

Calling

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning again, and welcome to Church of the Advent. My name's Jeff, I'm one of the pastors here, and I hope that you are thawing out from your journey to church this morning on this cold day.

If you have a Bible or a phone, I would invite you to turn to 1 Corinthians 7, starting in verse eight. It's always good to have our Bibles open as we listen to somebody preach a sermon, but especially this morning, I think Paul's argument here in this chapter I think is especially nuanced and careful and detailed, and I think it's helpful if you have your Bible open to follow along.

Here in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul has a lot to say here about calling, about calling. I think many people who use the word calling today are often thinking about it or referring to it through a secular lens.

They often talk about it in terms of finding their passion. Maybe you've heard somebody say along the way in your life, you need to find your passion.

You need to find a work or a job that you're passionate about. This is about a sense of self-actualization, how a certain kind of work or an opportunity is supposed to give us a sense of fulfillment in life and to help us grow as a person.

[1 : 2 4] And a lot of people in our modern culture spend a lot of time and money orienting their lives around this. They spend a lot of time and effort to get into the right schools, to work at the right institutions, to network at the right meetings, all trying to find their passion through their career or through their work.

Still, some other people, I think, think through calling primarily primarily through a religious lens. So to have a calling from God means that you are involved in ministry.

You're a missionary, you're a pastor, you're a priest or a deacon. But how should we think about calling and how do we figure not only what our calling is, but how to make a change, how to make a move in our different callings that we have?

Should I stay in this job? Should I find a new one? Should I move to a new city? Who should I date? Should I marry this person that I'm dating?

Should I even get married? Should I stay married? I think a lot of us from time to time have asked questions like these and people in the Corinthian church in the first century were actually asking similar questions.

[2 : 3 9] Many of them were new Christians. They had believed the gospel when Paul had come and preached Christ to them. But as new believers, many of them had questions about how their newfound faith impacted the various situations in their lives, their marriages, their singleness, their jobs, their social positions.

And in chapter seven, Paul is taking time in his letter to answer some of these questions directly. And we know this from verse one, where he says, he begins the section by saying, now for the matters that you wrote about.

And so he's answering some specific questions that they had. And in this section here in chapter seven, we learn a few things about calling. We learn what calling is, how to discern our calling, and the freedom that calling brings.

What calling is, how to discern our calling, and the freedom that calling brings. So first of all, let's look at what calling is, how Paul defines calling here.

Both the secular view, find your passion, and the religious view, callings about ministry, have the same problem.

[3 : 46] The problem is that they suffer from elitism. They exclude the vast majority of people. The secular view excludes people who don't have the resources, or the opportunities, or the networks to do what they are passionate about for a living, to do what they're passionate about for a job.

A lot of people work jobs or careers that they don't feel passionate about. A lot of people work jobs they don't feel called to. The religious view, on the other hand, excludes people who work as electricians, and business owners, and teachers, and engineers.

If calling is for missionaries and clergy, then what about everybody else? So both of these views suffer from the same problem, but the way that Paul talks about calling here in this chapter includes everybody.

It includes all of us who profess faith in Christ. No matter their social situation, or their job status, it includes everybody. And I want you to see how he uses the word calling in two distinct ways.

Two inseparable, but distinct ways. First, he uses calling to talk about God's calling people to salvation in him. We see this in verse 18, where he says, was anybody circumcised when they were called?

[5 : 13] This is about the calling from God that comes in conversion and salvation through Jesus Christ. But he uses it a second way, then in verses 17 and 24, when he talks about the situations and the circumstances that God has called us to.

So calling is both about salvation and conversion, and it's also about the situations in our lives. And this is why theologians over the centuries have talked about primary and secondary callings.

Primary and secondary callings. And again, these are distinct and yet inseparable. In our primary calling, God calls us to salvation through repentance in Jesus, faith and repentance in Jesus through the gospel.

And through union with him, through faith in him, he calls us to be in a relationship with him where we're transformed more and more to love God and love our neighbors.

That's our primary calling. And this is, when you see the word calling in scripture, this is primarily what it's referring to. Let me give you a couple examples. In Ephesians 1.18, Paul is praying for the Ephesians.

