaking of it in terms of 'calling'. Thirdly, Paul adds that this is his general approach in all the churches. Think about how this idea would set those burdened with the Corinthian's questions free. If you are married, you are in God's will for marriage is from God. Your obligation to honour God is not to be found in some new venture completely foreign to all that you are now, but in your present circumstances. Are you a husband? God has given you this. God has called you to this. If you want to obey and honour God be the best husband that you can be. Do you want to know God's will for your life? Well, if you are a husband take up the responsibility to be a godly leader, make sure that love your wife like Christ did the church; take responsibility for the children. Stop being selfish and only seeking those things that make you happy and take seriously the idea of shepherding them. Think about each of your children, their personality; their giftings, their needs, and think about how you can instruct them in the gospel, guide them in living God glorifying lives. Did you think you needed to find some way to be single and make some large hearted gesture as a way of showing your devotion to God? You don't have to. God has apportioned you to be married, God has called you to be married, faithfulness to God looks like being the best husband you can be to the glory of God. Take all that energy and desire and apply it to the modest and attainable goal of being a husband to the glory of God. Make sacrifices of your time to be with your children; make sacrifices to secure them opportunities. Don't think that serving God only looks like a martyr or a missionary; or a life marked by extreme poverty and pain. There are many things that you thought were not the will of God that are the will of God. You don't have to reinvent your domestic situation to be in God's will and faithful to God. If you are married stay married; if you are able to stay single to serve God that is good, but if not it is not a sin to marry. If you are a parent don't neglect your children in some token act of service to God, make your children your ministry, double down on parenting them well, this is God's calling. You can see how this would be helpful. You can see how falsely bound consciences can rest in where and what they are without having to reinvent themselves in radical ways in order to prove they are faithful to God.

Paul brings in another example, v18-19, '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.' The first example was changing your domestic status to try and be in the will of God. Here Paul brings in what could be a religious or racial example. Circumcision what a procedure a Gentile male would have to undergo if he wanted to join the Jewish religion. He would become a proselyte and considered a true Jew and worshipper of YHWH. Paul is saying that if you were a Jew who has now confessed faith in Jesus Christ, you do not have to go through a painful surgical procedure to reverse circumcision. Likewise if you are a Gentile who has become a Christian, you do not have to undergo circumcision as part of becoming a Christian. Stay as you are. There are a few things to parse out here.

Firstly, there will be certain things that a person will have to leave behind, like their sins. If a person was a thief he must steal no longer. If someone was a prostitute, they of course cannot continue to be in this trade because of God's will regarding our bodies. If someone was a drug addict; a criminal; an idolater, repentance is part of our conversion and we must leave our sins behind.

Secondly, when Paul indicates that a Jew does not have to seek to undo the procedure of circumcision this does not mean that the religion of Judaism from which Paul had converted was in any way being legitimized. In other words this cannot be used as a cover to stay in a false religious situation like a cult or a false religion. If we applied this to Islam it would mean that although a Muslim would have to change who and how he worships, he would not have to give up certain cultural things like the language he speaks, the food he eats and the clothes that he wears. This principle has helpful applications in the area of missions where in the past Western missionaries have imposed western language, dress and custom and unnecessarily stopped cultural practices that were not associated with idolatry or immorality. The gospel is a message that is able to go out to all nations and does not seek to make a homogenous group that all have one dress and one language, but one people from every tribe, tongue and nation.

