

LIVE ACCORDING TO YOUR CALLING
1 Corinthians 7:17-24
December 11, 2005 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

I heard the amazing life story of Ronnie Milsap on the radio this week. Milsap, as many of you know, was born blind. His parents, thinking this was a punishment from God, gave him over to his grandparents to rear who in turn placed him in a state school for the blind at the age of six. It was at this school that workers recognized that Milsap's blindness was not a curse, but a blessing. He was a classical virtuoso violinist at the age of seven. He made remarkable grades in school, so remarkable that he was accepted into a pre-law program in college. It was at this time of his life, at a Ray Charles concert, that he snuck backstage to meet his hero. Upon hearing him sing and play, Charles commented, "Son, law might be in your future, but music is in your heart." Ignoring the comments of those close to him that if he pursued a music career he would be a good-for-nothing, down-and-out blind man, Milsap followed the advice of Charles. The rest is history. In 30+ years, he has become one of the leading country music singers in history, gaining six Grammys, six Billboard awards, eight CMA awards, three ACM and four Cashbox awards, has had an astounding 40 #1 singles and has sold well over 23,000,000 records.

While I am uncertain of Milsap's spiritual condition, he provides for us a good example of accepting our lot in life as appointed by God. We have biblical examples of this as well. The life of Joseph, who went from the pit to the palace, from the palace to prison, and from prison to a position of prominence in Egypt. What was Joseph's assessment of this in talking with his wicked brothers? "As for you, you meant evil against me, *but* God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Gen. 50:20). The life of Job is another example (at least for two chapters). Job lost his family, his fortune, his farm, and his fame. What was his response to his "loving" wife? "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" (Job 2:10). Of course our supreme example is the life of Christ, who in the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing the agony that awaited Him at the Cross, cried out to the Father, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Have you ever wondered what you would do differently if you could somehow go back and live your life differently? Have you ever wished you could change your lot in life? Most of us have pondered these questions. Sometimes questions like this can be healthy. We can learn from history in hopes of avoiding certain situations in the future. However, for some, this sort of thinking becomes bondage. Some toy with these questions and then come back to things as they really are. For others, this is their reality. These questions consume them, often causing severe guilt and frustration. In our text this morning, Paul addresses some at Corinth who had become consumed with this type of thinking and he lays out the simple truth that *the Christian is to be content in whatever circumstance that is appointed by the Lord*. There are three points of encouragement that Paul gives here that can help us when we are going through difficult trials and circumstances in our lives. With this encouragement, we can live according to our calling.

I. God's Sovereignty (7:17-18, 21-22)

Three times in our text, Paul issues some variant of the principle, "**as you were called**" (vv. 17, 20, 24). The context of Chapter 7 deals with those who are married and those who are not. Over the past few weeks we have seen Paul's words to the married. Next week we will look more intently at his words for those who are single. In our text this morning Paul expands his

thought a bit on this idea of “calling.” Some, as we have seen, desired to serve the Lord but thought that their particular situation of marriage hindered them from doing so. Paul’s advice to them: remain as you are. We see the same advice from Paul in this text in two other situations that were causing confusion in the church at Corinth.

1. The issue of circumcision

The first issue of these issues is the issue of circumcision. The question of circumcision was prominent in the early church. The apostles addressed the issue in Acts 15 and passed a ruling on it. Paul later forthrightly admonished the church at Galatia who had abused circumcision and made it a requirement for salvation (Gal. 2 & 5). And, like these early churches, Corinth also exceeded what was written concerning circumcision. So Paul questions them, **“Was any man called when he was already circumcised? Has anyone been called in uncircumcision?”** (v. 18).

With these questions, Paul again confronts the Corinthians misunderstanding of what made one holy. Some Jews, in coming to faith in Christ, regretted their circumcision because it tied them to Judaism. Now that they were saved and had broken with Judaism, their circumcision served as a source embarrassment to them. So some sought to have the operation reversed, to become uncircumcised. This was not an uncommon practice in Bible times. Maccabees told of men “making themselves uncircumcised” for the purpose of acceptance in Roman culture, a culture that despised circumcision. The Jewish historian Josephus told of similar actions taken by Jews for acceptance in Greek culture that also looked down on circumcision. Both of these cultures despised circumcision because of its Jewish distinctiveness. So this practice of uncircumcision was common. But the practice had crept into the life of the church. So Paul asks the question, **“Was any man called when he was already circumcised?”** His command, **“He is not to become uncircumcised.”** They were to remain as they were. Their circumcision, that which made them distinctively Jewish, should not serve as a hindrance in serving Christ and His church. Nor would uncircumcision make them more holy. So Paul’s conclusion: Remain as you are.

