

The Mind of Christ: Living the Life God Gives You
1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Around the year 400 AD, in the northeast part of what is now England a sixteen-year-old boy named Patrick was captured by a band of pirates from the island of Ireland. (This sounds like the plot of a movie, but it's a true story.) Patrick was a nominal Christian; he attended church and received Christian teaching with his family, but he lived a rather wild life. These Celtic pirates from Ireland captured him and other youth, put them on their ship, returned to Ireland, and sold them into slavery.

Patrick was sold to a wealthy "tribal chief and druid" who assigned him the task of herding sheep. For six years Patrick worked for and lived with his Celtic captors. During that time he experienced some profound changes in his life and relationship with God. Instead of becoming bitter and hardened, Patrick cultivated a deep life of prayer and contemplation. He also developed a love for the very people who were holding him captive. He also gained an intuitive understanding of the Celtic people of Ireland that very few others in the Roman Empire possessed.

After six years of captivity, Patrick heard a voice in a dream, telling him, "You are going home. Look! Your ship is ready!" The next day he woke before dawn, walked to the seacoast, negotiated his way aboard a ship, and eventually returned to his home in Briton. After a time of study and training, Patrick served as a parish priest for many years.

At the age of 48 (already past the normal life expectancy in those days), Patrick again heard the voice of God in a dream, calling him to return to Ireland to the very people who had held him captive. He heard the people crying out, "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us." In 432 Patrick returned to Ireland with a small band of other Christians to preach Christ to the Celts. Patrick's mission was unprecedented in that day because the Romans considered the Celts to be "barbarians" and therefore unreachable. But history shows that God used Patrick to launch a Christian movement. Ancient documents estimate that Patrick's mission saw the founding of around 700 churches and 30 to 40 of Irelands 150 tribes became "essentially Christian." The generations following Patrick saw the Irish church expand and flourish.

Why was Patrick's mission so fruitful? Perhaps the primary thing that Patrick possessed – in addition to his own faith and love for God – was his intuitive understanding of the Celtic people. He had lived among them as a slave. He understood the way they thought and spoke. He understood things about them that would prove to be invaluable – things that outsiders simply wouldn't and couldn't know. For example, they loved paradox – something the Bible and the teachings of Jesus are full of. They were fascinated with "rhetorical triads and the number three" – something that made them predisposed to accept the concept of a triune God. They loved epic stories – something that the Bible is full of. Instead of forcing them to become good Romans before becoming Christians, Patrick was able to show how Christianity fulfilled *their* best values and deepest longings. He could do this because he understood them.

I begin with the story of Patrick because each of us grows up in a specific context that we understand as well or better than anybody else. We each grow up in a family and in a culture. We each grow up in specific circumstances that not only make us unique; those circumstances

make us uniquely qualified to bring Christ to the people around us. Today as we return to our study of 1 Corinthians, we are going to see how Paul challenged people to stay where they were when they came to Christ. He is going to challenge them to see the sovereignty of God in their circumstances – many of which were very difficult. Instead of trying to escape the context that they knew the best, they were supposed to see that context as a God-ordained place to represent Christ.

Respect the sovereignty of God in your life. (7:17-24)

Paul gives the basic point of this passage in verse 17:

17 Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches.

Paul is addressing the mindset of the new believer that says, “Now that I have come to faith in Christ, I need to get out of my current circumstances. I need a change of occupation, a change of status, a change of life.” Some even thought, “I need a change of spouses because I’m a believer and I’m married to an unbeliever.” Paul has already addressed this last issue in verses 10-16. Paul instructs the believer not to leave the unbelieving spouse. For starters, marriage is a covenant for a lifetime, plus, Paul wrote, God might even use you to lead your spouse to Christ. After all, who has the opportunity to show someone the beauty of Christ better than somebody in your own home?!? So, if the unbelieving spouse is willing, the believing spouse should remain married.

Here in verse 17 Paul applies this principle about remaining in one’s current circumstances more broadly. He writes, “Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God called each, in this manner let him walk.” The NIV translates the first part of verse 17: “Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him. . . .”

