

Remain where you are: The Christian & Contentment

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Preacher: Brian King

[0 : 00] Let's pray and let's ask for God's help as we come to today's passage. Father, as we come today, we ask for your help again as we tackle what in some ways might be a straightforward passage, but in other ways can be quite difficult.

I pray that your Holy Spirit will be opening our hearts so that we can be able to receive what you want to say to us so that we would apply correctly what you want to say to the details of our respective situations.

So please help me to proclaim your word faithfully and to just communicate as clearly as I can. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now a few years ago, my wife saw a flyer for a puppet show downtown in Kuching. The flyer sounded quite exciting, advertising puppeteers from different countries, promising an interesting performance, and best of all, free your charge.

And so Chin Yin thought she'll bring my young son along to watch this. But when they arrived, they discovered a few things. There was no live show at the time advertised. In fact, you could barely find any information.

[1 : 11] Eventually, they got directed to a recording. Except that this supposed recording of these puppets could barely even be caught that. It was more like a PowerPoint slideshow with graphics and fonts that looked like they came from the early 90s.

There was a pretty big gap between what Chin Yin expected and what she experienced. Now I'm sure we've all gone through similar experiences, haven't we? We had certain expectations, but the reality didn't match up.

Whether that was a restaurant, a movie, or an event. And that gap between what we expect and what we experience is called disappointment.

But the thing is, that gap doesn't just apply to puppet shows and restaurant food. It applies on a larger scale as well. You see, think about the life you wanted and look at the life you have now.

My guess is, you know, there's a gap. A gap between the life you expected to have and the life you actually have. It's just a question of how big that gap is and what form it takes.

[2 : 24] And although I don't know all your situations, I can make some educated guesses. There'll be some of you today who are single but thought that you'll be married by now. One of you actually mentioned that to me quite recently.

There might be one or two of you who thought that you'll be parents by now, but there are no kids on the way. There are some of you who thought that your kids would turn out a certain way, but it hasn't.

And there'll be some of you who thought that you'll have accomplished this or that particular goal by now, but it remains out of reach. And sometimes being a Christian makes that gap harder to bear.

Why? Because we have certain expectations. If God is our Father and He loves to give good gifts to His children, then surely our lives would look different, right?

But it hasn't. And so we're disappointed. And that's when our mind starts turning to the if-lys. If only I had decided to take that job.

[3 : 27] If only I hadn't taken that job. If only I married a different person. If only I didn't marry that person. If only I became a Christian much earlier in my life.

If only I didn't come from that overbearing Christian family. If only. If only. And that little phrase can easily become the consuming theme that swallows up our thoughts and hangs over our everyday.

And if we're not careful, it can begin to rob us of our joy. We begin to think that unless God changes our circumstances, we can never fully thrive, never experience God's work in our lives, never get to lift His name up high.

And so today, Paul wants to challenge us. He wants to keep us from getting locked into that if-only paradigm. He wants to show us that disappointment need not prevent us from living the life that God wants us to live.

And that actually, a godly contentment that comes from a recognition of what God has done in our lives is a more lasting and powerful solution than any mere change in circumstances.

[4 : 50] As he says elsewhere to his apprentice Timothy in 1 Timothy 6.6, godliness with contentment is great gain. And while at first glance, this passage looks completely disconnected from sex, singleness, marriage, and the kingdom of God, in reality, this passage is really the theological heartbeat of 1 Corinthians 7.

And so let's dive in. And when we scan the passage, we can more or less spot Paul's main counsel straight away. Remain where you are.

Remain where you are. Look at verse 17. Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them just as God has called them.

Or look down to verse 20. Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. One more time, down in verse 24.

Brothers and sisters, each person as responsible to God should remain in the situation they were when God called them.

[6 : 08] But why does Paul say that? Well, that's what we're going to explore. And here's his starting point. Because God has called you to himself.

Because God has called you to himself. That's his answer. You see, what is the greatest privilege of a Christian? Answer, that you have been called by God for him and to him.

And that's what Paul stresses throughout this passage. In nearly every verse, I hope you saw, you'll find the language of calling. You see, when we think of our lives, we tend to think horizontally.

That means we only think at the human level. And so we ask questions like, what should I do with my life? What are my goals? What should I aim for?

