

Find Your Contentment In Christ

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Intro. Few things characterize our modern world more than anxiety. Politics, race relations, Covid, social status, and self-esteem dominate so much of our thinking and stress us out. We live in an anxious-intoxicated culture. And, social medium only exacerbates the issue. In an article entitled, “Tips For Using Facebook When You Have Social Anxiety Disorder,” Arlin Cuncic writes,

“Facebook anxiety is a modern-day affliction and a reflection of anxiety that you feel in daily life. Interacting on Facebook carries with it many of the same fears and insecurities that you probably feel in real life. The difference is that when you are alone in front of your computer, there is ample time to start obsessing and spending too much time worrying about what other people think. In this way, Facebook can magnify some of the fears you already experience.” (Verywellmind, 12-27-20)

What a difference a relationship with Jesus makes (or should make!) Paul teaches us because we are in Christ we should not be anxious about anything (Phil 4:6). He teaches us that our Lord enables us to be content in whatever circumstances we find

ourselves (Phil 4:11). In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says do not worry whether you are married, single, divorced or widowed. Don't concern yourself about ethnic or social distinctions and status. Find contentment in your identity in Christ and your station in life, whatever it is. Afterall, it is your Lord who put you where you are!

As we examine verses 17-24, one word dominates the passage. It is the word "call." The word occurs 8 times in our English text, but 9 times in the Greek text. It is properly translated as "situation" or "condition" (ESV) in verse 20. Paul will use the word primarily to speak of our call to salvation and identity in Christ, But, he will also use it to speak of our vocation, our condition or situation in life. As Stephen Um notes, there is both a vertical and horizontal dimension to our calling that Paul will unpack (*1 Cor.*, *Preaching the Word*, 135). Both callings have been sovereignly determined by our Lord.

I. Be content in your assignment from the Lord

7:17

Paul has been discussing sex, marriage, and singleness. These are issues that can make us anxious and fill us with discontent. Paul will now move to address basic principles that should under gird our thinking, not only about these matters, but all of life. Bottomline: God knows where you are and He has placed you where you are. Paul makes this clear by laying down a principle from the Lord and his common practice (his rule or command) in all the churches. The principle: "Let each one live his life in the situation the Lord assigned when God called him." God

has an individual plan and purpose for every one of His children. Rest in this. Be at peace in this. When God called you to salvation thru His Son, he already had a course for your life mapped out. Growing out of your call to salvation is a definite calling for life predetermined by God. I love how Simon Kistemaker puts it:

“In whatever situation a person becomes a Christian, he or she must remain there. That is the place in life the Lord has designated for everyone. “Paul endeavored to convince his readers that their relation to Christ was compatible with any social relation or position” [Quoting C. Hodge]. New converts to the Christian faith are often of the opinion that the only way to show gratitude to God for the gift of salvation is to become a minister or missionary of the gospel. This is commendable but not necessary. The Lord calls his people in all walks of life to follow him. He wants them to be Christian fathers and mothers, Christian husbands and wives, Christian employers and employees. Each one should fulfill the role the Lord has assigned to him or her and live (literally, walk) according.” (*1 Cor.* NTC, 230).

Paul tells the Corinthians this is not a word just for them. This is His “command” (*CSB*) or “rule” (*ESV*) for everyone, “in all the churches.” It is a

universal command for all Christians at all times in all circumstances. Service to God can take place in a variety of relationships and vocations within his moral will. Some may, and probably will, change. But, that is not something to fret over or worry about. John Piper is right, “make obedience a big deal; make the whole aim of your life to obey the moral will of God... you can have fulfillment in Christ whatever your job is” (“Your Job as Ministry,” 6-14-81). By God’s grace, Charlotte and I have been content in whatever assignment we have found ourselves. Janitor, associate pastor, courier, teacher, dean, vice-president or president, we have found contentment knowing we were exactly where the Lord wanted us to be. There is no better place to be than in the center of God’s will (Rom 12:2).