[6 : 27] And he says, I pray that you would have the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know the hope to which he has called you. That you may know the hope to which he has called you.

Calling here is about the hope of eternal life that comes with salvation. Let me give you one more example. 2 Peter 1, verse 3. His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.

So calling here is about transformation. It's about growing in holiness to be more like Jesus. So that's our primary calling. And our secondary calling flows from that.

In our secondary calling, God assigns us situations and circumstances to live out our primary calling.

And specifically, to live out our secondary calling, he gives us gifts. He gives us roles. He gives us relationships. He gives us gifts like hospitality, or teaching, or administration, or writing, or mercy, or prayer.

[7 : 42] He gives us relationships like family, like spouses, like friendships, neighbors, roommates, coworkers. And he gives us roles to play, like parents, or spouses, or software developers, or neighbors, or police officers.

That's our secondary calling. But in both our primary calling and our secondary calling, it's important to see that it is God who does the calling.

It's not a line of work, a job, or career. It's not an inner subjective voice inside of us telling us to find our passion. It's about God.

God is the one who is doing the calling. And therefore, calling is not about finding our passion. It's not about finding our dream job. And it's also not just for pastors or missionaries.

Calling is about God. It starts and it ends with God. It's about the God who calls us and invites us to salvation in him through fellowship with his son by the power of the spirit.

[8 : 50] And it is about the God who assigns us gifts and situations and relationships and roles to live out that new life that he has given us. So that's how Paul defines calling.

That's how Paul, how he talks about our primary and our secondary calling. But that raises a question for us that's very practical for us, that in our secondary callings, in the places God has assigned us, how do we discern God's leading?

How do we discern God's call in those places? And specifically, how do we know when it's right to make a change? How do we know when it's right to make a move in our circumstances?

How do we know whether to persevere in a hard job situation or to move on? What if we want to get married and have kids, but our hopes are, our hopes for that are growing dim?

How do we know how to discern what our secondary calling is? And that's what I want to look at secondly. Three times in this passage, Paul repeats a principle that he applies to various situations.

[9 : 59] And I want you to, he repeats it three times. Verse 17, only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned him and to which God has called him.

He says relatively the same thing in verse 20. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. And then he basically repeats the same thing again in verse 24. What he's saying is, stay where you are, remain where you are because God has assigned you that situation.

Now, this isn't some kind of radical fatalism about God's will for our lives. There are exceptions. There are good reasons to change our circumstances.

And Paul gives this principle. He says, the general rule is stay. The general principle is to remain unless, because.

Stay, unless, because. And I want you to see this here in these three different situations. So in verses six through nine, Paul is addressing single people and he's gonna tell them, stay, unless, because.

[11 : 17] There were some people who were single who were wondering, now that I'm a Christian, should I get married? Uh, this is a legitimate question. After all, marriage is a picture of the gospel.

It's a picture of Christ in the church. And so some of them were probably wondering, is marriage in a better way to serve God? Is it a better way, a higher way to serve God's calling in my life?

And Paul says to people who are unmarried, some who have never been married, some who are widows. And he says, stay where you are. Unless, unless there's a good reason to get married, unless you find somebody to marry, or as he says in verse nine, if you're living in sexual sin already and you can't control your desires, getting married is better than being single and continuing to live in sin.

So stay single, unless there's a good reason not to, because. Because, he says, singleness is just as much a gift from God as marriage is.

He talks about this in verses eight through nine and then later in chapter seven. So stay, unless, because. Let's look at the second situation. In verses 10 through 16, Paul is addressing people who were married to an unbeliever.

[12 : 35] And they had a, they also had a question about their situation. Some people who were, who had become Christians through Paul's preaching had spouses who did not become Christians also.

They were unbelievers. And so their question was, now that I'm a Christian, should I divorce my spouse who's not a believer? And Paul tells them, stay, unless, because.

Stay in your marriage, unless there's a good reason to divorce. And he, in verse 15, he lists abandonment of the marriage by the other person as a good reason for divorce.

Stay in your marriage, unless there's a good reason, because, in verses 16 and 17, that God may use your marriage to draw your spouse to faith.

