

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

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[0 : 00] Please turn up 1 Corinthians 7, the passage that was read for us a bit earlier on. You may know that old quip when somebody has stopped in the street and asked directions how! to get to somewhere. Could you tell me how to get to such and such a place? And the person says, I wouldn't start from here. And everybody laughs. It's all very funny. But of course, the humor or the idea with the quip is that you have no alternative but to start from here because here is where you are. And when it comes to what it means to live the Christian life, we are always starting from here. And here, if we're honest, is very often not where we should be.

And yet, it is where God meets us because that's where we are. It's where God meets us, and that's where He calls us to follow Him. Look at verse 17. Only let each person lead the life. Different translation. Only let each person walk in the way that the Lord has assigned to Him. He's saying, live the life that God has assigned to you wherever you are, starting from here. Where were you when the Lord called you? Halfway through a divorce?

married to an atheist? In the throes of an affair? At an AA meeting? Where are you now? Where are you this morning? Well, wherever that is, Paul says that his rule in all the churches is that we should take it from here. Here's where we are. Let's go. Now, that's not what people usually think, is it, when we talk about the Christian faith? When we talk about what it means to belong to God, what it means to be part of a church, what it means to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If you were to ask the man on the street, the ubiquitous man on the street, his attitude would be something along the lines of, well, I might consider the church when I've sorted myself out a bit. The idea is that you've got to clean yourself up a bit before you come to God. We should become the kind of people that God is on the lookout for. What would they be? Moral people, decent people, stand-up upright people, and probably, you know, if we throw in a bit of religion as well, that's not going to do any harm, is it? But the opposite is actually true. God takes the initiative. God calls us from where we are, from here. That's been a theme in this letter. The Corinthians were all over the place morally.

We saw that back in chapter 6, the section from verse 9 and following. You were, and he lists a whole load of really unsavory things that marked their lives, and then he said, but you were called by God, and God has cleaned you up. You can't miss the calling language in these verses that were read to us this morning. Eight times, call, called, calling in as many verses. God takes the initiative. And it makes total sense when you think about it. The fact that God takes the initiative, it couldn't be any other way when you think about it. Biblically, you see, the Bible talks about our salvation as a rescue. If you are drowning, the emergency services don't expect you to get yourself to the shore before they offer you help.

[3 : 45] The emergency services don't come to the edge of the water, and they see you bobbing around out there or, you know, under the water, and they think to themselves, you know, well, let's wait and see. No, they get after it, and they go and they rescue you because you can't help yourself.

Another image, much more striking image that the Bible uses, is that we are spiritually dead. If someone has a heart attack, the medics don't arrive and stand there and hope for the best, you know, wait for them to get up before they begin to do their treatment. Of course they don't. They get in, and they do their work. When we are helpless, we need others to take the initiative, and that is what God does. We have no other option when it comes to spiritual things. When it comes to us and God, there is no alternative. We can't get ourselves right with Him. He has to take the initiative, and that's what He does. He calls us, and He does that from wherever we are. However immoral, however unsavory, the self-righteous and the proud, and He takes us from there. Can I say to you this morning as well, that's actually the offer of the Christian gospel.

God calls, and you respond. Whatever state your life is in this morning, God will deal with that in due time, but you come to Him with your nothing, and He gives you His everything.

[5 : 07] He'll count Christ's death to you. He will clothe you in His righteousness. What that means is, He will deal with your sin, and He will make you fit for His presence by uniting you to His Son through your faith. That's your response. You respond in faith. He does everything that is needed, and at that point then, you give yourself to a life of following Him, putting off sin, choosing obedience, and that's the journey all of us are on, every single one of us, putting sin to death and living according to God's design. And when you do that, you should expect your life to change.

Change is inevitable if that is what you are doing, because God is at work in you by His Holy Spirit, transforming you from one degree of glory to another. So there is change. He meets us where we are. He gets about changing us, but here's the thing this morning. There are some things that you don't need to change. That's what Paul is concerned with.

In our passage this morning. Remember, this letter is Paul's response to issues that the Corinthians have raised in a previous correspondence, and there are clearly some in Corinth who think that it's more spiritual to stop doing certain things and to start being and doing other things. We saw last week how some people are saying, if you're going to be a Christian, you need to choose to be celibate.

That is what real holiness looks like. That is a better way. And Paul says, no, sex and marriage is good. Others were saying that God has called them from being married to an unbeliever, and they think, well, we should divorce that unbelieving spouse because they are unholy. That's a better way. And Paul says, no, if they'll stay with you, you stay with them. Remain married. You sanctify them.

