

The Life of the Called

1 Corinthians 7:17-24; Colossians 3:17-25

Turn to 1 Corinthians 7. We have now been living with Covid-19 and its restrictions for a solid nine months. This has been a faith journey for me. At the start, I was alarmed at how many good things churches could no longer do together. I did not know how God's people should respond to this, and I did not know how leaders of God's people should respond.

I was sure we should have great faith in God. Whatever it all meant, he was not surprised or alarmed, he manages all such things. Even if it is evil, which in some ways it certainly is, it comes under his sovereignty. He decides how bad it will be, and how long it will last. And, we must be kind to each other, make room for differences, not be divided.

Over these months I have moved towards submission and contentment. That doesn't mean there is not evil in this. But it means that our God and his call is bigger, and he has actually given us instructions on how to respond.

So today we will go through two Scriptures that give us guidance in all kinds of situations. In both of these Scriptures Paul speaks directly to slaves. Slaves were in a life they did not choose, and they had far fewer choices and freedoms available to them than others had.

And in these words from God to us, their slavery is no disadvantage at all in serving and honouring the Lord. That's why these two paragraphs are important. They leave no one out. Everyone, every single believer, is called by God and serves the Lord Jesus, all the time.

The first paragraph we'll read was to the Corinthian church. Those believers wanted to live a life devoted to God, but they had some wrong ideas about what God wanted. Here's what Paul is trying to correct in 1 Cor 7: some situations in life are not as godly and devout as others. No, says Paul, everyone is called by God to serve him *just where they are*.

Our Situation is our Assignment, our Calling – 1 Cor 7:17-24

Let's read. 1 Cor 7:17-24. The key word here is "called." Paul uses it nine times in this paragraph. I've edited the NIV a bit.

*17 Each person should live as a believer in whatever the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has **called** them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was **called**? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was **called**? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each person should stay in the **calling** they were in when God **called** them.*

21 Were you a slave when you were **called**? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when **called** to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when **called** is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price [the Lord owns you]; do not become slaves of human beings. Brothers and sisters, each one, as responsible to God, should stay where they were when God **called** them.

Changing our situation does not matter to God. We can serve the Lord just as well where we find ourselves, exactly where we find ourselves, as we can anywhere else. We can obey God's commands anywhere. That's all God wants. Changing our situation does not improve this.

In v17, where we find ourselves is our *assignment*, where we find ourselves is our *calling*. In v20, again, where we are is our *calling*. And God is perfectly satisfied if we stay there. And in v24, brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should stay in their *calling*.

God also changes our plans, and moves us around. This paragraph does deny that. Paul himself is a called apostle. God certainly changed his situation. This paragraph tells us that where we are is as holy and effective for God as anywhere we can be. No change in situation can improve that.

God wanted Paul to be an apostle. But being an apostle is *not* holier than being a tent-maker. One can serve God with all their strength in either place, that's the point. Circumcision is nothing, uncircumcision is nothing, keeping God's commands is what counts. Being in full time ministry is nothing, being a gravel truck driver is nothing, keeping God's commands is what counts.

We talk about people being called into "ministry." That's true, it is my story. And if God leads us this way, we will do it. No one ever refuses God very long. He makes it happen. See Jonah.

Here is how this can go wrong. Young people at Bible College want to be devoted to God, they want to serve God, and so they go into full time ministry *so that* they can live a life more pleasing to God. That's not a good reason to go into ministry. *Every* situation is a calling.

We can sometimes be persuaded that it would be more pleasing to God to love people on another continent than in our own church and family. So we make a short trip to go take care of people over there somewhere, and that will be serving God in a special way.

If you want to go build houses in another part of the world, then go. If God is calling you to go somewhere else and take care of people there, then go. But let no one think that such trip are more godly, more devout, more Spirit-filled, than day in day out faithfulness here. Those are just different places to be faithful. A slave had no such option, and pleased the Lord just as much.

Sometimes people enter ministry because their spiritual life is troubled, they feel far from God, and they want to move toward God, and they go into ministry because then surely God will respond to them, help them, surely then they will feel close to God, which they want so much but they don't know how to make that happen. So they make plans to go into ministry.

Bad idea. This Scripture in 1 Cor 7 tells us that for every single one of us, our situation *now* is our assignment, our situation *now* is our calling. We will obey God and serve the Lord Jesus where we are. Or not. There is no situation not like this.

