

# Your Job as Ministry

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Topic: Work & Vocation

<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/your-job-as-ministry>

The main point of my message this morning can be stated as a declaration and as a prayer. As a *declaration* it would be: How you fulfill the demands of your vocation is an essential part of Christian discipleship. Or to put it another way: How you do your job is a big part of your obedience to Jesus. Stated as a *prayer*, the main point today is: Father, grant to us all the grace to be conscious of your presence at our work and to obey your commands in all our vocational relationships. I believe this is the word of God for us today, and I would like to unfold it for a few minutes from 1 Corinthians 7:17–24.

## Let Everyone Remain Where He Was Called

Before we read it, let's orient ourselves from the preceding context. One of the problems in the church at Corinth was the uncertainty about how faith in Christ should affect the ordinary relationships of human life. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7 the question is raised whether faith in Christ should mean that a husband and wife should abstain from sexual relations. Paul gives a resounding *no* in verse 3. Another example in verses 12–16 is the question, What should we do if one marriage partner puts his or her faith in Christ but the other doesn't? Should the believer pull out in order to keep pure? Again Paul answers, no. Stay in the relationship you were in when God called you to faith. Faith in Christ as Lord and Savior will never destroy the covenant of marriage which God ordained at creation.

But having said that in verses 12 and 13, the apostle does allow that, if the unbelieving partner deserts the believing partner and wants nothing more to do with the believer, then the believer is not bound forever to the relationship. In other words, coming to faith in Christ does not make a person want to abandon relationships appointed by God, but to sanctify them. With long-suffering and prayer and humble, exemplary conduct, the believing partner longs to win the unbeliever. But it may be, as Jesus predicted in Matthew 10:34ff., that the rebellion and unbelief of the unbelieving spouse will turn Christianity into a sword that severs, instead of a peaceful balm that heals. So the *principle* that the apostle follows is: stay in your God-ordained relationships; do not seek to abandon them or destroy them. But he allows the *exception* that if the relationship is abandoned and destroyed apart from your desire or control by the unbelieving partner, then let it be. The innocent believer is not bound to the deserter.

Here begins our text in 1 Corinthians 7:17. Having discussed the principle of staying in the God-ordained relationship of marriage when you become a Christian, Paul now discusses this principle in two other connections. Let's read 1 Corinthians 7:17–24.

Only let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. 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. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the

commandments of God. Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity (or: But, even if you can become free, rather use your present condition). For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God.

The principle that Paul had already taught in relation to marriage is here mentioned clearly three times. Notice verse 17, "Let everyone lead the life which the Lord assigned to him, and in which God has called him." Then verse 20, "Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called." Then verse 24, "So, brethren, in whatever state each of you was called, there let him remain with God." These three statements of Paul's principle divide the text into two parts. It may be helpful to think of these as three pieces of bread in a double-decker sandwich (like a Big Mac). Between the top two pieces are verses 18 and 19 where the principle is applied to the issue of circumcision and uncircumcision. Between the bottom two pieces are verses 21–23 where the principle is applied to slavery and freedom. But before we can understand either of these applications, we need to clarify a key word in the principle itself.

### **What Kind of Calling Is in View?**

The word that occurs in each statement of the principle and nine times altogether in this paragraph is the word "call." When Paul says in verse 17, "Let everyone lead the life . . . in which God called him," and when he says in verse 24, "In whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God," he is referring to a divine call by which we were drawn to believe in Christ. We often use the word "calling" to refer to our vocation: my calling is to be a homemaker; my calling is to be a salesman; etc. But that is not the way Paul has used it eight out of the nine times it occurs in this paragraph. One time he uses the word "calling" in this vocational sense, namely, in verse 20. Literally the verse says, "Let each one remain in the *"calling"* (not state) in which he was called." The word "calling" here refers to vocation or station in life. And in this vocation or station in life another calling comes from God. This calling is the Holy Spirit's pull into fellowship with Christ. Very simply the call of God that comes to a person in his vocation is the power of God converting the soul through the gospel.

This is all made clear in 1 Corinthians 1. In chapter 1, verse 9, Paul says, "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." So all Christians, and only Christians, are called in this sense. This calling from God is different, on the one hand, from our vocational "calling" and, on the other hand, from the general call to repent that goes out to all men. When Jesus said in Matthew 22:14, "Many are called, but few are chosen," he referred to the world-wide call of the gospel which many people hear and reject to their own doom.

But this was not the calling Paul had in mind. The call of God which puts us into believing, loving fellowship with Jesus is a powerful, effective call that draws us to the Son (John 6:44, 65). This is seen most clearly in 1 Corinthians 1:23, 24, where Paul says, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." The "called" are not all who hear the preaching, but those who receive it as wisdom. We can paraphrase the verses to show the difference between the general call and the effective call: Paul says, "We *call* everyone to believe in Christ crucified, but many Jews find this *call* to be a stumbling

block, and many Gentiles find this *call* to be foolishness, but those who are called (that is, powerfully and effectively drawn to Christ) find the gospel call to be the power and wisdom of God."