II. Be content in your conditions in the Lord

7:18-22

Paul now illustrates the point he has just made in verse 17. The first has to do with religious distinctions (circumcision) and the second has to do with social distinctions (slavery). These were perhaps the major or “chief” social distinctions of the day (Vaughn and Lea, *1 Cor.* BSC, 77). Paul addresses the issues in a question-and-answer format. Question: “Was anyone already circumcised when he was called” [to Christ and salvation]? Answer: “He should not undo his circumcision.” Evidently, according to Gardner, “Such actions to cover a person’s Jewishness appears to have taken place from

time to time.” (*1 Cor.*, ZECNT, 326). And, the reverse situation is true as well.

Question: “Was anyone called while uncircumcised?” Answer: “He should not get circumcised” (v.18). Why one might ask? Verse 19 provides the answer, “circumcision does not matter and uncircumcision does not matter.” So, what matters? “Keeping God’s commands in what matters.” Galatians 6:15 provides a very valuable commentary on Paul’s point: “For both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; what matters instead is a new creation” (cf 2 Cor. 5:17). Being in Christ changes everything! Outward ethnic and social distinctions no longer matter as they once did. It is not that they are unimportant, but they no longer have the priority or carry the weight they previously carried. Piper again is helpful and pastoral in his comments,

“What Paul *was* doing was showing that *obedience* to the commands of God is so much more important than any cultural distinctives, that the mere changing of these distinctives should be of no importance whatever to the Christian. In other words, don’t make such a big deal out of whether you are circumcised or not, or whether you are white or black or red or Swedish. But instead make obedience a big deal; make the *whole* aim of your life to obey the moral law of God. Then and only then may circumcision (as Paul implies in Romans 2:25)

and other cultural distinctives become beautiful, in a very secondary and derivative way as expressions of the obedience of faith” (“Your Job as Ministry,” 6-14-81).

For a second time in verses 17-24 Paul reiterates the main point of the passage (cf v. 17), “Let each of you remain in the situation (lit. “in the calling”) in which he is called” (v. 20). God has specifically and uniquely called you to this “situation” or “condition” (*ESV*). It is not accidental nor is it fate.

Reaffirming this cardinal principle, Paul makes a second application. This time he applies it to slavery. Slavery is a horrible evil in whatever time or form it is practiced. In the Graeco-Roman world it was widespread and common. Unlike the trans-Atlantic slave-trade commerce that will always be a stain on America’s past, it was not race based. Further, its manifestations and practice were quite diverse. Schreiner points out,

“One could be born a slave, sell oneself into slavery to pay debts, be sold into slavery or become a slave by being captured in war. Many slaves lived miserably, particularly those that served in the mines. Other slaves served as doctors, teachers, managers, musicians, artisans, barbers, cooks or shopkeepers, and could even own other slaves. In some instances, slaves were better educated than their

masters. Slaves in the Graeco-Roman world were under the control of their masters and had no independent existence. They had no legal rights, and they could suffer brutal mistreatment at the hands of their owners: masters could beat them, brand them and abuse them physically and sexually. Children born in slavery belonged to masters rather than to the parents who gave them birth. Seneca's observation exposes the evil of slavery:

“You may take (a slave) in chains and at your pleasure expose him to every test of endurance; but too great violence in the striker has often dislocated a joint, or left a sinew fastened in the very teeth it has broken. Anger has left many a man crippled, many disabled, even when it found its victim submissive. (*Ira* 3.27.3)” (*1 Cor.* TNTC, 149).

It also should be noted that the slavery of pre-Civil War America most readily corresponds to what we read in Exodus 21:16 and 1 Timothy 1:10 (“slave traders”) which the Bible resoundingly condemns.