Also, your kids have a special covenant status. They are holy, because you're a believer. Stay in your marriage, unless there's a good reason not to, because God might use your marriage to impact your spouse.

[13 : 42] Let's look at the third and final situation. In the third situation, Paul is addressing bond servants or slaves. And he tells them, remain as a slave, unless you can gain your freedom, because if you belong to Jesus, you're really free.

You don't ultimately belong to your master, but you belong to God. Now, we have to do a brief aside here, because Paul is addressing slaves. Anytime we see slavery in Scripture, we have to address this.

It's important to say that Paul here is not addressing, he's not condoning slavery as an institution, especially the kind of slavery that happened throughout American history.

We know from history that the kind of slavery that happened in the Greco-Roman world in the first century was a lot closer on the spectrum to indentured servitude.

Slaves in Paul's day enjoyed a relatively decent social status. They could hold prestigious jobs and own money and property, and many could even buy their freedom. And that is exactly what Paul encourages these people to do if they're able to.

[14 : 52] But more significant than the historical context is the theology that he lays down here in verses 22 and 23. And he tells slaves that because you're in Jesus Christ, that you are actually free.

That your fundamental identity is that you are free. And that people who are free in the eyes of the world become slaves to Jesus Christ. And he's giving them this counterintuitive paradox because he says, all of you, whether in the eyes of the world you're a slave or free, you are all equally called by Jesus and you are all equally under his authority.

Now there's probably a lot more that we could say about why Scripture doesn't condone slavery, but it's important to at least say that it's passages like this that would eventually sow seeds for the abolition of the slave trade in places like America and England centuries later.

So what do we see in this section? We see that Paul says to single people, and to married people, and to slaves, stay where you are unless, because.

And the whole point of what Paul is trying to communicate is that when it comes to following God and living out our secondary calling, is that in general we shouldn't worry or be anxious about our situation.

- [16 : 13] Because our situation, our circumstances, don't sanctify us. Our circumstances don't make us more holy. Our certain walks of life don't allow us to serve God more faithfully than others.

Our marital status, our job situation, where we live, it's not that these things are unimportant, it's that they're irrelevant when it comes to serving God faithfully.

Being married is not superior to being single. Being a pastor is not superior to being a layperson. Having an advanced degree is not superior to having a high school education.

Being a CEO is not superior to being an entry-level employee. And therefore, when we're discerning various decisions about our secondary calling, when we're asking questions like, should we move cities?

Should I change my job? Should I change my marital status? We should have a strong bias. Our first inclination should be to stay where we are.

- [17 : 22] To bloom where God has planted us. To serve God wholeheartedly in whatever situation that we find ourselves in. To not be overly anxious or concerned about our circumstances. Why?

Because we believe in a sovereign God who in his infinitely wise providence calls people to himself and assigns to them places and roles and gifts and responsibilities.

The gifts that we have, the relationships that we have, the places that we live, all come to us through the sovereign providence of God.

Just as God's primary calling on your life through salvation in Jesus Christ is not a random accident, so it is with his secondary calling on the circumstances of your life.

They come from the hand of a sovereign God. Does this mean we should never change our situation? No. That is clear from this text. There are good reasons to take a new job or move.

- [18 : 24] There are good reasons to get married. The principle is stay unless. Now, I fully admit that this probably sounds pretty challenging to many of us.

It sounds challenging to me because we live in a modern culture where staying put is hard. We want to be free to change our situation whenever we want and as often as we want.

But what I want to invite you to see is that what may initially sound restrictive or limiting or constraining to our modern ears is actually meant to bring us freedom.

It's actually meant to bring us rest. It's actually meant to bring us joy and that's what I want to look at next. I want to look at the freedom that calling brings. The freedom that calling brings and I want to look at it from two angles.

And the first is this, that this understanding of calling frees us to see both marriage and singleness as equal gifts.

- [19 : 28] Because our secondary callings flow from our primary callings and because it's God who sanctifies us, not our circumstances, being single is not a junior varsity way to serve God.

In fact, Paul says that singleness in many ways is preferable to marriage. And he says this at length in chapters, later on in chapter seven, that single people have many advantages to serving God that married people do not.

