

Life In Christ – 1 Cor 7:17-24

1 Cor 7:17-24; This is the last message in ch7, having covered the other verses in previous weeks; *And* it's the last message of the *year* in our ongoing study of 1 Cor's

And given the issue here, I think that's appropriate

B/c this is a summary of what our lives should and shouldn't look like as followers of

Jesus – what our lives should and shouldn't look like *in Christ*

That is, in relationship with him, and under his influence and protection

That's the issue in these verses – life in Christ

Serving not only as a great summary, but a great introduction to what biblical

Christianity is all about . . .

And a perfect means of evaluating yourself in light of it – which I hope you'll do

17 Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. 18 Was anyone at the time of his call [i.e. his call to salvation] 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. 19 For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. 20 Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. 21 Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) 22 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. 23 You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

The first principle here regarding life in Christ, is that it . . .

Life in Christ doesn't require a change of circumstances, but a change of focus (v17,20,24)

Paul starts with the word *only* in v17, as if to say, "here's the bottom line"

Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.

Instead of thinking that you have to change jobs, or neighborhoods, or colleges, or spouses, or whatever else just b/c you gave your life to Christ – stay put

Or as he says in v20 – *Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.*

Each person should stick with their situation in life when they were saved – when they were *called* by God to a life in Christ; That's the bottom line

And just in case we missed it the first two times, he repeats it again in v24 – *So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.*

IOW your life in Christ doesn't require a change of circumstances

That was Paul's *rule* [guideline] *in all the churches* then (17b), and continues to be so now

Just b/c you just got saved, doesn't mean you have to go into full-time ministry, or live as a monk, or move to a commune, or anything else

Not only is that unnecessary, but it's often detrimental – b/c it removes the light of your witness from the darkness in which you were saved

- Who knows whether God might want you to impact those around you with the same gospel that gripped *your* heart?

Who knows whether he might want you to bring the life of his presence to bear, among those in your circle?

The fact is, he does; That's why he ends v24 by saying *with God*

So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

Bringing his presence to bear right where you are

Does that mean you should never move, or change careers, or transfer to a different school? No; Sometimes God leads that way, and there's nothing wrong with it
But you don't *have* to just b/c you got saved

- On the other hand, some situations *require* a change
Like when your job is sinful, or promotes sin

Some years ago, I remember meeting one of my brother's friends, who worked at a pornographic print shop

They printed porn magazines and he kept the machines running

And the worst part of it, is that he rationalized why it was okay for him to stay

And I thought to myself, hello; Not only is that failing to avoid all appearances of evil, and live above reproach, and flee youthful lusts . . .

But it contributes to the devaluing of women, th breakdown of society, and th sin of man

It was not only *wrong* for him to keep working there, but *dumb*, no matter how good the money was

And it came as no surprise when I heard a few years later of his divorce

Some situations *require* that we *change* our circumstances

- Others *allow* for it b/c of the compulsion of the HS within us, or the counsel of godly people around us, or the temptations facing us
Like the man in our church who came to Christ last year, and after working for 15 years at the casino, quit and got another job
It violated his conscience to promote things that were damaging to people's lives

Some circumstances require a change, others allow for it; But short of that, stay put
And instead of changing your circumstances, change your focus

Lead the life to which God has assigned you, and called you – and make the *most* of it
Focus on your life in Christ *amidst* your life at hand, instead of trying to escape it or change it, just b/c you don't like it

Or, more to the point, stop wishing for a different life, and start living the one you have, with your eyes fixed on *him* for a change

Life in Christ doesn't require a change in appearances, but a change of heart (v18)

He says in v18 – *Was anyone at the time of his call [his call to salvation] 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.*

You don't have to change your appearances any more than you have to change your circumstances

The epitome of which in *those* days, was getting circumcised or uncircumcised

Which I've always thought was kind of an exaggerated metaphor to make the point

But in doing a little digging, I found out that in fact there was a simple surgical procedure at that time, called an epispasm . . .