Paul is instructing the believers in Corinth to accept the life that God has assigned them and to “walk” in it. As we’ll see, this is not an absolute command; he will qualify himself later in this passage. But I want to make sure that we feel the full force of what Paul is saying here. He is saying that God is sovereign over your life – even before you come to faith in Christ. There is great comfort and security in this knowledge. It was no mistake that you were raised (or are being raised) in your particular family. You have a certain “bent” by God’s design: talents, interests, abilities, etc. God is sovereign even over whether you grew up in poverty or wealth. God is sovereign over your appearance and your health. “The Lord has assigned to each one of us” a life which includes all these things.

Again, the tendency is to become fixated on the things we wish were different. The tendency is to assume that God wants our circumstances to be **better** – which we all know means having more money, a more prestigious career, less stress, and better looks. What Paul is advocating here is really quite radical. He is saying, “Respect the sovereignty of God in your life – even God’s sovereignty before you came to faith.” The life God has assigned to you, “in this manner let him walk”; don’t reject God’s sovereignty in your life. Live your own life. You are uniquely qualified to live your life and to influence your world for Christ.

The examples Paul gives are quite dramatic.

18 Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised.

It's a bit awkward to explain this verse, but it's here in the Bible, so I'll give it a shot. People knew if you were circumcised or not because public baths were commonly a gathering place for men in Greek culture. A Jewish boy or man might think himself to be at a disadvantage because he was circumcised (many Gentiles despised Jews). It was a liberating thing to hear in the gospel that your status before God has nothing to do with whether or not you are circumcised; it is no longer the "sign of the covenant" as it had been in the Law. Therefore, a Jewish Christian might decide, "I want to be uncircumcised" (apparently there were procedures even in that day). Paul's counsel is that if you were circumcised when you came to Christ, don't seek to become uncircumcised. And if you are a Gentile who has come to Christ, you don't need to become circumcised.

19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

This reminds us of the oft-quoted principle, "To obey is better than sacrifice." Whether or not you're circumcised has no spiritual significance. What has significance is whether or not you keep the commands of God. That's worth being concerned about. In verse 20 Paul re-states his main point:

20 Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.

If you are a Jewish believer, be content with that. If you are a Gentile Christian, be content with that. Don't become preoccupied with things that just don't matter. Remain in the condition you were in when God called you to Himself. God was sovereign over whether you were Jewish or Gentile. Find contentment in the sovereignty of God.

The next example Paul gives is slavery:

21 Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.

When we hear the term slavery, we think of American slavery in the Deep South. But slavery in the Roman empire of Paul's day was usually quite a bit more humane. Slaves were actually a part of the household and were often treated quite well. Sometimes slaves had positions of responsibility and authority (government officials, teachers, artists, etc.). But the fact remained: they were still slaves; they were not free to live where they wanted and do what they wanted.

Paul tells the person who was a slave when s/he came to Christ, "Do not worry about it" – don't let your status as a slave be the dominant fact in your life. Paul does qualify himself with, "... but if you are able also to become free, rather do that." Freedom could sometimes be bought; other times freedom was granted. Paul said that if freedom is an option, by all means become free. But if not, recognize God's sovereignty even over your status as a slave. Find contentment in the sovereignty of God.

Having never been a slave, I can only imagine how this teaching sounded to those who were

slaves in the church at Corinth. I imagine that it might have sounded a bit harsh and/or insensitive. But notice how Paul gives the theological context for thinking about slavery (both literal and spiritual):

22 For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave.

The slave who came to the Lord experienced a freedom in Christ that transcended his/her circumstances. The person who was free who came to the Lord became a slave to Christ (which involved a loyalty and commitment that went far deeper than anybody could force upon you as a slave). And so what mattered most is not whether you are a slave or free; what mattered most is whether or not you are called by God (i.e., a believer).

23 You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

Paul is probably not speaking here of literal slavery; not many would be tempted to become slaves again. He's probably speaking of a mentality of slavery in which a person blindly submits to what others (such as legalists of the first century) say and teach instead of submitting to the mind of Christ. As Paul wrote in Galatians 5:1, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."

In verse 24 Paul returns to his main point once again.