What should I pursue? What do I want to get out of all these years I have on earth? What are my plans? We think about these matters only as it relates to ourselves.

[7 : 09] But the problem with that is that it creates instability. We define our purpose, but because we don't know everything and we can't see everything, we're always thinking, maybe there's a better option.

Maybe there's a better thing to chase. a better agenda to pursue. I just haven't figured out what that is yet. You know, we can't help but wonder if there's always something better.

And that's the problem with living horizontally. We're weighed down by uncertainty. But when we realize that we're caught by God, it reframes our lives vertically.

We begin to interact at the God and human level. and we now ask different questions. What does God want to do with my life? What is God's agenda?

What does he call me to focus on? And how does that now change the way I see the people around me or the environment I'm in? We begin to see that we don't call the shots.

[8 : 14] And that is good news. After all, if you already have trouble deciding where to go for lunch, what makes us think that we are ready to decide what our lives should be all about.

But when we know that our lives are to be lived vertically, we rest easier. Because we simply answer to God's calling.

But you say, how do I know if the life I have now is what God is calling me to? Answer, verse 17 again.

You know the life you have now is the life God has called you to because the life you have now is the life God has assigned to you.

You see, we're always called by God in a particular context. God didn't save us simply by flipping on a switch. Instead, he has written our story.

[9 : 23] Think of how you became a Christian. You were at school when a teacher shared the gospel with you in the ISCF. Or you had a friend invite you to church to hear about God while at university.

Or you were on the internet and you stumbled across an interesting video that showed Christianity is credible. Or you were in a family where your parents opened the Bible with you often and lived your lives for Jesus.

When God called you to himself, he did so in a particular setting, at a particular time, which he himself had sovereignly directed.

He's the author of your story. And Paul says, that is still true. He is still writing your story.

And so whatever life setting you're in now, whatever situation you're in, it's a sign by him. It is still under his sovereign and gracious direction.

[10 : 28] And in that situation, what do you do? Verse 17 again, live as a believer. We all have different assignments, but that one call is the same.

Wherever you are, strive to follow Jesus. That's the most important thing. Now, we'll see a little later that that doesn't mean that you never seek to change your circumstances.

Sometimes that's what you have to do in order to be a faithful follower of Jesus. But Paul says to the Corinthians, don't get obsessed with that. Don't see the mere change of circumstances as the silver bullet to your problems.

Just remember, where you are now does not lie outside the sphere of God's control. Where you are now is right under his watchful eye.

And that will help you to live as a believer if you remain where you are. And notice he doesn't just apply it to the Corinthians alone. Look at the end of verse 17.

[11 : 37] This is a rule I lay down in all the churches. Where you are now is where God has assigned you to live as a believer.

But you might ask, are you sure, God? Are you aware of my circumstances? How can godliness with contentment be great gain in my situation?

Paul says, yes, circumstances matter. I don't doubt that. In fact, that's what I'm going to address next. But in the end, they don't determine our relationship with God.

Why? Well, because when God calls you to himself, two things happen. Let's look at them in turn. Here's the first thing.

Paul says, because God has called you to himself, your past circumstances no longer define you. Your past circumstances no longer define you.

[12 : 46] For the remainder of this passage, Paul speaks into two of the most turbocharged issues of his day. The first is circumcision.

Now, that's probably an issue that doesn't get you all excited today. we don't feel the weight of this issue. And so, I was trying to think what might be a modern-day equivalent, and I think it would be race.

Whether in America or Malaysia, bring up race today, and you can already feel the blood pressure rising. And that's because our race or our ethnicity has such close affinities with our identity.

It was the same with circumcision back in the first century. For the Jew, they can be nothing more integral to their identity than being circumcised.

It was a symbol of the covenant they had with God. It was a clear marker that you belong to God's people. It showed that you were the one who enjoyed the favour of God.

[13 : 57] And given what circumcision represented, it's no surprise to learn that there were a few Gentiles who were interested in getting circumcised. Now, they didn't necessarily believe that this was essential for salvation.

There's no hint in the latter of that. But here's what they might have been thinking. You know what? My gentle past is nothing to be proud of.

In fact, it's pulling me down. It's preventing me from moving forward in the Christian life. And so maybe circumcision would help change that.