On the other hand there were Gentiles at Corinth, knowing that circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign and a seal of God’s covenant with the Jews, who thought that they would receive some special blessing if they were circumcised. Whereas converted Jews regretted being circumcised, these Gentiles regretted not having the mark of circumcision. Paul asks, **“Has anyone been called in uncircumcision?”** His command in this instance, **“He is not to be circumcised.”** They were to remain uncircumcised. Circumcision would not draw them any closer to God. Further, by their actions of seeking circumcision, they would be sending the message that circumcision was a requirement for salvation. So Paul commands both groups to remain as they were, **“Each man (whether circumcised or uncircumcised) must (not should) remain in that condition in which he was called”** (v. 20).

2. The issue of slavery

The second issue that Paul addresses is the issue of slavery. There were those at Corinth that thought that their slavery somehow affected their Christianity. They thought that if they were freemen that they would be able to live the Christian live more effectively. They tied their faith and obedience to being free. So they sought to make themselves free. Paul again considers their status when they were called, **“Were you called while a slave? Do no worry about it”** (v. 21).

Paul does not suggest here that a life of slavery is as good a condition as freedom. Nor does he condone slavery. His point is that even though a person is a slave he is still able to live the Christian life. Paul addressed this point in numerous places in Scripture. He wrote to the Colossians, “Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who *merely* please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord” (Col. 3:22). He expands this in Ephesians 6:5-8:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷ With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, ⁸ knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

Slavery was a way of life in Romans culture. Nearly half of the population were slaves, even those that held professional positions of prominence. So again, Paul asks in v. 21, **“Were you called while a slave?”** His exhortation, **“Do not worry about it,”** remain as you are. They were not to think that if they were freed this would somehow make them more holy. They were, by virtue of their faith in Christ, already free, **“For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman”** (v. 22). They were in every way, “free indeed” (John 8:36).

In the midst of this, Paul interjects a difficult phrase, **“But if you are able also to become free, rather do that”** (v. 21). Some take Paul to mean that even if the opportunity for freedom availed itself, the slave should be content to remain a slave and continue to live in that present condition. However, this seems to be more than Paul intended. The more likely thought is that if the opportunity for freedom presented itself, the slave should pursue it and make good use of his new status.

Paul next speaks to the freeman, **“Likewise he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave”** (v. 22). As we have seen, there were those at Corinth who abused their freedom in Christ. Paul reminds them that even though they were free from the bondage of men, they were not free in reference to Christ. If they truly were in Christ, then they had surrendered themselves to the Lordship of Christ and were therefore His slaves. Paul expands on this thought of the bounds of Christian freedom in chapters 8-10 that we will look at after Christmas.

What was Paul’s purpose in addressing these religious and social issues at Corinth? It was a simple reminder that God was sovereign in their lives. **“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”** (v. 17). Did you catch that? **“As the Lord has assigned each one.”** Their circumstance did not catch God off guard. God ordained it. He was in control.

We can take great encouragement from this truth. God is in control of every situation in which we find ourselves. In other words, according to Paul, He put us there. Inevitably, when discussing the doctrine of God’s sovereignty, the issue of “fairness” comes up. There is this perception that somehow God’s sovereignty and our perspective of fairness must always line up. The danger in this is that people often shape God in their own image. They try to get God off the hook for all of the “bad” occurrences in life. However, this is not the picture of God’s sovereignty we find in Scripture. He knows us better than we know ourselves. In His love He places us on this earth, just as we are, to honor and glorify Him. And Paul here reminds us that regardless of our situation, regardless of what we think of ourselves or what the world might think of us, we are to be content with where God has placed us. This is not to say that when we are saved we are to continue with occupations and habits that are immoral or illegal. God would

not have us to continue in a life of thievery or prostitution or any other immoral or illegal way. It would be against His nature to “assign” this. However, we are not to use God’s sovereignty as an excuse to make ourselves more comfortable. We are to faithfully serve him where he has placed us. If we lived according to the Corinthians thought, doing whatever we think it is that makes us more holy, then everyone would surrender their lives to vocational ministry and everyone would become preachers. But that is not God’s way. He made you just as you are, put you just where you are, called you to your specific service, to honor and glorify Him. Which leads us to the second point in our text.