Where the physical effects of circumcision (C) were reversed, to make it look as though it hadn't happened

Which seems like a lot of trouble for such little exposure, given the clothing they wore
Until you understand that in *those* days of the Roman Empire, men washed themselves by bathing in *public* baths, *and* exercised in public gymnasiums, *naked*
So their appearance was apparent for all to see, and was used to judge someone's ethnicity and religious affiliation

And Paul's like, I don't care; Your appearance doesn't make one bit of difference when it comes to your life in Christ – one look is no better than another

- Now, that doesn't mean Paul was ruling out C for *all* reasons, only spiritual ones
IOW he was arguing here, as he did on other occasions, that C had no bearing whatsoever on a person's walk with Christ or standing with God
Which is different than the time 4 or 5 years earlier in Acts 16, when he circumcised Timothy for *practical* reasons
And I want you to understand the difference, so that you're not confused when you run into it

Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Greek father, which made him a Gentile – generally looked down on by Jews of the day
But he was a model disciple, and therefore Paul wanted to bring him on his journeys

There was only one problem – the Jews in that area *knew* he was a Gentile by birth and uncircumcised, and therefore wouldn't have given him or Paul the time of day
So in order to remove that stumbling block as they preached in the synagogues, Timothy was circumcised

But *not* b/c it was necessary for him to be a full-fledged follower of Jesus Christ
He did so for practical reasons, not spiritual ones
B/c our spiritual life in Christ doesn't require a change in appearances
It didn't then, and it *still* doesn't now; That's the point here in v18

- And boy do we get this wrong
Whether it's clothing, or tattoos, or weird hairstyles, or body piercings, or leather bracelets, or whatever . . .
There's a subtle pressure, sometimes intentional, sometimes unintentional – for people to “clean themselves up” a bit, when they come to the Lord
And if they don't, we judge them by appearances

“Did you see so-and-so the other day? There's no way they're saved”
“I mean, the way she dresses, the tattoos he has, the plugs in his ears – come on”
And the pressure mounts to change their appearance, b/c we treat them differently and look at them differently – they feel it

- Having said that, I'm not talking about immodest dress that causes men to stumble, and reflects a lack of concern for purity

Or the wearing of tattoos and studs b/c someone is vain and wants to be noticed
That *is* wrong, and they *should* change their appearance (1 Pet 3)
But I'm not talking about that

I'm talking about different – different looks, different styles, and different kinds of people who like to present themselves differently
There's no vanity, or immodesty, or impure motives – it's just personal preference
And it's okay; B/c life in Christ doesn't require a change in appearances

What it *does* require is a change of *heart*
A change of heart to *love* the Lord with all yours
And a change of heart to love the things that *God* loves
And a change of heart to *walk* your talk instead of just limping along or faking it
And a change of heart to *serve* the Lord by serving people

That's what life in Christ requires – not a change of *appearances*, but a change of *heart*
Have you had it?

Life in Christ doesn't require adherence to rules, but obedience to God (v19)

I think that's what Paul is getting at when he says in v19 – *For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.*

Now, at first that seems like a contradiction b/c circumcision *was* a command of God
God said to Abraham in **Gen 17:10** – *Every male among you shall be circumcised.*
And then in v13 – *So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.*
An everlasting agreement, of which, C was a requirement and sign
So at first there seems to be a contradiction between dismissing circumcision, and keeping the commandments of God *****

But with the death and resurrection of Christ, two things happened

1. A *new* covenant was established, rendering the first one obsolete
Heb 8:13 says – *In speaking of a new covenant, he [God] makes the first one obsolete.*
And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.
So with the death and resurrection of Christ, a *new* covenant was established, rendering the first one obsolete *****

2. The *signs* of the old covenant have also become obsolete
Signs, referring to those things that OT believers had to do in order to indicate and validate their adherence to the covenant; things like circumcision and sacrifices
So in addition to the covenant itself, the *signs* have also become obsolete

That's why Paul says *neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision* – it's irrelevant this side of the cross
Something he also said in **Gal 5:6** – *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.*
Only obedience to God's commands *****

- So rather than contradicting himself, Paul is saying – forget about adhering to obsolete rules; focus on obedience to God; obedience in things that matter
Things like loving others as yourself; And blessing those who curse you