They don't defile you. In this passage from verse 17, it might sound like a change of topic from that, but it isn't, because Paul is still addressing this idea of what it means to be a faithful Christian, what it looks like when God meets you where you are to live in a way that pleases Him. And he picks on two further areas where the Corinthians have got confused. The Corinthians have created unnecessary barriers to, you might say, enjoying Christ, experiencing the fullness of the blessing of living in obedience to Him. They've created, therefore, unnecessary barriers to acceptance in God's kingdom. And there are two of them, ethnicity and social status. Ethnicity and social status. Those are big concerns alongside what the Corinthians think it means to follow the Lord Jesus.

[7 : 50] Now, acceptance. When you think about it, acceptance in our culture today, with whatever the in crowd of your choice. It could be a gang. It could be a private members club. However, wherever along the line it might be, gangs, teams, members clubs, they require us typically to be from a certain background and to adopt certain behaviors. Well, look at verse 17. It is not that way with Christ.

Walk in the way that the Lord has assigned. Live the life that God has given you where you are. And He says, don't make it about these two things. Don't make it, number one, about ethnic status.

Ethnic status. Look at verse 18. 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. In Paul's Jewish worldview, it's very simple. The world is divided into two groups, Jews and Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised. And in the Corinthian church, they have both. And actually, that is a remarkable thing. These two groups naturally hated one another. From birth, the division between Jew and Gentile was hardwired into their thinking. But now, in the church, they are one. They are united through faith in the Lord Jesus. They don't stop being ethnic Jews or ethnic Gentiles, ethnic in the sense of ancestry and peoplehood. Those remain. But their status as Christians takes priority. Now, it's possible in Corinth that there were some Jews who were trying to hide their ethnic origin for the sake of getting ahead in Gentile Corinth, while some Gentiles perhaps chose or advocated for circumcision as a sign that they were really spiritually God's children, truly a part of His special people. But Paul undercuts all of that.

[9 : 58] Verse 19, For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. See what he's done? Paul has said, whatever these other things that you want to set alongside faith in Christ and obedience to His Word, nothing. Don't count for anything. Now, we, unless you are ethnically Jewish, I don't think we can appreciate just how staggering this really is.

Circumcision was what marked this group of people out as special. It was what marked them out as truly belonging to God. It was vital to their heritage. It was a really significant thing. And here is

Paul, he's saying, it's nothing. That is, it is any claim to worth before God on the basis of this ethnic marker, it just vanishes in Christ. And so, it's important that we recognize that beyond the distinction between Jew and Gentile. Your ethnicity is neither a benefit nor a barrier to Christ and to a life of godliness.

It is no benefit or barrier in the community of the called, the washed, the sanctified, and the justified. God doesn't care where you come from. He doesn't care about the color of your skin, except that it is the skin that He uniquely gave you as a gift.

When it comes to your culture or your traditions, where those things dishonor Him, they need to be left behind. And where they glorify Him, He is delighted. But He doesn't choose you on the basis of those traditions. There was a time when Britain was a Christian country in the sense that the Bible influenced our culture, our laws, our traditions, and that was the whole piece. Jerusalem, of course, we were told would be built on England's green and pleasant land. But you didn't need to become British to be a Christian. And while, of course, we want to pray that God will roll back the secular liberal project that has taken a hammer to so much of that culture and those traditions, we still won't require Britishness for salvation.

The evils of things like apartheid and segregation, especially when they were expressed in the church, made some people think that Christianity was white man's religion. No. Ethnicity is no benefit or barrier to God. Don't try and downplay or deny where you are from. This is what God, verse 17, has assigned to you. Another element of Jewish ethnicity involved a significant religious component, of course. And the same thing applies in that regard as well. Some in the early church said that faith in Christ was important, but it was insufficient. And to be a real Christian, to be a true son of Abraham, you had to be circumcised as well as believe in the Lord Jesus. But Paul says circumcision is nothing. If that's the case, that simply can't be true. So yes, it is the case that a Jewish family had many spiritual advantages. Paul makes that point in Romans chapter 9. This didn't make them superior to anyone else who had put their faith in Jesus, however they got there. [13:44] We are all one in Christ Jesus. And for us today, as we raise our children in the Lord, the children of Christian parents have great spiritual privileges.

And we really want them to grow up and have boring testimonies. They go off to university and they go to a university. They're having a mission at the university and some bright spark thinks it'd be a great idea if somebody stood up and gave their testimony, if they told their story of how they came to faith in Christ. And somebody from our church, because they've got a bit about them, let's say, I don't know, they turn up and they're going well.