II. God’s Purpose (7:19)

Paul writes, “**Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but *what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God***” (v. 19). God, in His sovereignty, does not simply call us and put us in certain situations for nothing. He has a purpose for every circumstance in which He places us. There are two things that we see in our text that are vitally connected as it relates to God’s purpose in whatever circumstance that He sovereignly places us.

1. Circumstances provide the opportunity to display God’s attributes

“The circumstances of your life are the God-given occasion of you displaying and manifesting the attributes of God” [quoted by Mark Dever, *The Message of the New Testament*, 186]. We often describe God’s attributes in two categories. The first describe His incommunicable attributes. These refer to those attributes of God that He does not share with man: His independence or self-existence, His immutability, His infinity, His simplicity, and His self-sufficiency. These God does not share with His creatures. The second category is known as His communicable attributes, those He share with man and that are sanctified in the life of the believer. His knowledge and wisdom, His truthfulness and faithfulness, His love, His goodness, holiness and righteousness, all of these are to be reflected in the life of the believer, though imperfectly.

God provides these circumstances in our life as an opportunity to display these attributes, to manifest his glory. These at Corinth looked at circumcision and slavery in the wrong way. They focused on the circumstance rather than the God of the circumstance. In doing so, they caused religious and social division in the church and sought to “fix it” by changing the circumstance. However, Paul reminds them that they were right where God wanted them to be. These circumstances provided them an opportunity to reflect God’s knowledge and His wisdom, not theirs. Does that sound familiar? We saw way back in the beginning of this letter their continued efforts to live according to the knowledge and wisdom of the world. They were again reflecting this in their actions with circumcision and slavery. Rather than manifesting God’s love and goodness in saving them by His grace and for His glory, they had succumbed to trying to make themselves appear more loving and good in a worldly way. They sought to change themselves and their situation rather than glorifying God in and through the situation.

The great danger we see here is that to the world, we are delivering ourselves from our situation, not God. We are seeking to make ourselves more comfortable rather than being content in the circumstance in which God has placed us. In other words, it is difficult for the world to see God at work in the situation.

Take the issue of circumcision. Paul writes, “**Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing.**” What Paul is saying is that these at Corinth had made circumcision

an issue. It had become the focus. But how did this action reflect the character of God and His church? Was God's salvation genuine for both Jew and Gentile? Were they, by their actions, showing the unity of Jew and Gentile? Were they demonstrating that the wall of division had come down in Christ? No. When the Jew wanted to become like the Gentile and the Gentile like the Jew, they displayed that God was a God of division and not unity. They were not reflecting the character of God. This is the essence of Paul's exhortation. But he further describes God's purpose in these circumstances.

2. Circumstances provide the opportunity to obey God's commands

“Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but *what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.*” Again, Paul is reiterating the fact that circumcision and uncircumcision have nothing to do with the Christian faith. The Jew and the Gentile are equal in the sight of God. God does not require circumcision or uncircumcision, merely external signs of obedience, but that which is internal, a desire to keep **“the commandments of God.”** Hosea put it in a similar way in writing that God's delight is “in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6). Were sacrifice and offerings important? Yes. But they had become mere rituals in the life of Israel. Sacrifice and offering had missed the mark of their original intent and had become a replacement for real obedience. The same had happened at Corinth with the issue of circumcision. That which was merely external had taken the place of a true, inward desire and passion to obey the Word of God.

On the other hand, some slaves were using their slavery as an excuse not to obey God. However, as miserable as the life of a slave was, there was nothing in it that prevented one from obeying the commandments of God. They served their masters begrudgingly and griped and groaned about how much better they could serve the Lord if they were free. And, as we have seen, freemen often took great liberties with the commandments of God and lived as they pleased, justifying their actions.

Paul's message here is clear. The Lord delights in those who joyfully obey Him, regardless of their situation. They understand that God is sovereignly involved and that He has ordained whatsoever comes to pass. They do not look at their situation and let the situation dictate their actions. They seek God in the situation and what He would have them to do in it and learn from it. Roger Ellsworth exhorts, “Quit worrying about your circumstances and start obeying him!” Then he asks a pointed question, “Isn't it ironic that we often use our circumstances as an excuse for not obeying God when God is the one who gave us those very circumstances so we would obey him?” [*Strengthening Christ's Church*, 128].