Also, people make real plans to go into ministry, God is calling, they are eager to serve, and then life derails them. They just can't make it happen. Something goes wrong. Then they feel like they have settled for second best. And I've heard believers use terms like that. They messed up with God's plan A, so now they are on God's plan B. That is discouragement from the evil one.

If God wants you in ministry, you can't stay out. That has never happened. Take a look at Jonah, for an extreme example. If you are not in ministry, then it is not your assignment, and not your calling. Don't wring your hands about that. Rather, take your situation right now as your assignment from the Lord Jesus, and your calling from God.

And now, because of Covid 19, our situations have changed, a little or a lot, depending on the person. But people, for every one of us, this is now our assignment from the Christ the Lord, this is our calling from God. So let's carry on. No one is ever left out of this for one minute.

Paul in Chains, in Prison – Acts 21-28

Before we go to Colossians 3, let's talk about the Apostle Paul for a few minutes. The book of Acts tells us about the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the gospel of Christ being preached in more and more places, many people coming to the Lord.

Acts has 28 chapters. Paul is an important part of the gospel being preached beginning already in Acts 9, when he was a persecutor of the church, and the Lord met him on the road to Damascus. The Lord called Paul to preach the gospel all over the place. Paul said it was always his goal to preach Christ where no one had evangelized before (Rom 15).

In Acts 21, Paul was visiting Jerusalem, and a riot started. Jews wanted to stone him as they had done to Stephen. A Roman centurion and his soldiers rushed in and grabbed Paul, and very quickly had put chains on Paul's hands, and on his feet.

That is at the end of Acts 21. For the last quarter of Acts, Paul wears those chains day and night, and they never come off. He's wearing them in Rome at the end of Acts. From the time those chains go on in Acts 21, Paul was a prisoner of Rome.

They moved him from Jerusalem to Caesarea, and put him in prison there. He had a trial, but they still didn't know what to do with him, so at the end of Acts 24, Luke tells us that to keep Jewish leaders happy, Felix left Paul in prison for two years. Two years of prison and chains.

Eventually he has another trial, and he gets sent to Rome for a supreme court hearing of some kind. Acts 28 ends with Paul still a prisoner, still in chains, but he has a rented room of his own, and a soldier to guard him, and people can come visit him. Two more years.

In the last nine chapters of Acts, no churches get started, and the gospel does not get preached very much. Paul's situation had changed. He could do very little of what the Lord had called him to do. He had plans to go to Spain. It seems that never happened.

Paul did very little complaining about this. He writes 5 of his 13 Letters from prison, and he is as thankful and grateful to God in those five as he is everywhere else. He did not like it, but it was the Lord's assignment, obviously.

He says in Philippians 1, a letter he wrote from prison, "I want Christ to be exalted by my body, whether by life, or by death. If you pray for me, and the Spirit gives me courage, Christ can be exalted by my body, whether by life, or by death."

Can he preach the gospel? No. Can he travel to a new city? No. Can he start a church? No. Can he live each day in a way that makes Christ look good? Yes, he can do that, he can even do that on the day he dies, if people will keep praying for him, and the Spirit will give him help.

Whatever you do, it is the Lord Christ you are Serving – Col 3:17-25

Now, let's go to our second Scripture for today, Colossians 3. Our 1 Cor 7 paragraph was the Lord telling us about our calling, our assignment. In Colossians 3, the Lord tells us about serving him. When are we serving our Lord? What counts as service? Pretty much everything.

17 *And **whatever you do**, whether in word or deed, **do it all** in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

In 3:18 – 4:1, Paul gives instructions to six kinds of people in most households: wives, husbands, children, parents, slaves, and masters. The curious thing here is that the instruction to slaves is actually longer than the other 5 instructions put together. I think that's because we are all bought with a price, as we read in 1 Cor 7, we are all Christ's slaves. This is guidance to all believers.

22 *Slaves, obey your earthly masters **in everything**; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but **with sincere hearts and reverence for the Lord**. 23 **Whatever you do**, work at it with all your heart, **as working for the Lord**, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. **It is the Lord Christ you are serving**. 25 *Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.* The Lord will reward Christian slaves for serving him with great eternal blessing.*

Grab these lines: **Whatever you do**, whether **in word or deed**, **do it all** in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Slaves, obey your earthly masters **in**

everything, with sincere hearts and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

The Lord is speaking to us here, and he's using a very wide brush. There is very little we do that we cannot make service to the Lord, my brothers and sisters. Certainly all the tasks in a day that we'd rather not do we could do for the Lord Christ, serving him, being a faithful slave.