And so they say, I think they'd be a good person to give their testimony. And somebody goes along and they said, tell us how you came to Christ. I grew up in a faithful covenant home and I've never known a day when I didn't know and love Christ. I think we should get someone else for the testimony.

They don't want to hear that. That's not the dramatic story, but it's the story that we want as parents. But that doesn't make them any more worthy of God than others.

If you grew up in a sound church and you were nurtured in the catechisms and you attended the right youth camps, if you were the president of your Christian union, great, great, well done.

[15:07] But you can't point to any of those things as earning special merit before God. The only thing, do you see what the only thing is? Verse 19, the only thing that matters, keeping the commandments of God. It doesn't matter what life God has given you. What matters is whether or not that life is submitted to God's Word. Can you see? It's really simple. All of these things, all of these badges that our culture loves to put us in silos and say, we're this kind of person, we're that kind of person, it all gets separated between those that submit their lives to God's Word and those that don't.

Don't make ethnic status an issue. Remain as you were when you were called, Paul says. The same is true, point number two, of social status. Social status. Verse 21, were you a bond servant when called? Don't be concerned about it.

A bond servant is a slave. One-third of the Corinthian population at the time were slaves. Slaves were not legally persons, so they had none of what we now call human rights.

They were classified as property. That meant they had zero social status. Because they lacked worth in the eyes of the world, they could easily, of course, assume that it was the same with God. Because everyone else thinks this way about me, well, God must think that way about me as well. We do that, don't we? We believe what others say about us. We adapt to how we are treated by

other people. We easily assume that everyone thinks that what those people think about us, well, God must think that. We project it onto Him. We take what we've been told about ourselves by others, and we think that's who we are. It's obviously wrong-headed.

[17 : 05] Whatever status the world affords or doesn't afford you, don't use that as a gauge of value in real terms.

Whatever the world, whatever status the world affords or doesn't afford you, don't use that to gauge your value in real terms because it says nothing about your value in the eyes of the only person who really matters, the God of heaven and earth. What the world around you thinks of you is irrelevant to God, and He's the only one who holds the keys to eternity.

Now, that works both ways. The world could celebrate you to the treetops, and you could think you're rather great, but all the while you're actually an enemy of the Lord of heaven and earth. The world could despise you, think that you're nothing, but all the while you have the smile of God on your life. Our problem is that we often get those confused, don't we? We think that power and wealth and success according to the metrics of the culture, well, they must be a blessing of God, but that might not be the case. If riches are a snare, which the New Testament tells us they are, if it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, how do you know that your wealth is a sign of blessing and not something that actually keeps you from God? We think that poverty and strife put us at a disadvantage and are a sign that God doesn't care. But if you're a believer in the Lord Jesus, God loves you, and while your situation may be hard, those struggles don't put you at a disadvantage eternally. The point is this, whatever social ladder our culture holds up doesn't apply in God's kingdom. All the way through the gospels, Jesus goes out to the poor and the needy and the marginalized. Jesus really cares about those that others don't. So, while none of you are slaves in the sense that Paul is describing here, if you are poor, don't think that you need to climb the social ladder in order for God to accept you or so that you can live a full Christian life. You are a freed man in the Lord. That's the language that Paul uses here. You are free as it relates to the Lord, so don't worry. No one owns you when you're in Christ except Him, and that is incredibly liberating.

The ground is level at the foot of the cross of Christ. Now, it doesn't mean that we need to pursue poverty or we need to stay in poverty, just as Paul says here that the slave didn't have to stay in slavery if he could get out of it. There is no particular virtue in poverty for poverty's sake, but don't think that you need to change your social status in order for God to be pleased with you.

[20 : 14] You don't need to better yourself in the eyes of men for you to experience God's favor. In fact, if you think this way, you're simply swapping one kind of slavery for another. Look at verse 23, you were bought with a price. You were bought with the precious blood of the Lord Jesus, and that redeems you from every other form of tyranny or slavery or any of that sort of thing.

And so he says, do not become bond servants of men. You've been set free in Christ. Don't choose slavery to someone else. If you live for earthly status, you're enslaving yourself. You're enslaving yourself to the approval of men. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ doesn't only liberate us from all sin, it liberates us from the opinions of those around us. You were purchased out of that slavery at the price of Christ's blood, as I've said, so just leave it behind. You might have no earthly status. The Corinthian slaves were seen as property, but in Christ, God loves you, and He has freed you, and He has freed you so that you can keep His commandments, not so that you can be controlled by the opinions of others. There is no class system in the kingdom of God. You might want, you should, I suppose, want to work your way out of poverty for the sake of those who depend on you, but you don't have to do it for God's sake.