And getting involved in the lives of the least of these
And building up the body of Christ; And practicing the “one another’s” of Scripture
And lifting high the name of Jesus in worship
And sharing the good news Jesus with boldness; And praying without ceasing

Those are the commandments of God

Far from rules meant to earn our forgiveness or validate our salvation . . .
God’s commandments are moral and ethical imperatives that we *do*, as a joyful response
to what we *have* – which is life in Christ
Obsolete rules are out; Spirit-led *obedience* is in

Life in Christ doesn’t require a change in social status, but a change of allegiance (v21-23)

21 *Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)* **22** *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.* **23** *You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.*

Along with 1 Tim 1:10 that condemns *enslavers*, this is one of the clearest indicators in Scripture that slavery is wrong; But that’s not his main point

Paul’s like, *don’t be concerned* with your slavery (21b)
Or in our day he might say – don’t be concerned with your social status or the hand
you’ve been dealt, when it comes to your life in Christ
You’re just as secure as the next person, and no less deserving of God’s grace

Your lack of freedom, or lack of economic mobility, or lack of social respect, or lack of
status – doesn’t make one bit of difference in your salvation
You don’t have to be free in *life*, to be free in *Christ*
If you can’t escape the degradation of being looked down on in the world’s eyes, the
degradation of a low social status – don’t let it concern you; that’s the idea in v21

- But if you *can* gain your freedom – do so he says; *avail yourself of the opportunity* (21b)
Something I’m sure many black men and women knew intuitively if not explicitly, when
trying to escape slavery
And I imagine it bolstered their confidence in times of doubt – that they were *right* in
trying to gain their freedom

And the same s/b true now

If you *can* change your socio-economic status, if you *can* escape the clutches of poverty,
and dependence, and servitude – do so
B/c in God’s eyes, as one of his own, you *are* free – you’re *a freedman of the Lord* (22);
a formal term for “no longer enslaved”

In Christ, you’re free – not to *live* however you want, and *do* whatever you want . . .
But to live for *him* and do what *he* wants
B/c in him, and this is the other side of the coin, you’re now *his* slave
He who was free when called is a slave of Christ. (22b)

- Prince or pauper, low social status *or* high – in Christ you’re now *his* slave; his *servant*
Free to live without the encumbrance of sin and doubt and death hanging over you . . .
And *constrained* to live in full obedience to him

In Christ, you’re both free *and* constrained

Why? B/c *you were bought with a price* (23; 6:20) – an infinite price; the blood of Jesus
At the cross, not only was the price of your *freedom* paid in full, but so too was the price
of your *slavery*
Your slavery in the *best* sense of the word, b/c contrary to any earthly master, *your*
Master, your Lord, is the very one who loved you enough to die for you

- We so often emphasize the *freedom* we gained at the cross, but rarely the allegiance
“My chains are gone, I’ve been set free” we sing . . .
But rarely if ever – “my chains are *on*, my all for thee”

But both are true, and both are gain

Serving the King of kings and Lord of lords – loving and merciful and forgiving and
patient and gracious and exciting and risky as he is . . .
Is the greatest privilege and highest status we’ll ever attain
But it requires a change of allegiance

We’ve been given all the change of status we’ll ever need – in Christ, we stand justified
before God
The only thing left is to live like it
To take up your cross *daily* and *follow* him (Lk 9:23); And to lose your life for *his* sake
That is, to *expend* yourself in *his* service

Not for man’s sake – don’t spend and be spent for man
That would be *enslaving* yourself to him – the very thing Paul forbids in v23b
Rather, live your life for *God’s* sake
And for *God’s* sake, live the life to which you’ve been called *****

- That’s the kind of change that a life in Christ requires
Not a change in circumstances, but a change of focus
Not a change in appearances, but a change of heart
Not adherence to rules, but obedience to God
And not a change of status, but a change of allegiance

Pray – Lord, thank you for the life in Christ you’ve so graciously given us
We want to live it well; So change our hearts, God
And our focus – to whatever extent is necessary
And find us living in humble obedience and sold-out allegiance to you, and you alone

Worship – Day After Day

Close – Christmas services – kids’ choir; gospel; invitations