The Lord does not want to leave anyone out. Whatever any one's present situation, it is the Lord's assignment, it is God's call. We are all in this. And all those things that we have to do, which a slave's life was full of, can be faithful service to the Lord.

This takes submission to the Lord. Let's start with the basic Christian confession, Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, and he has full rights to my life. That's where we start. In Thomas's words, "My Lord and my God." And does Jesus really have full rights to my life?

He thinks so, and the church from the start has been built on people saying this and meaning it. But we are saying a lot when we say, "My Lord and my God, you have full rights to my life."

Two Prayers

If this is a battle for you, well, join the club. It is a daily battle for me. I want to pass on two short prayers that I use for myself and also for you. Php 2:13 says "*It is God who works among you, both to will, and to do, what pleases him.*" So I pray, "God, work in me today, so that I will want to do what pleases you, and so that I will do it."

The other prayer comes from a line in the blessing at the end of Hebrews, which says, "may God equip you with everything good for doing his will, and work in you what pleases him." So I pray, "God, equip me with everything good for doing your will, and work in me what pleases you." It is much the same as the first prayer.

If you have trouble making peace with the Lord's assignment for you, with God's call to you, then pray these prayers. We know they are prayers the Lord wants to answer. "Work in me today, so that I will want to do what pleases you, and so that I will do it. Equip me with everything good for doing your will, and work in me what pleases you."

And pray with confidence. God will NEVER let a prayer like this go to waste. He will certainly respond. It is quite possible that he already knows how much you want to do his will, and that he's already doing a lot of this. I know you all, and I can't see it being any other way.

Still, though, pray. Jesus prayed a lot, he thought he needed it, and quite a bit of his praying will be along these lines. I know that some of you already pray like this often, and it shows. If you don't pray like this, do start. And pray like this for others, including me.

I will end with a story. Our church gives money to Providence. Some time ago, perhaps 8-10 years ago, our church gave a gift to Providence. The development director took out for lunch the pastor of any church that gave a gift to Providence. We had lunch in the Providence cafeteria.

Early on he said, “So, Ed, tell me about your church. What’s your five year plan, or your ten year plan?” I was happy to tell him about our church, but five year plan? We make plans, but those don’t guide the church.

I answered, “Yesterday I prayed for our church, that God would work in us so that we’d want to do what pleased him, and so that we’d do it. My five year plan is to pray this for the church every week for the next five years.” He laughed at me. So I said, “Would you like to hear my ten year plan?” He did not laugh, there was an awkward silence, then we spoke about other things.

But I did mean that, and I still do that. I tell that story once in a while. I told it once to a small group, and a man who is a part of a much bigger church came to me afterward. He knows about our church. He said, “I can see how a small church like yours can have a five year plan like that.”

I bristled when I heard that, and I still bristle when I remember that, but I could not think of anything to say that I would not need to apologize for, so I said nothing.

But listen, if a church of any size, a huge church, prayed: “God, work among us, so that we would want to do what pleases you, and so that we would do it,” if they prayed that, and God answered their prayer – how can that possibly *not* be enough?

For our church as a whole, and for each one of us, our situation is the Lord’s assignment to us, it is our calling from God. Our response is to live worthy of the Lord in our assignment, in our calling. That is the only thing that matters. Whatever you do, do it all for the Lord Jesus. Obey in everything. Whatever you do, work for the Lord. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Amen.

PRAYER: O Lord, we thank you. Everyone of us has our assignment from you, our calling from God. It is so like you to leave no one out, and we celebrate such a Lord, such a God. And you also say, “the One who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.” Work in us, so that we will want to please you, that’s a huge step, and so we’ll actually do it. You are more committed to seeing this done than we will ever be. You want us to succeed in this. Your grace is on us every day, to equip us, and to work in us what pleases you. Thank you. You also say that since you began a good work in us, you will finish it, so we’ll be ready for Christ’s return. Thank you for bringing us into your kingdom, for your faithfulness to us, your grace and your help. Amen.

BENEDICTION (actually a doxology): To him who is able to keep us from stumbling, and to present us before his glorious presence, without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.