

What Is Your Calling?

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[0 : 00] What is your calling? What is God calling you to? And that's a question that Christians ask one another often.

Are you called to marriage? Are you called to singleness? Which profession do you feel called to? And 1 Corinthians 7, 17-24, which we'll just read for us in a span of mere eight verses, is the word calling appears in this passage eight times.

And really it's as good a passage as any in the Bible to teach us about the nature of Christian calling. And this passage is actually still a part of the passage we covered last week, where Paul was dealing with specifically the issue of whether married people should remain celibate within their marriage or seek divorce to get out of their marriage in order to have a single-minded devotion to God.

Corinthians were asking that question, and Paul's emphatic response in both cases was no. If you're married, you should continue conjugal relations, and if you're married, you should stay married because you can serve God even if you are married, whether you're single or you're married.

And this passage is really the theological basis for that exhortation. And so here he says, he's teaching us basically that as people who were purchased by Christ, we can fulfill our Christian calling no matter what condition we are in.

[1 : 27] Really that's kind of the main point, the theological basis for what he said last week. Because for him, it doesn't ultimately matter what condition we were in when we were called by God into relationship with him, because it's possible to honor him and serve him in whatever situation we are in.

And that's why Paul says if you're married, stay married. And in next week's passage, he'll say if you're single, stay single, unless your passions are too strong, right? So because whether we're single or married is irrelevant to our Christian calling.

Singles as well as married people can fulfill their Christian calling. So to prove this, Paul employs illustrations in verses 17 to 19 to show that circumcision is irrelevant to our call.

And then in verses 20 to 22, he shows us that even enslavement is irrelevant to our call. And then finally in verses 23 to 24, he tells us that redemption is relevant to our call, right?

So those will be my three points, the headings for today. So circumcision is irrelevant, enslavement is irrelevant, and then redemption is relevant. And verse 17 reads, Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him, right?

[2 : 43] So that's how it reads in ESV. And in the ESV, it kind of sounds like what the Lord assigned us to and what God called us to are the exact same things, as if it's referring to the same thing.

But the context teaches us that they're actually not the same thing because the rest of the passage distinguishes our situational assignment from our Christian calling. So it's two different things that Paul has in mind when he says this.

The NIV makes this a little bit clearer. He says, It says, So that's our calling as a believer.

And whatever situation we're in, that's how we should live. So this points out something that's very important, is that we tend to think of our calling primarily in terms of our vocation.

Isn't that right? Whether it's to be an architect or a teacher, a doctor, a president, or a wife and a mother. But for Paul, the word calling is not primarily a vocational term, but a relational term.

[3 : 46] In 1 Corinthians 1.9, he tells us what Paul means by calling. He says, Our Christian calling is primarily relational rather than vocational, even though, of course, God has something to say about our vocation and how we have to live in that vocation as a Christian.

It's about our fellowship with the triune God, how we receive his love and grow in our love for him. And often, the Christians who are the most insecure, the ones that have this insatiable desire to prove themselves to other people, are ones that are too focused on their vocational call and not enough on their relational status before God and how they relate to him.

But Christian call is about communion with him, our companionship with God. And so in verse 17, Paul's telling us that we should fulfill our Christian calling to abide in God, to remain in him, whatever situation we are in.

The Corinthian believers, some of them, were so fixated on changing the circumstances of their lives, the conditions that they were in. For example, seeking sexual abstinence in marriage or seeking divorce by going even a step further to seek divorce when they're married.

But Paul tells them that instead they should focus on fulfilling their Christian calling in the situation that they've been called in. So only let each person, verse 17, only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him in which God has called him.

[5 : 19] And lest the Corinthian believers challenge Paul on this point, Paul adds, this is my rule in all the churches. So he's saying, I'm not being particularly restrictive to you.

This is, in fact, what I teach in every church that I've ever ministered in. And the word rule is a word that means arrangement or order, right? And Paul is here establishing a principle by which we are to be guided.

All Christians are to be guided. And he's not laying down here a law saying that Christians must not change their life situations. Paul envisions clearly in the preceding passage and in the passage that follows that some life situations will change, right?