At the same time, there were a number of Jews who had lived long enough in this Greco-Roman city of Corinth that they were beginning to feel a little ashamed of their heritage.

In the city, it's common to exercise or take a shower in the nude at your local gym. that was just the way it was. And if the Greeks or Romans saw that you're circumcised, they'll think you're weird, even dishonorable.

[15 : 09] In their eyes, it's the mark of a foolish religion. And some Jews, feeling the pressure, opted for a surgical operation that could pull the remains of their foreskin forward and make them appear uncircumcised.

And so either way, people were feeling the weight of their past. So they were looking to change certain things on the outside. Whether it was getting circumcised or trying to appear uncircumcised, people saw that as key to their spiritual well-being.

But to everyone's big shock, Paul says, guys, you're making way too big a deal of this. Just look at verse 18.

Was a man already circumcised when he was caught? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was caught? He should not be circumcised.

And so Paul is saying, if you became a Christian as a Jewish believer, fantastic. And if you became a Christian as a non-Jewish believer, fantastic.

[16 : 29] But let's get on with living out your core. Let's get on with your assignment. Stop worrying about changing what's in the past. And in a statement so radical that it cannot be overstated, he says, verse 19, circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing.

It's hard to communicate what a shocking thing to say that is. I suppose it's a little like a Muslim Imam telling your Muslim friend today that eating pork doesn't matter.

But Paul is clear. Circumcision no longer has anything to do with your relationship with God. Instead, Paul says, here's what counts.

Verse 19 again, keeping God's commands. Now that Jesus has come, things have changed. Your past, whether you're circumcised or not, no longer defines you.

You can be uncircumcised and still follow God. Or put another way, you can be circumcised and not follow God at all.

[17 : 44] No, the difference maker now is not your past, but your future. That's how Paul phrases it in Galatians 6 verse 15.

It should appear on your screen. neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything. What counts is the new creation. When you become a Christian, you belong to the age to come.

You no longer belong to the age passing away. God has taken your story and placed it within his story such that the two stories merge.

And so even if you had a sad beginning, you're guaranteed a happy ending. That's what the gospel does. It stops the past from defining you.

And what counts is no longer the external but the eternal. And because you're God's new creation, what matters now, whatever the situation, is that you live for him.

[18 : 55] you keep his commands. That's what counts. Or in the words of Galatians 5 verse 6, also on the screen, what really counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Since in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. And that's what keeping God's commands is all about. It's about faith in Christ, leading to a life of love, love of God, and love of others.

It's about all the stuff that we've heard so far in 1 Corinthians. Giving up your rights, fleeing sexual immorality, glorifying God with your bodies.

Why? Because you have been caught by God to himself. love. And so your past circumstances no longer define you.

Your ethnic, cultural, or religious background is no longer decisive for your relationship with God. For the Jews in Corinth, that's what circumcision represented.

[20 : 11] Your ethnicity, your religion, and so on. But Paul says, don't get hung up on those any longer. Is there one or two of you today who look at your ethnic, or cultural, or religious background, and wish there was something you could change?

Perhaps you grew up in a non-Christian family, and even today you're still the only Christian. And it's easy to cast a wistful eye on others, and wish that you grew up with well-adjusted, less dysfunctional, believing parents.

But God says, don't let that control you. Don't let that disappointment overwhelm you. Yes, your past, whatever that is, form part of your story.

It's left a mark on you, no doubt. We don't deny that. But now, God says, your story has been absorbed into my story.

And in my story, what really counts now? The fact that you live your life to my glory. Which brings us to the second thing Paul says.

[21 : 32] Secondly, because God has called you to himself, your present circumstances don't have to hold you back. your present circumstances don't have to hold you back.

Paul addresses now a second contentious issue, slavery. Corinthian society consisted of those who were free and those who were slaves.

And even those who were slaves could experience quite a variety of conditions. It wasn't like the slave trade of the 17th century. There were slaves who worked as teachers, musicians, and even doctors, and who were well treated by their masters.

But there were others also who were badly exploited and abused. And so there was quite a bit of variation. And in such a scenario, Paul now says something really shocking.

Verse 21, were you a slave when you were caught? Don't let it trouble you. In other words, once again he says, remain where you are.

