

**“Work and Status”**  
**1 Corinthians 7:17-24**  
**July 31, 2022**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

In our final sermon in our series on work we are going to address a common question. “How can I know what God has called me to do?” In contrast to last week’s topic on laziness, when I mentioned that I have never been asked to help someone deal with that sin, this topic is just the opposite. Every pastor has been asked many times by people to help them know God’s will for their lives, whether it’s in the area of their occupation, a marriage partner, or many other areas of life.

I’m thankful that we live in a time when there is freedom to pursue a wide variety of possible occupations. Some of our grandchildren have been visiting this week, and our six-year-old grandson has said that he wants to be a Tour de France cyclist when he grows up. He added that he thought he could win it because he had the bright idea of doing the race on an e-bike. There are indeed lots of options for our children as they decide what they want to do when they grow up. But it is also the case that the multitude of options poses a challenge in this area of deciding which one to choose. And for the Christian, we want to choose the one that God is calling us to pursue.

Paul addresses this question in today’s passage in the larger context of talking about marriage and divorce. His answer addresses the issue of status. The main point is that we don’t make these decisions to boost our status in the world, because, for the Christian, status is something we receive and not something we achieve. He draws out three implications of this idea.

**I. Be Reluctant to Change**

This passage may seem at first to be out of place in the larger context of 1 Corinthians 7, a chapter in which Paul answers some specific questions the Corinthians had posed to him about marriage and sexual practice. Immediately prior to verse 17, Paul had been addressing the issue of mixed marriages between Christians and non-Christians. The Corinthians wanted to know if they should seek a divorce from a non-Christian spouse, a mixed marriage arising from the conversion of one spouse but not the other. Paul’s clear answer is that the Christian spouse should not seek a divorce on those grounds, even though such a mixed marriage would pose challenges for the Christian spouse.

Paul then goes on to explain that this conclusion is based on a general rule he has for all the churches. The rule is **“Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him”** (7:17). The word “assigned” is critical. Paul views God as making assignments. The surprising thing here is that he is referring to an assignment God made prior to one’s conversion. That becomes evident in the two examples Paul gives: circumcision and enslavement. **“Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision”** (v. 18). He then makes the same point in reverse for those uncircumcised at the time of their conversion.

The second example is that of slavery. If you were a slave at the time of your conversion, he says, **“Do not be concerned about it”** (v. 21). Some wonder why Paul doesn’t take a stronger stand against slavery here or elsewhere in his letters. A couple of things can be said in response to that. First, it has been pointed out by many that slavery in the New Testament was different than slavery in our nation prior to the Civil War. It was closer to the indentured servitude common in medieval Europe. Second, Paul’s efforts were focused on the kingdom of God, the Church, and not instigating a rebellion against the current world order. He believed that the Church was to be a light to the world, and as relationships were transformed by the gospel (including the slave-master relationship), that the church’s influence would eventually lead to a change of this institution.

How does all this help us discern what God has called us to do? It does so by introducing two principles that we can summarize as the sovereignty of God and the issue of status. God’s sovereignty means that he is control of all of life. It is indicated by this word “assigned.” I note in our passage that his sovereignty in a person’s life doesn’t begin at that person’s conversion, but predates the conversion. So he can tell the person who was converted after marriage when the spouse remained unconverted that God assigned that spouse, and this becomes the basis for not jumping into a change through divorce.

An appreciation of God’s sovereignty helps lead us by giving us the questions we need to start with. Answering these three questions helps us discern what God is calling us to do. What are my desires? What are my abilities? What are my opportunities? If God is sovereign, then he is the author of all three of these: your desires, your abilities, and your opportunities. A call from God requires alignment of all three. You may have the desire and ability to do something, but God hasn’t opened the door to do so, and you lack the opportunity. God is sovereign in closing that door. If all three of these are required, this also means that God will not call you to do something you don’t want to do. Nor will he call you to do something you lack the ability and

giftings to do. So asking and answering these three questions is an important and necessary part of discerning God's will for you.

The second issue brought up here is the issue of status. Where God's sovereignty is a positive encouragement, this one is more of a negative warning. Paul is saying that we should not be seeking change just to improve our status. The example he offers is that of circumcision (v. 18). This example needs a little explanation. Apparently, there was a surgical procedure at this time that sought to cover up the evidence of circumcision. Why would a man want to do that? There were multiple opportunities in this culture for men to see other men naked. The activities in the gymnasium were conducted in the nude. There were also public baths where men would be naked in the presence of other men. So a Jewish man would be obvious in this situation. If the dominant culture was Greek, a Jewish man may want to cover his Jewishness in order to fit in or to boost his status. On the other hand, if a Gentile is in a predominantly Jewish setting, he may want to get circumcised to improve his status among that group. Paul is not saying that Gentile converts should never be circumcised. Remember that he circumcised Timothy before taking him on as his missionary partner (Acts 16:3). It is the reason that is key. Paul circumcised Timothy for the sake of the gospel, and forbids circumcision here for the sake of elevating one's status.

