

## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:17-24

### INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered what you would do differently if you could go back and live your life again? Would you select the same career? Would you marry or stay single? Would you live in the same area? Would you buy the same house? Would you choose the same friends? Would you worship in the same church? Would you have children?

Now for most of us this little mind game is just a bit of fun, we might play it for awhile and then come back to the reality that we find ourselves in and happily get on with living life.

However there are others and there were some in Corinth who were consumed with thinking about their past and in particular thinking about how different life might have been if they had not of made that mistake or if they had of taken a different decision or if they were born into a different nationality. In particular there were those at Corinth who thought about their martial state and wished that things were different.

There were those who were single whether because they were married and divorced or because they have always been single or whether their partner has died who longed to be in the married state again? There were those who were married who longed to be single. This "if only" syndrome had gripped a number in Corinth and so Paul writes in this section to teach the believers to accept their position in life and get on with living in that state whether married single Jew or Gentile.

### 1. THE PRINCIPLE IS STATED (v 17)

The principle is very simple. We should accept the position and status in life that the Lord has assigned to us and called us to live for him. If he has assigned marriage for us then we are to be faithful to him, in that married state. If it is singleness that He has gifted us for and called us too then we are to be faithful single people.

Whatever our past may have been the situation that we now find ourselves in is the situation that the Lord has now assigned for us and we are to work for him and serve him in that situation. It might be that we find ourselves in the singleness position because we have lost our life partner. We have to try to come to terms with that position and seek his grace to live for him. It might be that our marriage broke up and we find ourselves in a single position again then we cannot change our past and we have to live in that single status as faithfully as we can using our single status to serve him. It might be that we have always been single and we long for a married partner.

Paul teaches us here that God has assigned your singleness and He at this moment of time has called us to that position therefore there is no point in worrying about our futures or in pining after the married condition instead we need to accept our position in life now and seek to serve God faithfully as a single person.

The danger is that we long for a different status in life and do so to such an extent that we can so easily paralyse ourselves in such a way that we end up failing to accept our status in life and therefore failing to be faithful servants of God in the position that He has assigned to us. Of course this truth not only applies to our marital state but also applies to all areas of life. It applies to our work situation, our health and our financial situation.

Whatever state God has called you and I to; is the state in which we are to serve our God and be a faithful witness and example to the grace of God. Once we accept this principle we will be able to display contentment even in the most difficult of situations for we will be accepting God's

position in life. The truth is that Christians who are always discontent and are always trying to improve their circumstances are Christians who have not accepted this stated principle.

For God assigns to us every position in life and God calls us to live for him in that situation. Of course he has a purpose in assigning to us our status in life he wants us to be his witnesses in our various situations. If you suffer from poor healths then isn't it a marvellous witness when you learn to accept your illness and are able to live a consistent Christian life in spite of your illness.

There are Christians who are in difficult marriages for all sorts of reasons and yet they testify to the grace of God in the way that they live for Christ in those marriages. Isn't it a great testimony to the grace of God when a single person lives a pure life when all their peers are living immorally?

Isn't it a wonderful testimony to the grace of God when we can work in our difficult places of employment in a contented way when all our work colleagues do nothing else but complain about their management or poor working conditions? Isn't it a witness when death takes our life partner and yet we are able to cope and live consistent Christian lives by the grace of God? Of course these verses do not mean that we should never seek to improve our working conditions or to improve our status in life when the opportunity arises, as we will see in a minute.

But this principle means that we accept our lot in life for God has assigned our position to us and called us to it. It might be that one day He assigns a different position for us but unless we learn this principle now in our current situations then we will fail to learn it when our position in life gets a little better or when it gets a little worst. Paul is calling us all to be Christians in the positions where we now find ourselves and he wants us to be the best Christians we can be for his glory.

This means that Christians can be Christians in a country where a dictator rules or in a country where democracy rules. God assigns both situations and Christians in both situations are called to live for Christ and to do so faithfully. It might be harder and more dangerous to be a Christian where a dictator rules but Christians in such countries must accept their situation as assigned by God.

They must seek to live for Christ and be the best Christian they can be in that situation.

## 2. THE PRINCIPLE APPLIED (vs. 18-24)

Now Paul gives us two applications of the principle that he has stated in verse 17. In doing so he is applying the principle to specific situations that he knew about within the church at Corinth. The principle is first of all applied to the identity of those who were members in the church at Corinth. There were Jews and Gentiles within the church at Corinth who needed to accept their identity (vs. 18-20).

In other words when a Jew became a Christian (called by God) they should not try to become Gentiles and likewise when a Gentile was saved they should not try and become Jews.

Apparently there were some Jewish Christians who desired and longed to be like the Gentiles. Corinth was a Gentile city and the Jews of the city stood out and some even went as far as having surgery in order to hide the fact that they had been circumcised.

Others might well have wanted to show that they had been set free from Judaism and longed to be uncircumcised because their circumcision was a constant reminder to them of their Jewish past and their Jewish religion. Of course the idea of circumcision could simply be referring in a figurative way to Jews and Gentiles both men and women who longed to be of a different nationality.

So Paul's teaching is to accept your identity, if you were born a Jew then you are a Jew even after your conversion. O you might not practise the Jewish faith of Judaism but you are Jew by birth because that is the nationality assigned by God. Likewise Gentiles who are uncircumcised are not to become like Jews after conversion. Once again this was a big temptation for after all was Jesus himself not a Jew.

Perhaps some Gentiles wanted to be circumcised because they thought that to be a Christian was to be Jewish. But Paul makes it clear that being circumcised or not being circumcised does not matter.