[22 : 42] Now that's troubling at first sight. Is Paul being pro-slavery here? Is he turning a blind eye to injustice? Well, not quite.

Notice in verse 21, he doesn't say, if you are a slave, don't be freed. Rather, he says, don't let it cause you worry.

slavery. Why? Because Paul isn't addressing the institution of slavery here, but how slaves should respond to their present circumstances.

And unlike circumcision, where someone can choose whether or not to have that surgery, the slave has no say in the matter. It's not up to him whether he can be free or not.

He's not in a position where he can change his circumstances. Only his master can. And so, verse 21 again, if your master sets you free, great, if you can gain your freedom, do so.

[23 : 50] After all, verse 23, being a slave of others is bad. Paul agrees with that. But Paul says, if right now you can't change your circumstances or your status, then don't lose sleep over it.

Because you can still serve God. You see, some of the slaves were thinking, if only I was free, then I would be able to serve God better.

I would be able to better glorify him. Isn't it horrible that actually I can't really live for him as long as I'm a slave? They thought that their present circumstances were holding them back.

And that's probably true of some of us listening in today. You're thinking, if only I was this or that, then only then can I serve God, but I can't do it right now.

But here's Paul's answer. Not true. Because God has called you to himself, your present circumstances don't have to hold you back.

[25 : 02] Your ability to glorify God does not depend on it. Why not? Because when God called you to himself, your status is transformed.

Just look at verse 22. Paul says, when you trusted Jesus, you became the freest person of all.

You are freed from spiritual death. You are freed from slavery to sin. You are freed from bondage to the Mosaic law. You are even freed from the fear of physical death and of people pleasing.

That's what Hebrews 2 and Galatians 1 verse 10 says. As a slave, you are actually more free than the free non-Christian. and God has freed you from realities far more significant than your present circumstances.

And so you are free to glorify him even when you occupy the lowest social rung in society. And if you are a free person in society, well, you have nothing to boast about.

[26 : 31] Your current superior social status doesn't make you more praiseworthy in God's sight. If your present circumstances appear more favourable right now, it makes no difference to your standing before God and your service to him.

Because your freedom is not the most significant thing about you. The fact that you are Christ's slave is.

Just because you are free doesn't mean you have no master. You belong to Christ. He bought you, which means he owns you.

Now, we say that all the time, but because we don't have any experience with slavery, we sometimes fail to grasp the implications. But when the Christian singer, Michael Card, started attending an African-American church, he noticed how often the congregation worshipped Jesus as master.

Not just saviour, not just friend, but master. Because of their history, they understood that following Jesus is about obeying and pleasing him because that's what slaves do.

[27 : 55] But they had no qualms because they knew what their new master is like. After all, who is Jesus? He's the master who has bought us with his very old blood.

He's the master who said, not my will, but yours be done, taking on the attitude of a slave. He's the master who walked in the footsteps of slaves, choosing the way of suffering, even dying on the cross.

We say that Jesus is the servant king, but it would not be inappropriate to call him the slave king. That's our master.

And no wonder the book where Michael Card shares this observation is called A Better Freedom. That's what you enjoy when you're Christ's slave.

And these African-American brothers of ours fully get verse 23. You will bother the price. Do not become slaves of human beings.

[29 : 07] One of them said to Michael Card, when slaves refer to Jesus as master, they are letting their earthly masters know they aren't.

They are not the slaves of human beings. They are slaves of Jesus alone. And as a result, even their present circumstances can't hold them back from serving Jesus as Lord.

And so we arrive at Paul's big point for today. Whatever your situation today, live for God. Whatever your circumstance today, glorify him in it.

Because God has called you to himself, you can follow Jesus wherever you are. Your past and present circumstances don't have to define you or hold you back when you recognize who you are in Christ.

So don't fall into excessive introspection. Don't fall into self-pity. Instead, to use the memorable phrase of one commentator, bloom where you're planted.

[30 : 25] Bloom where you're planted. But what might all this look like? Well, let's finish off today's sermon by considering how this might work out in practice.

Let's consider this especially with regards to our marital status. After all, that's been the subject of 1 Corinthians 7, hasn't it? And notice what has Paul already been saying in previous weeks.

If you're in a mixed marriage, stay there if possible. If you're already married, keep enjoying your sex life. If you're single, welcome that.