Paul returns to his Q&A format in verse 21. Question: Were you called while a slave? Answer: Don't let it concern you.” Don't allow this to control and ever

consume you. Christ is now your all-consuming passion. He is your everything! And, how Christ see you is what ultimately matters. However, Paul adds a qualification. “But if you can become free, by all means take the opportunity.” This admonition to pursue freedom if the possibility presents itself finds indirect support in the book of Philemon. It also has Old Testament warrant as well. Schreiner notes, “the admonition, ‘do not become slaves of human beings’ (7:23), supports the idea that remaining as a slave is not the ideal...[and] this reading fits with the Old Testament, where enslaving a fellow-Hebrew is frowned upon (Exod. 21:2-11; Neh. 5:5)” [Schreiner, 150-51].

Paul drives home his argument with a foundational theological truth in verse 22. “For he who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise, he who is called as a free man is Christ’s slave.” Paul will apply this principle in 9:19-23 to the work of evangelism. Here the point is I am free from sin but a slave to Christ in my spiritual status before God. Leon Morris provides helpful commentary on Paul’s “paradoxical language” in this verse. He writes: “The slave who is called has entered the glorious liberty of the children of God. He has been freed from slavery to sin and this divine liberty matters so much more than his outward circumstances that he should see himself as the Lord’s freedman...With this goes the complementary truth that he who is a free man when called is Christ’s slave. Once more the point is that outward circumstances matter little. The important thing

for the free man is his relationship to Christ; his whole life is to be lived in lowly service to his Master. Nothing matters alongside this.” (*I Cor.* TNTC, 110-111).

III. Be content in your relationship with the Lord

7:23-24

Paul builds on his argument bringing it to an appropriate climax. He begins by quoting word for word 6:20 though, as Kistemaker notes, “the words are placed in an entirely different context” (*I Cor.*, NTC, 234). “You were bought at a price,” the shed blood of the Son of God. In 6:20 the atonement of Christ sets us free from sexual immorality as we become the “temple of the Holy Spirit.” Here we are set free from slavery to sin and earthly distinctions as we become slaves of Christ. Therefore, “do not become slaves of people” (v. 23). Your social status according to human standards now means nothing! Zero! Naught! As a new creation in Christ, don’t be enslaved to shame as a slave or enslaved to pride as a freedman. Don’t be enslaved to the opinions of man because they don’t matter. Christ is Lord and who He says you are is what counts! Find your identity, value and worth in Jesus!

For the third time (cf. vv. 17, 20) Paul inserts the key that unlocks his argument. “Brothers and sisters, each person is to remain with God in the situation (*ESV*, “condition”) in which he was called” (v. 24). Warren Wiersbe is right, “We are prone to think that a change in circumstances is always the answer to a problem. But the problem is usually *within* us and not *around* us. The heart of every problem is the problem of the heart” (*Be Wise*, 89-90). So, whose opinion matters most to you:

1) yours, 2) others or 3) God's? He made you. He saved you. He placed you where you are. So, rest in that. Join with Paul and confess with the apostle the words of Philippians 4:11-13, "I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself. I know both how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content – whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me."

"A Prayer for Contentment"

Conclusion: Oh Lord, You are my shepherd and I should not be in want, but so often I struggle to be content and do want; forgetting that you have graciously provided me with every spiritual blessing in Christ and everything I need for life and godliness.

Thank you for often not giving me what I want because my desires would draw my heart from being satisfied in You.

Help me to be content in You with what You have given me.

Protect me from coveting possessions or people, talent or influence, relationships or prestige. Keep my heart from being anxious for what I don't have and make me thankful for the numerous gifts that You have already given.

According to Your Word and steadfast love, fill me with the joy and satisfaction of contentment in Christ.

Help me learn to be content in any situation like Paul and to quickly reject the idolatry that dwells beneath the surface of my coveting.

I ask you to continually bring to mind your faithful provision for all my needs, that Christ died for the sin of coveting, that in Christ I am free to be content and live righteously, and that godliness with contentment is greater gain than pleasing my flesh.

And may I be humbled and changed by the ultimate example of contentment; of Christ becoming poor in order that I could become rich, and being content to go to the cross to fulfill the Father's will to rescue a people for Himself who can be free from discontent and zealous for good works." (Kevin Halloran, *Anchored in Christ*; 3-14-16).