Thirdly, by Paul stating that the Gentile who becomes a follower of Jesus Christ does not have to receive circumcision to become a disciple of Christ is an important point about the purity of the gospel. It is well known that in the Galatian church there were some Jewish false teachers who were teaching that salvation by grace alone in Christ alone is not enough. If any Gentile truly wants to become a child of Abraham they will have to submit to circumcision and other Mosaic laws. Paul is here underlining the fact that salvation does not depend upon an addition of external rituals like circumcision. In fact in v19 Paul talks about the change that does matter, 'For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.' Paul says the same thing in Gal. 6:15, 'For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.' Because someone is born again, is a new creation by participating in the power of Christ's resurrection by being resurrected by the power of the Spirit inwardly; there is now an outward change that can be seen in the fruit of our obedience to God's commandments. This is not a keeping of God's commands for salvation but a keeping of God's commands because we are saved. A change from the inside out not the outside in. Paul is reminding these Corinthians that we do not gain acceptance or forgiveness by external changes. We must come in our sin to God, we must put our faith in Christ, turn from our sins and by an inward experience of being born again receive new life. We cannot manufacture salvation by extreme lifestyle changes, though a radical turning from sin will always attend true salvation.

I do think this has some bearing on some matters that our generation is struggling with. Since BLM we have seen even Christians emphasizing their race above their identity in Christ. We have seen black Christians insist that they do not feel safe around white people and how they need black spaces to worship with black preachers. This is a sign that their minds are not prioritizing the truth of our common identity in Christ and His goal for a united people from all nations. Today we are also seeing nations double down on their national identities as they are faced with increased immigration diluting their own culture and identity. This has led to strange ideas like some brands of Christian

Nationalism that emphasize whiteness. In the church we need to remember our primary identity in Christ. I was born in Scotland, and in an age where national identities have suffered in the melting pot of globalism I may feel curious about my Scottish heritage, but wearing a kilt; eating haggis and learning to play the bagpipes will not make me a better Christian. The point that Paul is making about what takes priority in the way I see myself can help me in this age of Identitarianism and revived nationalism.

Slavery

V20-21, 'Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. 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.)' Paul has spoken about domestic status; racial status and now he speaks about social status. Here he addresses the matter of slavery and applies his principle of stay as you are to it. Many are unhappy with what Paul says here thinking that Paul is endorsing slavery, saying that it is ok and you should not be concerned if you are a slave; and that Paul is affirming an oppressive system and speaking as an enabler. This false conclusion comes because we from our historical stand point who have lived after the dismantling of slavery in the West come with certain expectations and questions. We need to recognize the question Paul is answering so that we do not put words in his mouth. Paul is answering the question, can I be a Christian and be married; circumcised; a slave? He is not asking all the questions that arise from our perspective. Paul will make clear that our circumstances do not determine our identity and we can still serve and honour God even in difficult circumstances.

Slavery was not perceived as a positive thing but negative, slaves were seen as chattel and did not have what we would see as basic human rights. They could not freely marry, were subject to beatings, and could be sold by their masters. Greco-Roman slavery unlike the Atlantic slave trade was not race based. And there was a large expectation of being able to secure ones freedom, the age of 30 was a common age. At the time of Paul's writing it is estimated that 1/3 of Corinth's population would be slaves and 1/3 freedmen, those who were once slaves. The lot of some slaves was better than that of those who were free. Having a rich master could ensure a high standard of living, and many of those who served as doctors; teachers and other important roles was filled by slaves. Slaves could even be adopted by their masters becoming full members of the family. Although there were many evils involved in slavery not everyone's lot was equally difficult, and some slaves had a better life than those who were free. Paul speaks into this situation. It should be noted that Paul does not speak in the politically revolutionary tones that we would feel free to do so today. But this does not mean that Paul condones slavery. We will see that Paul says freedom is preferable; that we should not become slaves to men; that man stealing is wrong; in his letter to Philemon where he is returning his runaway slave to him, we can see how Paul shows how the gospel takes priority over standard social relationships; in several of Paul's statements where he talks about slave or free no longer being the primary categories that define us, all of this together along with the Bible's teaching on humanity as made in the image of God; of our universal duty to do to others as we would have them do to us; to have mercy upon those who are suffering and to speak up for the oppressed. The Bible's collective teaching on these matters is the main catalyst for bringing about the abolition of slavery. This must not be overlooked. Paul's positive teachings and gospel prioritizing teachings were like leaven that slowly changed our thinking

over time. It is this same gospel priority in his thinking that is evident in this portion. Paul's approach here is very different to a political revolutionary approach that would demand that the slaves all rise up in protest and overthrow the present establishment, this is not what Paul is advocating. Paul is committed to preaching the gospel and over time the gospel will leave the lump and true change will come about.