So he's not saying don't change your situation, but he's saying that's not your focus. Your focus should be on fulfilling your Christian calling in the situation you're in. That's the general principle. That's the general rule. That's what he's talking about. And then in verses 18 to 19, read with me here, Paul offers his first illustration to demonstrate this point. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised?

[6 : 22] 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.

So it's easy for us to read that and not our assent. And like, yeah, of course, you know, circumcision doesn't matter for our spirituality. But you have to kind of assume the perspective of a Jew listening to this, right?

For a Jew, hearing Paul say this, they would have been indignant and shocked. I mean, they were responsible. Are you kidding me? Right? I mean, circumcision is a commandment of God.

Right? Circumcision is the sign that God personally commanded of his people through the great prophet Moses. And it has served as such a sign for over a thousand years, the distinguishing mark that separated Jews from Gentiles.

And you're telling me that it doesn't matter? So this is really significant what Paul is saying here, logically. In fact, what we learn in Paul's epistle to the Galatians is that there were many Jewish Christians who, in fact, were teaching Gentile converts that they needed to be circumcised in order to be a true Christian.

[7 : 36] Circumcision. So Paul says, 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. Circumcision was a sign of the old covenant, right?

Therefore, it is no longer a command for the people of the new covenant. The cross of Jesus Christ had a radically equalizing effect, so that now Jews and Gentiles stand shoulder to shoulder at the foot of the cross.

And those who are not circumcised as well as those who are circumcised can enjoy the same salvation privileges that are in Jesus Christ. That's what that means. And that means for us also, we can't take pride in our own religious heritage or accomplishments apart from Jesus Christ.

In terms of fulfilling your ultimate calling as a Christian, it doesn't matter whether you're a first-generation Christian or whether your family tree goes back a hundred generations of Christianity.

[8 : 47] It doesn't matter whether you had believing parents who loved you and disciplined you and brought you up in the instruction of the Lord so that you have quite an unremarkable, so to speak, in a worldly sense, conversion story.

Or whether you had unbelieving parents who steered you away from the Lord, maybe even abused you, and you have the most dramatic conversion story in the world. It doesn't matter in an ultimate sense for fulfilling your Christian calling.

It doesn't matter whether you went to public school or private school or if you were homeschooled. It doesn't matter whether you're from a Baptist tradition or a Pentecostal tradition or a Reformed tradition.

Apart from Christ, those things mean nothing because those things in and of themselves cannot save a single person. It's Christ who recreates us so that we become new creations.

And when we repent of our sins and believe in Him, it's no longer our heritage, our background that defines us. It's Christ and His call that defines us. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.

[9 : 52] So let me ask you, how are you living now? How is your relationship with God now? All of us, no matter what our religious background is, no matter what religious baggages we bring to the table, we can fulfill our Christian calling by the power of the Spirit.

I hope that fills you with hope. It fills me with hope. Because we can't fulfill our Christian calling to abide in God no matter what situation we are in. This also means that we cannot take pride in our social or ethnic heritage apart from Christ either.

In terms of fulfilling our ultimate Christian calling, it doesn't matter whether we're Asian or Latino, black or white, Jewish or Gentile.

When we come to Christ, our racial, ethnic, and social heritage are all consecrated, set apart for Christ, so that we don't need to deny our heritage or seek to change it in order to follow Him.

And we can keep God's commandments as Caucasian or Asian or Latin or African Americans, as Nigerians, Koreans, Portuguese, Chinese, English, and American.

[10 : 59] Because by this, of course, I don't mean, and Paul doesn't mean that we don't have to change anything in our cultures. Every culture has things that are scriptural, that are biblical, that honor God, and every culture has things that don't honor God and that need to be changed.

That's not what I mean. But what I'm saying is that we don't need to seek to change our background, our heritage, where we come from, because our condition is not what's decisive in how we follow Christ's call.

There's something radically equalizing and unifying about the gospel of Jesus Christ. And Paul wants the Corinthian believers in this particular situation to apply that principle to their desire to be demarried as well.