That they're able to serve God with a kind of freedom and flexibility and single-mindedness that married people don't have. I think we see this as we look across church history.

Many of the most influential and impactful people in church history have been single. So whether we think about Hannah Moore, who is a British author and reformer who worked with William Wilberforce to end the slave trade.

We think about Amy Carmichael, who was an influential missionary in India for 40 years, who helped young women recover out of the sex trafficking trade. If you think about someone like C.S. Lewis, who was only married for three years of his life.

[20 : 32] Lottie Moon, who served Christ as a missionary in China for 40 years. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who built an underground seminary during World War II and resisted the Nazis.

Not to mention the Apostle Paul and the Lord Jesus himself. It is often single people who model for us what a wholehearted response to serving God looks like.

And even though we might know this theologically, that singleness is as equal as a calling as marriage, it doesn't always feel like that, does it? It can often feel painful and lonely.

And I think to not acknowledge that would be a mistake. And yet, single friends in the room, I hope that you are encouraged by the freedom that is found here in this text.

That because of how Scripture defines calling, you are not second class. You're not on the JV team. You're not in a holding pattern on the tarmac of life, waiting for God's call on your life to take off.

[21 : 37] No, God's call on your life is right now to serve Him wholeheartedly. You have unique gifts and capacities that only you can give that our church needs.

And our church and the church would be impoverished without you. So I think that's the first thing that we see that this view of calling frees us to see both singleness and marriage as equal gifts.

And secondly, this understanding of calling frees us to serve God in whatever we do, whether it's in our jobs or as a parent or as a neighbor.

It frees us to serve God in whatever we do without seeking salvation through our circumstances. I think part of why this text is so challenging to modern people like us is because we live in a time of unprecedented social mobility.

people change cities and jobs and spouses more today than ever before. Now there is a lot of good that comes with that but it also comes with a cost.

[22 : 43] There's the illusion that there is an infinite number of options out there in terms of where to live, where to work and who to marry and therefore it always seems like there's someone or something better out there for us than our current situation.

and that can leave us feeling restless and rootless and aimless. Always wondering if there's something better out there for us that will fulfill us more.

If I could only get married then I would finally be content. If I could only find a job that would fulfill my passion then I would finally be happy.

If I could only fill in the blank for you. That is a restless place to be and many of us have been there. It's so easy to believe that a change in our situation is the thing that will make us finally free and happy.

But to do so is to make an idol of our circumstances. To do so is to treat our circumstances as a functional savior. To look to them for only what God can give us.

[23 : 55] If calling is about finding your passion in life if it's about finding your dream job you'll never be free because there will always be something better out there for you.

Not only do our circumstances not sanctify us they also can never satisfy us. They will always leave us feeling restless and anxious. But if calling is about the God who calls us first to himself and second to our situations then we are free to serve him wherever we are.

In our workplaces as parents as students as friends as neighbors we're free to serve him wherever we are because ultimately we belong to him. And that is why Christ came.

And he came to set us free regardless of what our situation is even ones that are difficult. Jesus Christ himself embraced a calling from God that had the most difficult circumstances of all.

Rejection, betrayal, and suffering and death on a cross. Jesus was called to be a slave so that you could be called to freedom.

[25 : 10] To the freedom of serving God wherever he in his sovereign wisdom has placed you. To bloom where you're planted to serve him wholeheartedly. Can we pray for better situations?

Yes. And God may in fact answer some of those prayers. Sometimes God changes our situations but most often he works through our situations.

To call us more deeply into our primary calling to belong to him to deeper faith to deeper love to deeper dependence upon him. Brothers and sisters God has placed a calling on your life but it's not to find your passion.

It's not to find a dream job. It's to a person. God has called you to himself to a savior who can give you contentment and joy and hope and purpose that no circumstance could ever give you.

And if you find your calling first and foremost in him then you will be free to serve him wherever you are this time tomorrow.

[26 : 24] Let's pray. Our God and Father we praise you and thank you that you have called us to yourself and second you have called us to the places and roles that you have assigned us.

Lord give us freedom give us joy to serve you where we are. help us to do so wholeheartedly. Lord give us grace to know what it means to be faithful to you where we are today and to live out the calling you've given us.

In Christ's name Amen.