Therefore, when Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:17, 20, and 24 that we should remain and live with God in the state in which we were called, he means: Remain in the state you were in when you were converted, when you were drawn by God into believing, loving fellowship with his Son.

### **The Principle Applied to Jews and Gentiles**

Now we need to see how Paul applied this principle in his day, and what it means for us today. In the process, the theological reason for it will emerge also. Paul's first application of the principle is not to vocation, but to circumcision and uncircumcision. He applies it like this: if you were converted as a Gentile, don't try to become a Jew. If you were converted as a Jew, don't try to become a Gentile. That's basically what uncircumcision and circumcision stood for. This has far-reaching cultural implications: if you are black, don't try to become white; if you are white, don't try to become black. If you are Mexican, don't try to become American; if you are American, don't try to become Mexican.

Then Paul gives the theological reason for this admonition. Verse 19 says literally, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God (is everything)." That was about the most offensive thing Paul could say to a Jew: Circumcision is nothing. And if we understand its broad cultural application, it offends all of us. But it's true. Notice how radically different Paul's rationale is for keeping your cultural distinctives than the rationale current in our day. We say, white is beautiful, black is beautiful, red is beautiful, yellow is beautiful; therefore, don't try to switch cultures. Paul says, white is nothing, black is nothing, red is nothing, yellow is nothing, but keeping God's commandments is everything; therefore, don't try to switch cultures. Stay where you are and obey God. Paul is a very unfashionable thinker and, therefore, eternally relevant. He is radically God-oriented. Everything, everything falls before the priority of God.

This is absolutely imperative to grasp lest we create a new legalism. The old legalism said, "You must be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). You must be white in order to be approved." The new legalism would say, "You can't be circumcised if you want to be saved. You can't be white if you want to be accepted." We will pervert Paul's teaching and miss his intention if we take the sentence, "Let the uncircumcised not be circumcised" (verse 18), and make it an absolute prohibition of cultural adaptations. Paul is not pronouncing a blanket condemnation upon all those who adopt aspects of other cultures and give up aspects of their own. This is clear from the fact that he had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3), and from his own statement that he becomes all things to all men that he might save some (1 Corinthians 9:22).

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. In a word, the application of Paul's principle to cultural distinctives

is this: Don't fret and don't boast about your present state of cultural distinctives; they are of little importance to God compared to whether you are devoting yourself, soul and mind and body, to obeying his commandments, which are all fulfilled in this: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Romans 13:8–10; Galatians 5:14).

### **The Principle Applied to Slaves and Freedmen**

Then Paul turns in verses 21–23 to apply his principle to the issue of whether one is a slave or a freedman. The translation problem in verse 21 is really tough. Most modern versions say, "Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity" (RSV). This may be correct, but I find it hard to accept since the principle he is illustrating is expressed in v. 20 as "Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called," and in verse 24 as "In whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God." It seems wholly out of place between these to say, "If you can gain your freedom, do it." Not only that, but this translation does not do justice to all the words in the Greek ("even" and "rather") which come out in the alternative translation: "Were you called as a slave? Don't let that be a care to you; but, *even* if you can become a freedman, *rather* make use of (your present position)." The real contrast, it seems to me, should be expressed as: "Don't let your slavery make you anxious, but instead use it." Use it to obey Christ and thus "adorn the doctrine of our great God and Savior" (Titus 2:10).

I think it is true in the final analysis that this is not an absolute prohibition of accepting freedom, anymore that verse 18 was an absolute prohibition of circumcision. But if you translate it as a command to seek freedom, the true point of the passage is obscured. The point is: when you are called into the fellowship of Christ, you gain a new set of radically Christ-centered priorities; so much so that if you are a slave, it should not cause you to fret. "Were you a slave when called? Never mind." Is yours a menial job? Never mind. Is it a job that is not esteemed as highly as other professions? Never mind. This is the same point he was making with cultural differences like circumcision: Were you uncircumcised? Never mind. Were you circumcised? Never mind.

Paul could have given the very same theological reason for this position as he did in verse 19. He could have said, "For being a slave is nothing, and being a freedman is nothing, but keeping the commands of God is everything." This is true. But Paul deepens our understanding with a new theological reason. The reason a person can say, "Never mind," even though he is a slave, is this: verse 22, "For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord." And the reason the person who is free can say, "Never mind," is similar: "He who was free when called is a slave of Christ." I love to watch Paul put his theology to work like this. He is saying that in the gospel there is an antidote for despair in menial jobs and an antidote for pride in highly esteemed jobs. He looks to the slave who may feel hopeless and says, "In Christ you are a free man. You were bought with a price. Let no man enslave your soul. Rejoice in the Lord and hope in him and you will be freer than all the anxious nobles." Then he looks to the noble free man and says, "Do not become proud, for in Christ you are a slave. There is one who has authority over you, and you must be humble and submissive."

