

Faithful in Your Calling

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

One of the things people often struggle with is discontentment. We look at our circumstances and our lot in life and think, "I thought it was going to be better, or different than this." We look at the people around us who seem to have things better and we wish we were in their situation. We can struggle with jealousy and envy, which can turn into bitterness and resentment – resentment toward other people who are keeping us from what we think will be a better life, resentment toward those who seem to be better off, or resentment toward God for putting us in our situation.

Lots of people go through a mid-life crisis, where discontentment hits really hard and they make drastic changes to try to change their situation. They go on a spending spree and buy the things they knew weren't a good decision, but they don't care anymore. They need something fresh, something new. They change their patterns of behavior, do something more exciting, live on the wild side. Some people quit their jobs and try a different career path. Some quit their marriages and try to find excitement with someone else.

Sometimes discontentment can be a good thing and lead us to making good decisions and good changes. But I'm talking about the kind that can lead to a lot of rash and foolish decisions, and it's not just a mid-life problem, it can creep up anytime. Our circumstances can leave us wanting and we can feel this underlying agitation that makes us discontent.

The people in Corinth must have felt that way, especially when it came to their circumstances regarding marriage. Some were single, some were married, some were widowed, some divorced and in every situation there were struggles with being content. They wanted things to be different. So they asked Paul some questions about changing their situations, and we've seen his responses in the past couple weeks. For those who were thinking they should seek a life of celibacy, Paul said, "That's probably not a good idea." To the unmarried and widows he said, "Stay as you are." For those struggling in marriage and wanting a divorce, he said, "Don't do it," even if they were married to an unbeliever. For those whose spouse wasn't a believer and wanted out of the marriage, Paul said, "Let it be," even if they wanted to stay married.

Paul seemed to be countering their discontentment and desire to change their situations with a general response of “Don’t force things to change just because you’re struggling. Don’t flee your situation and circumstances.” Why would Paul do that? Did he want them to struggle? Didn’t he want them to be happy? Didn’t he want them to find greater contentment? I think he did, but I also think he wanted them to find it another way – something different than just changing their situations. We’ve all heard the saying that “the grass is always greener on the other side,” and that saying is true even after you’ve jumped the fence and gotten to the other side. So rather than seeking to find contentment by changing their situations, he wanted them to find it someplace else. And that’s what our passage is about this morning.

Where are you trying to find contentment in this life? Is it by changing your circumstances and running after one thing to the next? Paul has a different approach for you that will be more successful.

When I first read this passage, it seemed out of place in chapter 7. It seemed like Paul was abruptly changing the subject for no reason. But as I dug into it I could see he wasn’t changing the subject, he’s still talking about their marriage situations, but he does bring in some other examples to make his point and his main point is in the first verse we’re going to read. So to people struggling with their marriage situations, this is what Paul has to say...

Read 1 Corinthians 7:17.

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.

In other words, based on the preceding context, Paul is saying, if God has called you to get married, get married. If he’s called you to be single, remain single. If you’re married, stay married, even if your spouse is an unbeliever. And if your spouse isn’t a believer and wants out of the marriage, you should let them go. Lead the life the Lord has assigned to you and to which God has called you. Be faithful in your present situation.

Paul turns their attention to God’s role in their circumstances. The things they’re struggling with regarding marriage aren’t just an accident. God assigns to each their situation, even if those situations are less than ideal, and in those situations he calls us to be faithful. Live for him. Don’t seek your contentment in the

happiness of your situation, find your contentment in seeking the Lord and living for him. That's the secret of finding contentment. The grass may look greener on the other side, and it might be for awhile, but if you're chasing greener grass to find your contentment in life, you'll never find it. Stop chasing and seek contentment in Jesus.

In writing to the Philippians, Paul told them about his journey of finding contentment. In Philippians 4:11-13 he says, *"I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me."*

You're not going to find contentment by changing your situation in marriage or trying to force something different to happen. You might find relief or happiness for a while, but it won't ever be enough until you find contentment in Jesus. So to the people in Corinth, Paul said, *"let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him."* Be faithful in your present situation. Wherever God has you, be faithful to him. Trust his sovereign goodness for you. Rather than focusing all your efforts on changing your situation, focus on him. He may change your circumstances at some point, but don't put your hope in that. Let him be God while you remain faithful. Don't take matters into your own hands and play his role.