They want to escape marriage so that they can be more holy, so to speak, in a mistaken understanding of marriage. And so basically, Paul's saying, by analogy, marriage counts for nothing.

Celibacy counts for nothing. What counts is keeping the commandments of God. You can stay wherever you are and honor God where you are. So that's the first point of this, Paul's fourth point in this section.

[12 : 02] And then he turns to address the issue of enslavement. And so he followed this kind of logical flow in verses 17 to 19. In verse 17, Paul offered the principle.

And then in verse 18, he offered an illustration. And then in verse 19, he offered his rationale, his explanation, reasoning. And he follows the exact same pattern here in verses 20 to 22 to teach us that enslavement is irrelevant to our call.

That's my second point. He says in verse 20, each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. The condition to which we were called does not negate our ability to fulfill our Christian calling.

So we should remain in it. That's the principle. And then in verse 21, he gives us another illustration. Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it.

But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. That sounds kind of crazy, doesn't it? If that didn't sound crazy when you first read it, you probably didn't read it correctly.

[13 : 02] So look at it again. Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even a state of enslavement to another person, Paul says, is irrelevant to fulfilling our Christian

calling.

But Paul knows, of course, that it is better for the sake of the believer's well-being to gain freedom if possible. So he adds a little qualification.

He says, but if you can gain your freedom, by all means, avail yourself of the opportunity. But Paul nevertheless insists that whether we are free or enslaved, we can fulfill our Christian calling in whatever condition we are in.

Now, I have to digress a little bit to give some context because I have no doubt that some slave masters in history have quoted this verse to justify slavery and to tell their slaves to stay put.

But that would be a misapplication of this verse since the fact that slaves can honor Christ in their enslavement does not mean that their masters are right to enslave them.

[14:06] I mean, they still have to keep God's commandments. And also, when we think of slavery, hear the word slavery, right away our mind goes to 17th, 18th, 19th century modern world slavery.

But this would be wrong. It would be a mistake because the slavery in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament was far more like indentured servanthood than it is like the modern world slavery that we know of.

So it's really not too different from professionals who have come under a contractual agreement to render their services and are bound to only render their services to this particular person.

It's kind of that kind of indentured servanthood. So biblical scholar Murray Harris writes in his book, *Slave of Christ*, about the difference. And first thing he notes is that slaves in the Greco-Roman world were indistinguishable from the rest of society by race, speech, or clothing.

So they were never segregated from the rest of society and lived like everyone else. And that's in stark contrast to New World slavery, which was race-based and primarily exploited Africans and African-Americans and had them segregated from the rest of society.

[15:13] So it's just totally two different things. And then secondly, he says the slaves in the Greco-Roman world often were highly educated, sometimes even more highly educated than their owners. This is in stark contrast to New World slavery where the slaves were relegated, uneducated, and mostly relegated to menial and manual labor.

And then third, slaves in the Greco-Roman world made the same wages as free laborers, so often they were able to make enough money to buy themselves out. And even if they weren't able to buy themselves out, they were expected to be manumitted after about 10 years of service or at least by the time of their late 30s.

In contrast, the New World slavery, people were coerced into slavery for life with little compensation. And fourth, finally, people in the Greco-Roman world often sold themselves into slavery as a solution to their financial woes.

But that was a way of paying their debts, paying off their debts. But the slavery that we know of in the modern world was sourced through kidnapping. People, they weren't selling themselves into slavery to get out of debt.

It was a way of exploiting a population. And kidnapping is unequivocally condemned in the Bible. 1 Timothy 1, 9, 11, Deuteronomy 24, 7.

[16:29] So for all of these reasons, it's unfair to equate slavery in the Bible with modern-day slavery. And that's why our translation, the English Standard Version, ESV Bible, instead of using the word slave, which is the Greek word there, it uses the word bondservant to maintain that distinction so that we don't confuse and think about the kind of slave that we're familiar with.

So scripture teaching, that's all that to make a point, that scripture teaching in no way justifies the slavery that we know of in the modern world. But even if we understand this, Paul's statement is shocking, isn't it?

Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. Isn't it better to not be under debt? Isn't it better to be free, to be able to work for yourself and not for someone else?

But Paul's parenthetical statement implies the answer, yes, yes, it is better. It is better to be free rather than enslaved. And that's why he adds that qualification. But nonetheless, Paul writes, do not be concerned about it.

Sure, if you can get free, by all means do so. But don't despair because you can't get free because you can still fulfill your Christian calling. Then Paul gives us his reason in verse 22.

[17:48] Four, he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ.

It's a clever wordplay right here. He's saying that you might be free, you might be a freedman, but you are no less a bondservant of Christ. And if you're a Christian, he's saying also that you might be enslaved to another, but you are no less a freedman of the Lord.

The gospel equalizes and unifies believers no matter what societal standing prior to coming to Christ. And that's why in Paul's epistle to Philemon, so he's writing to a Christian slave owner named Philemon.

And he writes on behalf of a slave, a runaway slave that belonged to Philemon. His name is Onesimus, and he had run away from Philemon.

And he had met Paul, and under Paul's ministry, Onesimus became a Christian. And so Paul addresses Philemon in this letter, and in verses 15 of 16 of that one chapter book, he says, for this perhaps is why Onesimus was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother.

[19 : 13] So in terms of their societal standing, Philemon is the slave owner, and Onesimus is the slave. In Christ, they have become brothers.

The gospel equalizes and unifies, and that's why Paul's able to say here in verses 21 to 22, were you a bondservant when called? Don't be concerned about it. For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord.

Likewise, he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. This is so counterintuitive, isn't it, as we think about our lives? Because it's easy for us to get caught up in trying to change our circumstances, and trying to improve the conditions of our lives.

But scripture teaches us that we can fulfill our Christian calling irrespective of our circumstances. I mean, how many times have you heard things like this? It's so easy to blame our situations and environments.

He says, oh, only if I could get a new job. Oh, only if I could move to a new city or country. Oh, only if I could marry that person.

[20 : 16] Oh, only if I could make more money. Oh, only if I could get that promotion. Oh, only if I could have children. Oh, only if I didn't have children.

Right? Then I would be fulfilled. Then I'd be able to fulfill God's calling in my life. Right?

I mean, I'm guilty of this at times as well. And similarly, it's so easy for us, you know, more in a kind of larger framework. It's easy for us as people who are enmeshed in our culture to get caught up in the spirit of the times and the various, you know, movements and hashtags of our age.

If only our society would stop being so misogynistic. If only our people would stop being so racist. Then I would be able to thrive. Then I would be able to fulfill God's calling on my life. Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying.

[21 : 17] Right? I'm not saying that these are unimportant. These are real injustices. And Paul would say, as he said to enslaved Christians in verse 21, if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.

It would be good to affect a positive change. And when we have the opportunity. And it is our responsibility as people who are called to love our neighbors to speak out on behalf of people who are oppressed.

That's a necessary and natural expression of our love for neighbor. But whether we can change our circumstances or not, Paul teaches us that we are never hostage to our circumstances.

God will not let us elevate the imbalances and the injustices of our circumstances to a level that would paralyze us. He will not stand to let the unfair circumstances and conditions of our lives define us.

Instead, he says, So even when the world is unfair, even when we are oppressed, even when we are bound in chains, no matter what condition we are in, we are freed men of the Lord.

[22 : 33] And we can fulfill our Christian calling and keep God's commandments. That's Paul's point in this passage. And think about how liberating this truth is.

Imagine if our relationship with God were contingent on our circumstances. If it depended on the whims of other people, then those of us who are born into unfavorable circumstances or stumbled upon it by accident, we would have no choice but to despair.

But thanks be to God that this is not the case. We might be enslaved. We might be bound. But God is not bound.

And because we are united with him in fellowship through Jesus Christ, we are truly free. And I pray this fills you with hope today because that means whether you're a white-collar worker or a blue-collar worker, whether you're privileged or underprivileged, we can fulfill our Christian calling wherever we are.

And Paul gives the ultimate theological reason for this truth in verse 23. You were bought with a price. Do not become bondservants of men.