III. God's Presence (7:23-24)

In v. 24 we see a remarkable promise that we often forget when we are in the midst of difficult times, when our calling appears to be more than we can handle. Paul again states the principle, **“Each one is to remain in that condition in which he is called.”** But notice two little words that he includes in v. 24, **“with God.”** Whatever the Christian is going through, we can be encouraged that God has sovereignly ordained the circumstance, that God has a purpose for us in the circumstance, and, as we see here, God is present with us in the circumstance. God is with us. We see this a wonderful testimony of this in the Old Testament.

Deuteronomy 31:1-7 – So Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. ² And he said to them, “I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I am no longer able to come

and go, and the LORD has said to me, ‘You shall not cross this Jordan.’³ It is the LORD your God who will cross ahead of you; He will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua is the one who will cross ahead of you, just as the LORD has spoken.⁴ The LORD will do to them just as He did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, and to their land, when He destroyed them.⁵ The LORD will deliver them up before you, and you shall do to them according to all the commandments which I have commanded you.⁶ Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.”⁷ Then Moses called to Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, “Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land which the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall give it to them as an inheritance.”

Joshua 1:1-6 – Now it came about after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ servant, saying,² “Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel.³ Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses.⁴ From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun will be your territory.⁵ No man will *be able to* stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.⁶ Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them.”

1 Chronicles 28:20 – Then David said to his son Solomon, “Be strong and courageous, and act; do not fear nor be dismayed, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you until all the work for the service of the house of the LORD is finished.”

What an encouragement we see here. The nation of Israel face great uncertainty as to their future, may we say, as to their calling as the people of God. Moses, their fearless leader, was about to depart and the people had great anxiety concerning what lay ahead. Moses encouraged the people that God would be with them. Joshua also faced uncertainty in his calling to be Moses’ replacement. The LORD encouraged him, “I will be with you.” As David, the great king of Israel, is about to depart the scene, again there was uncertainty among the people and Solomon, the heir to the throne. What does David tell Solomon? “God is with you.”

The author of Hebrews quotes these words in Hebrews 13:5, interestingly, in the context of contentment.

Hebrews 13:5 – *Make sure that* your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU.”

So we see this wonderful promise that God will be with us in that which He has called us. But why does God promise this? On what basis does He promise to be with us, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4)? In v. 23 we read, “**You were**

bought with a price.” Paul had already written of this in 6:20 as his reason for fleeing sexual immorality. Now he uses the same words, **“you were bought with a price,”** in the context of Christ freeing men from the bondage of sin and death. They had been bought, purchased, set free, **“with a price.”** What was that price?

1 Peter 1:18-19 – ¹⁸ knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, ¹⁹ but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, *the blood* of Christ.

Therefore, the Corinthians belonged to the Lord. And the same promise He gave to the nation of Israel, the same promise He gave to Joshua, the same promise He gave to Solomon, He gives to all who know Him as Lord and Savior, who have been redeemed by His blood. Since we are His, since He has called us, He promises to be with us – *on one condition*, **“Do not become slaves of men.”** Paul is not talking about physical slavery, but spiritual slavery. They are warned not to fall back in with the ways of the world. We see this demonstrated over and over again in the Old Testament. As long as Israel walked with God, He walked with them. But the moment they turned from Him and walked according to the ways of the world, God forsook them. He abandoned them. So we see this promise is conditional, not as it relates to our salvation, but as it relates to God’s presence in a given situation.

Conclusion

I am not suggesting a “just get over it, pick yourself up by the boot straps” approach in these circumstances. What I am suggesting is that you truly seek the Lord in the situation, that you “cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7). It might be that God desires you to be delivered from whatever the cause of your anxiety is. But He might want you to remain in it for the good of yourself and/or others. Our attempts to be spiritual in these instances can cause more harm than good, both individually and corporately. We must remember, “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the LORD” (Is. 55:8). We are limited in our perspective because of sin, Satan, and the world. But God knows the big picture for our lives, and He sovereignly intervenes to bring us through according to His will. The message: *be content in whatever circumstance that the Lord has appointed*, remembering God’s sovereignty, God’s purpose, and God’s presence.