The point is that you are where you are, under the hand of God, and in Christ, you have all the resources you need to be content to live the life that God has assigned to you.

It should also be said that it works the other way. There is no inherent virtue in being poor. Many of you are wealthy by any reasonable standard, and there are plenty of people who think that you should feel bad about that.

Plenty of Christians who want to make you feel guilty because you've been materially successful. You also have what you have under the hand of the sovereign provision of God. So thank Him.

[22 : 23] Be grateful. That's what you do when someone gives you something. You don't feel guilty. You say, thank you, and you enjoy it, and you're generous with it. But you too need to live the life that God has assigned to you. One commentator says this, cultural values that venerate or stigmatize people according to their genealogy—that's their ancestry, their family line—their

genealogy, their work, their wealth, or education—do not affect a Christian's worth, and they should not infiltrate Christian values.

Those cultural values that venerate or stigmatize people according to those things, they shouldn't come into the church. That's what he's saying. There are no earthly barriers either to faith in Christ because God calls you or to serving the Lord in obedience to His Word.

So two things then as we close. Because these, there are no earthly barriers to faith in Christ, don't create any in the church. The color of your skin, your accent, your background, none of those things should play any part in your involvement in the local church.

Those factors aren't irrelevant because they are very relevant to what make you the person you are. They are a part of what makes you you. But they don't influence whether or not you can be a member or serve or participate in leadership in the church. Your character, formed as it will be by the commandments of God, that is what matters. It is just a fact that every church, like every other grouping of people, has a culture. And in a church, the culture that exists, it communicates even in an unspoken way, it communicates, this is what it looks like, this is what it sounds like to be a Christian. That is unavoidable. But I want to say, I look around here, every Sunday morning, this perspective that we have up here, we can see everybody, there is a wonderfully diverse picture that the Lord has painted, if you like, here with us. This is how the body of Christ should be in all of this wonderful diversity. And wherever you fit, and you do fit, I hope you know that you don't have to be anything other than you to belong here. Live the life that God has assigned to you.

Verse 20, remain in the condition in which you were called. The only change that we want to see is the kind of change that comes when the fruit of the Spirit is more visible in your life. The kind of change that comes with growth in godliness. Apart from that, don't worry, because God doesn't worry.

[25 : 14] And I want to urge us to keep working at building genuine relationships across cultures and backgrounds as part of this expression of the body of Christ. And that's all of us. Don't think it's someone else's responsibility to do that. All of us. And what we then do is we cultivate a genuine unity, across all of that diversity, and this shared status that we have as brothers and sisters in Christ that we then experience in a deeper way is shown off to the watching world. That is God's design for the church. That as He calls people from every tribe, tongue, and nation together into Christ, and that is expressed through local churches, that we say something to the watching world.

Where else in the world does background have nothing to do with your status? Where else do we see the kind of diversity that the church of the living God necessarily grows?

Nowhere. It shows off the transforming, unifying power of the gospel. Now, for that to be a reality among us, we'll need to extend trust to those that are different from us. We'll need to bear with one another. We'll need to explain when offense is called and be quick to say sorry and even quicker to forgive. Assume good motives with one another as we seek to grow in these ways. Working it out. When it gets hard, we're tempted to withdraw. We're tempted to divide. We're tempted to bring in all of the dividing lines that exist in the culture out there around us. Don't do that. Lean in.

Don't create barriers in the life of the church. And then secondly, don't choose any in your life. Don't choose any of these barriers in your own thinking, your own life. Lots of us have issues with contentment because we aren't happy to live the life that God has assigned to us.

[27 : 06] You are where you are this morning in life because that is the life God has given you. I think in some cases, some aspect of our background puts us at a disadvantage because it has put us at a disadvantage in the eyes of the culture and we think that's just the case in the church. It's not the case. Don't think that way about yourself. Some of us, we just want what others have because we care more about cultural status than we do about having the status of God's people.

But adding any earthly category, to use the categories that that theologian used, genealogy, work, wealth, or education, adding any of that to faith in Christ and submission to God's Word is simply to become a bondservant of men, verse 23. It is to choose a form of slavery that God has liberated us from and so has zero spiritual benefit. Don't create these barriers in your life. In whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. God made you.

He gave you what you have. He withholds from you what you don't have. So live not in resentment because of this, but in the freedom and joy of His promises, knowing that your true identity is that you are chosen and loved by the Father, that you are co-heirs of eternity with Christ the Son, and that you are indwelt in every moment by the Holy Spirit who will safely get each one of us all the way to glory. Wherever we're starting, that is where the story ends. So trust Him. Be who you are in