[23 : 45] Circumcision is irrelevant to our call and enslavement is irrelevant to our call, but redemption is relevant to our call. That's Paul's third point. The reason why, even in unfair and unfavorable circumstances, even when we are bondservants, we can enjoy freedom in Christ and fellowship with God is this.

You were bought with a price. Your biggest problem in life is not him or her or your parent or your spouse or your society, your boss or your culture or your president.

Your biggest problem, the biggest obstacle to the fulfillment and your salvation, your biggest disadvantage is you.

It's me. All of us have sinned against God by pridefully refusing to acknowledge him and choosing to live for ourselves rather than for him in spite of the fact that he is our creator and the source of all that is good and right and beautiful in our lives.

And in John 8, 34, Jesus says, Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. We had sold ourselves into slavery to sin and it was impossible for us to earn our way out.

[25 : 06] That was the situation we were in. But God purchased us. But God redeemed us. And God didn't buy us with trinkets that cost him nothing.

It says in 1 Peter 1, 18, You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.

That's what verse 23 means. You were bought with the price, so do not become bondservants of men. We have been purchased by God and therefore we are bondservants of God, not men.

And whenever we give our circumstances, our conditions, too much power over our lives, whenever we live as if our ability to follow God is constrained by our conditions, we are living as bondservants of men.

And God says, I purchased you. You are not a bondservant of men. You're my bondservant. But what stood between us and God was our own sins.

[26 : 08] And God dealt with that one sin for all by sending his son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for our sins. And he rose again to give us new life. And that's why we can be faithful Christians in whatever condition we are in.

So Paul concludes in verse 24, In whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. This sums up the whole passage and really brings the idea once again back to that idea of calling.

What is our calling? The Christian is called to relationship with God, to a fellowship with God. And that's what it means to remain with God. The word remain is the same Greek word that's used, translated elsewhere as abide or dwell.

And it's the same word that's used in John 14, 10 to refer to the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity. How they indwell one another, abide in each other.

And how do we abide in God, remain in God, dwell in God? John 6, 40 tells us that we abide in God by believing in his word and his works. And then John 15, 9 to 11 tells us that we abide in God by obeying his commandments.

[27 : 21] So remaining in God entails trust on the one hand and obedience on the other. It means to believe in him, to belong to him, and to behave in accordance with that identity.

And we can do this in whatever condition each was called. Our call rather than our condition dictates how we live. If you are not yet a follower of Jesus Christ, I invite you to consider God's calling this morning.

Because it's only in responding to his calling that you can find salvation and true fulfillment.

Especially in an urban context like ours, where upward mobility is everything.

I mean, you guys, it's a rat race, right? We're always trying to climb the ladder. And people's lives are characterized by that relentless pursuit of more and more and more and in search of fulfillment and happiness.

But that's an ultimately vain and unfulfilling endeavor. Even if you reach the very top of our society, no amount of money, sex, power, and fame can satisfy the aching longing of your soul.

[28 : 25] As Augustine, a 4th century Christian theologian writes, God made us for himself. And our heart is restless until it finds its rest in him.

We were created to worship God, to love him and be satisfied by him, to trust and obey him and God's beckoning. He's calling you.

Respond to him this morning. And if you're already a Christian, remember this important truth that as people who were purchased by Christ, we can fulfill our Christian calling to abide in him in whatever condition we're in.

Don't be so preoccupied with the condition you're in that you forget that your main occupation is the calling to fellowship with God. Remember that your Christian calling is relational before it is vocational.

Don't be so distracted with serving that you neglect to sit at the Lord's feet and listen to his teaching. Let's pray together.

[29 : 30] Let's pray together. God, we thank you for that great exchange on the cross, that greatest transaction where we who were hopelessly indebted, enslaved to sin, were purchased by the blood of the land.

We thank you for your grace. We thank you that because of that reality of redemption, that we are now free from all circumstances and conditions that bind us, to be able to freely live for you, worship you, to have fellowship with you, and that nothing, no situation, no man can constrain us from that reality.

We thank you for that. Help us now to live in light of it, to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.