In other words, remain where you are and bloom where you're planted. Live with Jesus. Paul has been applying verses 17 and 24 to verses 1 to 16.

And so today, if you are single, Paul is saying, don't give all your energy to trying to change your single status. Give all your energy instead to living for Jesus.

[31 : 38] That's something we'll explore more next week. That doesn't mean that changing your circumstances is wrong or impossible. I hope that's clear already. If you're a slave and you can gain your freedom, do so.

And if you're single and you can get married, that's perfectly fine. But beware of seeing marriage as salvation. That's to turn marriage into an idol.

And unlike Jesus, idols never give you what they promise. And conversely, if you are in an unhappy marriage, and I want to try to say this in as sensitive a way as possible, don't be too quick to assume that divorce will solve everything.

Separation rarely brings contentment because often the problem lies on the inside. not just on the outside. If our relationship with God is not alive, no change of circumstances can help.

That's an important thing to remember, not just in the area of relationships, but in every other area of life as well. If our relationship with God is not alive, no change of circumstances will help.

[33 : 04] don't believe the lie that a positive change in your circumstances is the same as a positive change in your relationship with God.

And don't believe the lie that bad circumstances automatically means that your relationship with God is bad. If that was true, Paul must have had a really bad relationship with God.

But please don't mishear me as being dismissive if we are having a hard time. All suffering, whether in marriage relationships or some other area of life, it's hard.

It hurts. It brings tears. There's no doubt about that. And it can deaden us to the possibility of hope.

It can make it just seem impossible to bloom where fertile soil doesn't exist. But with God, nothing is impossible.

[34 : 13] When we give our difficult relationship or circumstance to God, when we wrestle with Him and allow Him to take charge, no suffering is ever wasted.

I just want all of us to hear that. God is for you and living for Him is never a wrong decision.

Why not? Because Christians don't interpret God's character in light of their circumstances. Christians interpret their circumstances in light of God's character.

Maybe I should say that again. Christians don't interpret God's character in light of their circumstances. Christians interpret their circumstances in light of God's character.

And we know God's character. We've seen it clearly on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. We've seen God in the person of Jesus Christ drink the cup and let the darkness of judgment come over Him.

[35 : 29] And as Tim Keller puts it, if Jesus Christ didn't abandon you in His darkness, the ultimate darkness, why would He abandon you now in yours?

And so go to Him. Go in hope. He might not necessarily change your circumstances, though He might, but He'll change you instead.

He can even make you bloom where you're planted. And He won't abandon you. He's promised not to. And one day, He'll usher you into a future where even a lifetime of disappointment and difficult circumstances would instantly be forgotten.

in Christ, in the new creation, there will be no gap between the life you expect and the life you actually have. So my brothers and sisters, don't ever forget, God has called you to Himself and so He wants you to live like the cod, not like the consumer.

Consumers see everything as disposable, no longer getting anything out of church, time to change, choose a different life stream. No longer find that friendship or sell good fulfilling, time to change, move on.

[36 : 56] No longer light that job, time to change, live the dream, just change your circumstances. Don't even give a thought to how God might want you to live in that situation for Him.

But Jesus says, I've caught you, I've bought you, you are not your own. And if we take those words to heart, then our hearts would be singing, take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.

Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise. Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.

Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee. Let's make those words our prayer now.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, as we digest these words, I want to acknowledge that there will be a diversity of circumstances among us now.

[38 : 12] Some of us are doing okay. Our circumstances are perfectly normal, perfectly fine. We're living as freed people. If that's us, please help us to remember that we are Christ slaves.

We are not our own. And so please would you help us to live to obey him, to please him. But Father, I'm sure there's probably a number of us who are in situations that are difficult, that are hard.

And so Father, I just pray, Lord, that we would still give our lives to you fully, even if we're in that situation, that we would want to live for you, that we would cry out to you, to ask you to help us to bloom where we're planted.

And so Father, I pray especially for those in such situations, would they remember that they enjoy the best freedom, the most significant freedom of all, and that is freedom in Christ, that they would remember whatever their present circumstances, it doesn't have to hold them back because they have a glorious future in you.

And so Lord, we just commit all these people into your hands and we just ask Lord that you be at work, you'll be showing your glory in all these situations.

[39 : 35] In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.