The upshot of this is that whether a person is a slave or a freedman, it ought not be the cause of his despair or his pride. He ought to be able to say, "Never mind." He ought not to boast if he is a doctor or lawyer or executive, and he ought not to be self-pitying or depressed if he has a job that society esteems less highly. "So brethren," Paul concludes in verse 24, "In whatever state each was called, let him

remain with God." *With God!* There's the crucial phrase. What matters in life and in eternal life is staying close to God and enjoying his presence. What matters is not whether our job is high or low in man's eyes. What matters is whether we are being encouraged and humbled by the presence of God.

Putting the two applications of Paul's principle together, the teaching seems to be this: Obeying the commands of God (v. 19) and enjoying his presence (v. 24) are so vastly more important than what your culture or your job is that you should feel no compulsion to change your position. You should not be driven from one by fear or despair, nor allured to the other by wealth or pride. You should be able to say to your position, "Never mind. You are not my life. My life is to obey God and enjoy his presence."

### **Four Practical Implications**

Let me conclude now with some practical implications. First, God is very much more concerned with the way you do the job that you now have than he is with whether you get a new job. We have in this congregation nurses, teachers, carpenters, artists, secretaries, bookkeepers, lawyers, receptionists, accountants, social workers, repairmen of various sorts, engineers, office managers, waitresses, plumbers, salesmen, security guards, doctors, military personnel, counselors, bankers, police officers, decorators, musicians, architects, painters, house cleaners, school administrators, housewives, missionaries, pastors, cabinet makers, and many more. And what we all need to hear is that what lies most on the heart of God is not whether we move from one to the other, but whether *in* our present work we are enjoying God's promised presence and obeying his commands in the way we do our work.

Second, as we have seen, the command to stay in the calling in which you were when converted is not absolute. It does not condemn all job changes. We know this not only because of the exceptions Paul allowed to his principle here in 1 Corinthians 7 (cf. verse 15), but also because Scripture depicts and approves such changes. There is provision for freeing slaves in the Old Testament, and we are familiar with a tax collector who became a preacher and fishermen who became missionaries. Besides this, we know that there are some jobs in which you could not stay and obey God's commands: e.g., prostitution, numerous forms of indecent and corrupting entertainment, and others in which you may be forced to exploit people.

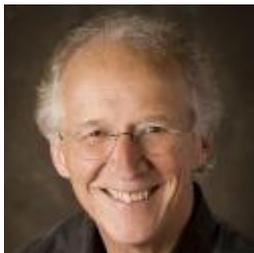
Paul is not saying that a professional thief or a Corinthian cult prostitute should stay in the calling in which they were called. The question at Corinth was: When we come to Christ, what should we abandon? And Paul's answer is: You don't need to abandon your vocation if you can stay in it *with God*. His concern is not to condemn job changes, but to teach that you can have fulfillment in Christ whatever your job is. This is a very unfashionable teaching in contemporary western society, because it cuts the nerve of worldly ambition. We need to think long and hard about whether what we communicate to our children about success is biblical or just American. The word of God for all us "success seekers" is this: Take all that ambition and drive that you are pouring into your upward mobility and pour it instead into a spiritual zeal to cultivate an enjoyment of God's presence and obedience to his revealed will in Scripture.

Third, for you younger people who have not entered a profession yet, the implication of our text is this: When you ask yourself the question, "What is God's will for my life?" you should give the resounding answer: "His will is that I maintain close fellowship with him and devote myself to obeying his commandments." God's

revealed will for you (the only will you are responsible to obey) is your *sanctification* (1 Thessalonians 4:3), not your vocation. Devote yourself to that with all your heart, and take whatever job you want. I have no doubt that, if all our young people are bending every effort to stay close to God and to obey the commands of Scripture, God will distribute them in the world exactly where he wants their influence for him.

Fourth, and finally, this text implies that the job you now have, as long as you are there, is God's *assignment* to you. Verse 17 says, "Let everyone lead the life which the Lord has *assigned* to him." God is sovereign. It is no accident that you are where you are. "A man's mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established" (Proverbs 19:21). "The lot is cast in the lap, but the decision is wholly from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:33).

You are where you are by divine assignment, even if you got there by fraud. Your job is your ministerial assignment, just as much as mine is. How you fulfill the demands of that job is just as essential in life as what you do here on Sunday. For many of us that may mean turning over a new leaf tomorrow morning. Let's all pray before we set out to work: "God, go with me today and keep me conscious of your presence. Encourage my heart when I tend to despair, and humble me when I tend to boast. O God, give me the grace to obey your commandments, which I know are all summed up in this, to love my neighbor as myself. Amen."



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