V22, '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.' If you are a Christian even though you are a slave you are truly free in the eternal scheme of things. You are no longer subject to the power of sin but freed to be able to pursue holiness; you are no longer enslaved by death but have received eternal life and one day will be resurrected; and are no longer subject to the devil for he has been bound by Christ and through the preaching of the gospel we are able to loot his kingdom. Paul makes mention of a 'freedman' this was a former slave who would be adopted into a Roman patron's family and receiving the name of that family. They essentially received all the rights of Roman citizenship barring opportunity to serve on the Senate. Paul is saying that if you are a Christian, even though a slave you are already family to the greatest Father whose children by adoption receive the greatest rights and benefits greater than anything the Roman Empire could bestow. If one was unable to secure their freedom they were able to be content, and able to serve the Lord in their servitude. On the other side there were those who were free who might feel superior and look down their noses at those who were slaves. Paul humbles them by reminding them that though free in society they are slaves of Christ. That they cannot so exaggerate their worldly position but must remember their spiritual condition as an antidote to their pride. Who we are to Christ not by comparing ourselves with others do we see our true identity and worth. We are loved and owned by God this is the most defining thing about us.

Let me throw in a word here about Paul's statement that if you can get your freedom take it. Firstly, I want to let Paul's words about finding contentment in being a slave because one is a Christian sit and confront us. I think we need to hear this. We trigger on this because it sounds like Paul is condoning slavery and I hope you hear me say that he is not. But he is saying that despite something as bad as slavery you can be content, you can serve God, you and submit to difficult circumstances to the glory of God and you are no less of a person or a Christian for this. Our generation is not very resilient and here is a call to see how we can be content in horrible situations. Secondly, let me add that there is no fatalist ideas in Paul's thinking, he is not saying, once a slave always a slave and don't you dare think about getting out of your slavery. Not at all, Paul is not advocating a self-afflicting existence where you have to always take the hard path that includes more pain for you. If you can improve your situation do so. You are allowed to try and improve your job, your living conditions, your health. Of course we can make idols of these things and pursue them for the wrong reasons, anything can become sinful from that point of view, but Paul is not against self-improvement in general. But as we allow all of what Paul is saying to have relevance things don't have to be perfect for you to be happy, for you to be a Christian, for you to be able to serve God. What Paul says here helps us avoid a self-afflicting fatalism and a self-comforting wimpiness.

V23, 'You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men.' Here Paul reminds the Corinthians slave or free of the price that was paid to set them free. Christ laid down His life in payment for our sins, dying on the cross to

satisfy what was required to pay for our sin. He was the ransom that enables us to be set free from the punishments that we deserve and who has secured our salvation and adoption. We must not allow the false ideas of man to so control us that we become enslaved. We must not allow false ideas about how we are saved; or how we are to live the Christian life draw us away from the gospel that sets us free; and the life of liberty where we can obey God's laws because we are saved and not in order to try and save ourselves. I also take this verse to reveal Paul's attitude towards whether Christians should be willing to sell themselves into slavery. I hope you can see that Paul does not approve.

V24, 'So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.' Three times in this section Paul has repeated this sentiment, stay as you are called, not in a political sense to affirm the status quo, but to help the Corinthians see that our standing in God and our ability to live the Christian life does not depend on some outward work like joining a community, or giving up our marriage, or undergoing some religious ritual, or submitting ourselves to a set of laws to get saved. Paul seeks for the Corinthians to maintain their liberty of conscience free from false ideas that would make them feel like they have to make large and costly gestures to please God or be truly holy. God has placed His people in every area of life, we can all be Christians and serve God, even making a difference for Him wherever we find ourselves. We need to recognize this. Where others might be thinking about themselves and how they can climb the corporate ladder we are thinking informed by gospel priorities seeking to be faithful wherever He has called us.