This passage would have us examine our motives when we are trying to discern God's will for our lives, whether it's in the area of our vocation or anything else. If we just want to change to boost our status, we will be led astray. I once saw a painting of four cows in four different fields separated by fences. At the intersection of the four fences, each cow was pictured with his head in an adjacent field rather than his own field. We are all tempted to think the grass is greener elsewhere, and rather than be content with where God has put us, we are always clamoring for change. That's why Paul says here that we should be reluctant to change. In other words, our bias should be to stay where you are unless God clearly calls you elsewhere.

## **II. Be Willing to Change**

This point is in obvious tension with the previous one. While we are to be reluctant to change, we are also to distance ourselves from the kind of passivity that resists change. This point is quite clear in Paul's advice to the slave. While he tells the slave that seeking his freedom should not be his primary concern, he goes on to add that if securing that freedom is within reach he should by all means take advantage of that opportunity. To say this differently, Paul is saying on the one hand that we should be willing to stay right where we are even if there are hard things about that place. But we should also not be fearful of making a change. In both cases, he's identifying the way that sin and

unbelief work in the human heart. At times it is expressed through a restlessness that is never content to stay and always seeking change, while at other times it is seen in the kind of fear that immobilizes us and keeps us from change. Addressing these movements of sin is always needed as we seek to be led by God.

There is another call to change found in verse 19. **“For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.”** What counts is the kind of heart change that leads to our growth in loving God and loving others. By definition, that requires change. When we begin our Christian lives, there is still a great deal of self-centeredness in our hearts. God graciously changes that, but it is often the case that the changes are challenging to us. The theological word for this is sanctification. While we saw in the previous point that seeking to boost our status should not be a factor in making decisions about such matters as vocation, schooling, marriage and career, our sanctification should be an important factor. If a particular course of action becomes an impediment to our sanctification, we can be sure that God’s will is for a change. The Bible says at one place, **“For this is the will of God, your sanctification”** (1 Thess. 4:3).

One summer when I was in college I was seeking a summer job that would help me to save a good bit of money. I saw in the classified ads a job posting promising the kind of monthly income that was two to three times what I could make with the typical minimum wage job available for college students. I checked it out and it turned out to be a job doing door-to-door sales of a service to turn a person’s photographs into framed portraits. I spent several days in training, and then went out to do my first solo effort. Since this service was especially attractive to young couples with newborn children, we usually focused our efforts on apartment buildings. My first day out, I encountered a young husband and wife who were the perfect prospects. As I was going through my spiel, I was noticing by the interior of their apartment that they were likely struggling financially. The whole time I was giving my presentation, I found myself hoping that they would say “No.” My heart sank when they said “Yes,” and I immediately went back to the office and told my supervisor that this job wasn’t for me. Not to have done so would have been solely for the greedy purpose of making money.

### **III. Receive Your Status**

As has already been mentioned, Paul’s main point in this passage is that status is something we receive, not something we achieve. This truth is powerfully presented in verses 22-23. **“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.”** In both of these verses, he is talking about the critically important issue of identity. We must know who we are in Christ. No matter how difficult your situation might be at work or at home, you have freedom in Christ. And that freedom is to be used to become a slave of Christ rather than a slave of men.

This has great relevance to our decisions about issues of guidance, whether it relates to jobs, money, marriage or anything else. Many times we just want someone to give us some steps we can take in order to make a good decision. While there is a place for that, Paul is saying that there is something far more important, without which you will inevitably make bad decisions. That thing of importance is to know your status, your identity in Christ. If you know that and are resting in it, then you will not be as prone to base your decisions on things like a fear of disappointing someone else. If you know your identity in Christ, you won't limit your decisions about which job to take to only those you think will boost your status. Your status has already been boosted as high as it could possibly be in Christ. That frees you up now to simply recognize the intersection of your desires, abilities and opportunities with the needs of the world and to pursue that.

### **CONCLUSION:**

As we celebrate Communion this morning, let's rejoice in the truth of verse 23. **“You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.”** We were in bondage to sin with no way to deliver ourselves. No amount of money would be enough to pay this ransom. It would require the blood of Jesus, which is to say his life. He paid this price, even dying for us when we were still his enemies. Now we are his, and we find in him our true home and our true status.