That applies to singleness, marriage, widowhood, and divorce. But it applies to other circumstances in life as well, and that's what Paul points out in the rest of this passage. He gives two more examples to reinforce his point. The first has to do with the ethnic heritage they were part of.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:18-20.

¹⁸ 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. 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.

In Paul's day people felt a lot of pressure from various groups within the church to abandon their ethnic heritage to be more faithful to God. If you were born into a Jewish family there was pressure to forsake the traditions of Judaism when you

became a Christian – to break free in order to follow Jesus more fully. Similarly there was pressure on Gentile converts to divorce themselves from their pagan roots and show their devotion to Christ by becoming a Jew. Whatever situation a person was in there was pressure to change. Paul says, “Don’t worry about those things. They don’t matter to God. He cares about your heart and devotion to him. If you’re a Jew, be faithful to Christ as a Jew. A Gentile? Be a faithful Gentile. Stay in your situation and find contentment in Christ.”

As we think about our lives today, none of us chose what family we’d be born into or ethnic heritage we’d be part of and oftentimes we feel like we have to change to fit some mold to be more faithful to Christ. We feel pressure to imitate the appearances and behaviors of the people in the church we’re a part of. But we’re all very different. Some of us are Scandinavians. Some of us are Italians, some African Americans, some native Americans. Some come from a Hispanic background. Some of us like to clap and raise our hands in worship. Some of us like to sing in solemn stillness. Some like contemporary worship, some like hymns. Some of us come from a Catholic background, some are Lutheran, some are Pentecostal. Some are Republican, some are Democrat. Some of us like to wear loud clothing and hairstyles, others are quiet.

We don’t choose the family or ethnic heritage we’re born into, and that family has a major influence on who we are. That isn’t a mistake or accident. God has placed us in our families and he values diversity in the church. He calls people from every nation, tribe, and tongue to be part of his family. So rather than feeling like we have to change and fit into a certain mold in order to be more faithful to Christ, we can be content with where God has assigned us. Be faithful where you’re at. Seek the Lord and walk obediently to him in whatever heritage you come from. That’s Paul’s first example. The second has to do with the social class we belong to.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:21-24.

Were you a bondservant 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 bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. ²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

In Corinth there were free citizens and there were servants, or slaves. And it's remarkable that when addressing those in the church who were bondservants, he teaches them to be content in that situation. If you're a bondservant, don't be concerned about it. If you have the opportunity to gain your freedom, then go for it, but in the meantime, don't be overcome with discontentment about your situation. God can meet them and use them right where they're at. Paul reminds them that in Christ they are free, even if society says otherwise. And those who are free are actually bondservants of Christ. Both were bought with the price of Jesus' blood, therefore don't become ensnared by the ways of man. In whatever condition you're in, remain with God. Be faithful to him. Find contentment in him, not your situation.

For us this is related to our economic or social class. Those of us who struggle to make ends meet can look at those with more money and struggle with discontentment. We think we'll be happy if we just make more money and we can make that our primary goal in life. But at some point we'll realize that money can't buy happiness. If God provides us with a better job or more finances, that's great, but until then seek to be faithful to him, right where you're at.

So Paul uses these examples to reinforce the main point he's making about their marriage situations. Lead the life that the Lord has assigned to you, and to which God has called you. You won't find contentment by just changing your situation, you'll only find it in him. And once you find your contentment in him you'll be able to be content in whatever circumstances you're in. Like Paul, you will find the secret to being content in any and every situation. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

So are you struggling with singleness? Don't force yourself into getting married. People do that all the time and end up worse than before. Are you struggling in marriage? Don't think that divorce is the answer to your problems and the pathway to fulfillment. Are you struggling because your spouse divorced you and you didn't want it to happen? Let them go and turn your attention to Jesus. Are you struggling with your family or ethnic heritage? Or with your financial and economic status? Don't flee from your situation thinking that will make all your problems go away. God has assigned us our place in life and wants us to lead the life we've been given. Let him lead the way in changing our circumstances while we find our life and contentment in him.