Christianity is not about such things for those things are about identity. Paul says that what really matters is that we keep the commandments of God (v 19). Obedience to God is what matters not our identity or our circumstances in life. For obedience is a mark of faithfulness. So if we are married what is God looking for in married couples? He is looking for obedience. He is also looking for obedience from single people and from Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.

He is looking for obedience from Christians who are well and those who are poorly. He wants obedience from older Christians and younger Christians, from working Christians and unemployed Christians. So Paul says don't pine after a change in circumstances or identity.

God has made you who you are and has assigned to you your position in life and conversion doesn't change that. He wants us all to be concerned about obedience rather than our circumstances or identity or situations.

So be content in life and seek to obey God in your situation and seek to honour him whether married, divorced, single Jew or Gentile (v 20).

Now Paul turns to his second application as he seeks to apply the stated principle to specific Christians in Corinth. (vs. 21-24) This time he thinks about slavery and freedom. Now Paul is not approving of slavery here nor is he suggesting that it is a good condition to be in but his point is that if a person was a slave when they were converted (called v 21) then the slave does not need to worry about his position for he is still able to live as a Christian even though he is a slave. He must be the best slave he can possible be. He must show that Christianity makes a difference in the way that he carries out his duties as a slave. He must show the difference Christ makes even as a slave.

Obedying Christ doesn't depend on a slave being set free he can obey Christ as a slave just as much as he could if he were freeman. Paul's point is that no circumstance no matter how hard or terrible, or painful or unjust can keep us from being obedient Christians.

Did Paul not give instructions to Christian slaves in Ephesus and his reason for doing so was so that they would know how to behave as Christian slaves and therefore bring glory to God (Ephesians 6:5-8). Besides in slavery they are actually serving Christ first and foremost not their earthly master. So it is with each one of us.

Whatever our station in life we are first and foremost serving Christ. So we serve Christ as we serve our earthly masters in our places of employment. We are serving Christ as we do our household chores and we are serving Christ as we do our schoolwork. In everything we do we are serving Christ first and foremost and that is why you can be in the most difficult and trying circumstances and still be content and bring glory and honour to our Saviour.

Slaves could demonstrate to their earthly masters that they could work hard and honestly not because they were forced to but because they wanted to out of love and obedience for their true

Lord and Master (Colossians 3:23). My dear friends the only thing that can stop us from obeying Christ is sin not circumstances.

Therefore if we are in a difficult, uncomfortable and restricting situation we should not be overly troubled by it says Paul (v 21) but we should remain determined to be faithful to our God for as long as God leaves us in our current situation.

However having affirmed and applied the principle Paul makes it clear that he did not consider slavery to be the most desirable state and therefore if an opportunity arose to gain their freedom they should take it (v 21). There is nothing spiritual about being in repressed conditions and there is nothing wrong with seeking to better one's circumstances as long as we continue to serve God wholeheartedly in our new situation. There are some Christians who seem to think that there is something more spiritual about being in trying circumstances. Have you met people like that? They love to describe their difficult life to you so that you can think well of them for coping in such a situation.

But if Christians cope in trying and hard situations then we should not think well of the person in those circumstances but think well of God who is helping that troubled Christian to cope in his or her circumstances. But Paul says there is nothing to boast about in being a slave and therefore if a Corinthian slave can gain freedom they must do so and accept their freedom as from God.

However even if a Christian slave is unable to gain his freedom he must remember that although he might be a slave when the Lord called him to salvation it means that although a slave by occupation he is actually a freeman in Christ (v 23). In Christ we are set free from a greater bondage and a greater slavery than human slavery. For Christ sets us free from the slavery of sin, from Satan and judgement in hell.

So no matter what situation we might find ourselves in as far as our circumstances are concerned we are free in Christ. Our circumstances might be one of bondage. Bondage to others or to health or to something else but in Christ all Christians are free from greater bondage than anything that we find in this world. Christians are the only people who are really free.

Everyone else is in bondage to sin and Satan and condemnation. However freedom in Christ does not mean that Christians can do as they like for freedom in Christ really means slavery to Christ (v 22). So for those in Corinth who were freemen when God called them to salvation must remember that freedom means being a slave to Christ.

True freedom can only be found in humble submission to the will and purposes and ways of Christ. Freedom for Christians is found in obedience to Christ. Disobedience leads to bondage. So Paul is covering every situation in Corinth whether free or slave they must accept their position and situation and seek by God's grace to live as slaves for Christ in their situation whether it be difficult or easy.

When we think about the truth that we are truly free in Christ then our physical outward circumstances do not matter for whatever God calls us to endure we can do so in the knowledge that we are free to enjoy Christ and to know his blessings not just in this world but also for all eternity.

The reason why we are free is because we were bought at a price (v 23), Christ has given his life for us he has paid the price of sin in order that we could be set free, set free by the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:19). If we have been set free at such a high price then we must not allow ourselves to become slaves again by bemoaning our status and circumstances in life and by failing to be content with God's will for us.

We place ourselves in bondage to this world when we are discontent with our situation and circumstances for remember the principle is that God has assigned our circumstances and situations and therefore we should accept them and seek to be His slave in those circumstances and seek to obey Him in those situations. We are responsible to God for how we live in those situations (v 24).

Therefore whatever our situation and circumstances let us learn this great lesson and be content in whatever situation God has placed us in. He gives us the circumstances that we face for his own good purposes and it's our responsibility to live for him as slaves to Christ in our various situations. For some of us, that means marriage for others its singleness, for others it will be ill health, or family trials or work difficulties or financial difficulties.

But no matter what, remember that the most important thing in life is not our circumstances or our happiness but it is obedience to God who has saved us through the precious blood of Christ and therefore we are his slaves and are free to serve him not just for time but also for all eternity.

Amen