24 Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

Again, Paul is countering the mindset that says, "Now that I'm a believer, I need to change out my life for another/better one. When my circumstances change, then I can really walk with God and/or have an influence in the lives of others." Paul's perspective was that since God has assigned each of us a life, we should live it to the fullest. Since God is sovereign, we should be content.

What is the application for me?

I realize that what I'm saying here (or what Paul is saying here) almost sounds un-American. One of the wonderful things about this country is that the opportunities are almost unlimited. You can pursue any dream you have. You can be what you want to be. You can do what you want to do. There's certainly nothing wrong with this freedom; it is a great blessing that relatively few people who've ever lived have known.

In case you've been wondering, the application of this passage is **not** that you need to 1) live in the town in which you were born, 2) get the same job your parents had, and 3) never try to better your circumstances through education and experience. I'm not saying, "Be passive and live the life God gave you." At the same time, I don't want to negate the basic point that Paul is making. Paul is saying, "When you come to faith in Christ, don't abandon the life God has given you." I would add, "As you live your life, pay attention to the life God has given you because God is sovereignly giving you opportunities to make Him known."

I think Paul's foundational concern is the cause of Christ. He was concerned that the gospel penetrate families and social groupings and different categories of people (slaves, free, Jews,

Gentiles, tentmakers, philosophers, soldiers, etc.). If people came to Christ and quickly abandoned their families, co-workers, and social networks (through upward mobility or “more spiritual” pursuits), the gospel would never gain a foothold. When you come to Christ, you are strategically positioned to bear witness for Him in your world in ways that nobody else can. You have relationships and insights that nobody else does.

I suspect that we would all say that we believe in the sovereignty of God: things don’t happen without His knowledge and permission. But do you believe in the sovereignty of God in your life – even before you came to faith in Christ? Do you see how God has given you the life that you have – even the things that are incredibly difficult for you?

Chances are that there are things in your past that you’ve tended to view as a terrible liability: a difficult home situation (maybe you didn’t have a healthy relationship with your parents), some traumatic event you’ve experienced, some failure or weakness, some disability. Without in any way minimizing the difficulty of such trials, understand that God gave you that life. God was sovereign over all those circumstances. If you allow Him, God will use those circumstances to refine you and equip you to share Christ with others.

I think about Patrick. What if Patrick said, “My life is forever ruined because I was a slave from age 16 to age 22. Where was God when those years were stolen from me?!” Instead, he allowed God to refine him during those years. He even came to see that those years of slavery were a great asset for the cause of Christ; those years equipped him to return and share Christ effectively. Do you see the sovereignty of God in *your* past?

Chances are that you have present circumstances that you view as a liability. You tend to think that you’ll never really be able to walk with God closely or influence people for Christ until those circumstances change: a different job, no more financial stress, etc. Again, without saying that your life is easy (it may be very difficult), understand that God has given you the life you have. You may or may not need to make some changes. But the point is that you have to see God as sovereign over your circumstances. Those circumstances place you right in the middle of many people’s lives. Those circumstances make you uniquely qualified to bring Christ to those people.

When I think about the people in this congregation, I see that God has sovereignly given us a vast network of relationships and influence. As we walk into 2008, let me challenge you to walk in faith: faith that God is sovereign over your circumstances; faith that God has given you the life you have; faith that God is therefore giving you unique opportunities to bring Christ to the people in your world.

Note #1:

You may be thinking, “But aren’t we supposed to take Christ to other cultures? Aren’t we supposed to *go* and make disciples?” That’s very true. But missions agencies will tell you that those who are most effective in other cultures are those who have been effective in reaching people in their own cultures. In other words, you don’t send discontented misfits to other cultures to bear witness for Christ. You send people who – like Paul – have learned how to be content in any and every circumstance. People who live out what Paul is saying in this passage become those qualified (and called) to take Christ to other cultures.

Note #2:

Mark 5 records how Jesus delivered a man from demonic control (sending the demons into the swine). When Jesus was getting in the boat to leave, the man who had been demon possessed “implored” Jesus to let him come along. I’m sure it would have been good for this man to be with Jesus, and he could have given testimony to the power of Jesus. But we read in 5:19-20:

19 And He did not let him, but He said to him, "Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you." 20 And he went away and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

It was best for him to “remain in that condition in which he was called.”