

1 Corinthians 7:17-31

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 0 0] verses 17 through 31. Let me ask you to turn there with me. It's page 955, I believe, in the Pew Bible, if you want to follow along there.

1 Corinthians chapter 7, verses 17 through 31. Let me read this word for us.

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.

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. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.

[1 : 0 5] Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who is 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. You were bought with a price. Do not become bondservants of men. So brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the present distress, it is good for a person to remain as he is.

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned. And if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.

Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. This is what I mean, brothers and sisters. The appointed time has grown very short.

[2 : 1 6] From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.

For the present form of this world is passing away. Let's pray. God, we have been thanking and praising you for your word this morning.

Lord, we thank you that you have given us your word that you have spoken and written it for us. And you, in your own person, by the Holy Spirit, come and cause it to be illuminated in our hearts and in our lives and in our communities.

God, so we pray that that would be the case. That you would come and rework our minds and our affections around the life-giving words that you have given us.

Lord Jesus, you are the life-giving word, and we look to you this morning. It's in your name we pray. Amen. Amen. So, in our text this morning, Paul gives us, reminds us, reminds the Corinthians anyway, of a rule that as he says in verse 17, he gives to all the churches.

[3 : 49] Probably better put, we might call it a principle. For as we'll see shortly, it's not a hard and fast law, but it's a bit more like a guideline or a framework. Maybe we could even say a hard attitude.

And what I want to do this morning is I just want to walk through this passage together and focus kind of on three things as we look at this principle. First, I want us to look at the principle itself and why we so desperately need it.

And second, I want to look at the three applications of the principle that Paul gives and really how those map onto our life today. And then third, I want to end by looking at the overarching reason why we can and ought to take this principle to heart.

So, there we go. First, let's look at the principle itself and why we so desperately need it. Well, it's easy to see what the principle is because Paul repeats it three times. In verse 17, in verse 20, in verse 24, he says essentially, remain as you were when called.

One commentator described this paragraph as like a club sandwich. You've got the bread and then a little meat and then some more bread and then a little meat and then the bread and the bread is the principle, right? There it is, woven throughout.

[5 : 04] That was Richard Hayes actually from Duke. You know, he's sort of a smart guy. Called it a sandwich. We'll go with it. If you've been here the last few weeks, you'll remember that Paul's been talking about sex, marriage, and singleness in the Christian life.

But here, in verses 17 to 24, he's stepping back and saying, you know, here's the deeper principle that's at play in all of this. Some of the single Christians in Corinth were thinking, should I get married?

Some of the married Christians in Corinth were thinking, should I get unmarried to my non-Christian spouse? And after some of his careful pastoral counsel in verses 1 through 16 of chapter 7 that we've looked at the last two weeks, Paul steps back here and gives them a broad principle to work with.

Remain as you were when called. Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear that principle at first, it sounds a bit, I don't know, boring.

Here is Paul, the uber social conservative, remain as you were when called. Simply just endorsing the status quo, it sounds like.

[6 : 17] Remain as you are, nothing to see here. I mean, is this really the same guy who wrote something as radical as Galatians 3.28? There's neither Jew nor Greek, there's neither slave nor free, there's no male and female for you are all one in Christ Jesus?

Or who wrote 2 Corinthians 5, 16 through 17? From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come. Man, whatever you make of those verses, they're anything but boring endorsements of the status quo.

So maybe we need to listen a little more closely to what Paul's principle here in 1 Corinthians 7 is really saying.

And if we take a moment and listen, this is what Paul's saying to us. As a member of God's people, as a member of Christ's church, nothing need now define you and nothing need now rule your heart and life more than your status in Christ Jesus.

[7 : 42] You don't need to become someone else or go somewhere else to be exactly who and where God wants you to be.

Eight times in this first paragraph, we find the language of calling. What does God's call typically mean for Paul? Well, most often when Paul speaks of God's calling, he's talking about that moment, that heart existential spiritual moment when the message of the gospel, of our radical sinfulness and God's radical love for us in Christ, when that message hits home in our hearts.

In other words, it's when the word of the gospel is no longer just an idea out there that we can sort of take or leave, but it's when it becomes a divine summons to us personally that we can no longer refuse and to which we respond in believing trust.

God's call. And Paul says, if that's happened to you, if God himself has called you through the proclamation of his gospel, the gospel of his son, then friend, the cultural group that you belong to, or your social position, or your marital status, these things are no longer what really defines you.

And so, they need no longer be the source of restless striving and anxious fretting. They need no longer be the thing that keeps you up late at night worrying and plotting and scheming and even despairing.

[9 : 37] You can remain as you are without fear, without striving, without a restless heart. And that, it seems to me, is why we need to hear this principle today.

Why do we need it? Because we live in such a restless age. In my local coffee shop, probably five to one, the flyers are about classes or workshops or personal consultations on how I can achieve wholeness or wellness or inner peace.

Why so many? Clearly, there's a market for it. Why is there a market? Because, friends, we are all, all of us, striving for something we often know not what.

Striving for something that will satisfy us, that will bring meaning and joy into our lives. Striving for something even that will justify us, that will somehow make me feel right in the world.

And the temptation for all of us is to take something like some of these things that Paul talks about here, our cultural ethnic identity or our socioeconomic position or our marital status and elevate it to an ultimate position in our lives and say, this is what's going to satisfy me.

[11 : 06] This is actually what's going to justify me. And so, we obsess, don't we, over our job or over our marriage prospects or over whatever in-group we do or don't belong to.

We obsess. And if we don't get it, we turn down despondent or cynical or angry. But if we do get it, something almost just as bad happens.

Sooner or later, we realize that it doesn't satisfy. And so, we go on to something else. Thinking that maybe that will be the thing we need. And if that doesn't work, we go on to another and another and another.

And of course, we realize that this is the definition of insanity. We're doing the same thing over and over again expecting the exact same results. Expecting different results. What's the definition of insanity? That's it.

Different results. And yet, even though we acknowledge that it's lunacy, we still can't get ourselves off the hamster wheel. And our restless hearts keep on striving and running, looking for the next thing or the next thing.

[12 : 28] But here it comes, like a voice from a totally different world. Here comes Paul saying, remain where you are. Be at peace.

Peace. You don't have to keep striving wishing you were someone else, somewhere else, with somebody else. God is calling you, summoning you to stop placing your worth and significance in those things and to put it in his son who loved you and gave himself for you.

After all, you know, think about it. Who pays the cost of the new status you get if you want to become circumcised, as it were?

Who pays the cost for you to move up the socioeconomic ladder? Who pays the cost for you to get married? You do. You're the one who has to go under the knife.

You're the one who has to slave away at the office. You're the one, or if you're lucky, your parents are the ones who have to pay the exorbitant fees of the modern wedding industry.

[13 : 45] You pay the cost for that status in the hope that it will satisfy you and justify you, which it never does. But friends, in the gospel, here's the one status that actually does satisfy and really does justify the status of being known by the living and true God and being called his own.

And who pays the cost for that status? Not you. Him. Christ pays it through his death on the cross for you.

And Christ being raised offers it to you freely as a gift and calls you, summons you to turn and take it. Now maybe Christianity strikes you as strange this morning.

That God would give you a perfect status before him through his son holy as a gift. But friends, is that any less strange than believing that some finite status, a job or a marriage can fill the infinite longing of our hearts?

St. Augustine famously said, God, you have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

[15 : 19] perhaps Christianity is not so strange after all. So there's the principle and why we need it.

Second, let's briefly look at how Paul applies the principle and how that might map onto our life today. First, in verses 18 through 19, he talks about circumcision and uncircumcision.

In other words, in the church, Jews shouldn't try to become Gentiles and Gentiles shouldn't feel like they need to become Jews. What counts isn't the cultural family or group that you're a part of.

What counts is keeping God's commands. And if you're thinking to yourself, how does someone who's circumcised get uncircumcised? They actually had surgeries in the first century that tried to remove the marks of circumcision.

You can imagine how fun that was. what counts is keeping God's commands. Now, Paul's clearly being a little provocative in verse 19, isn't he?

[16 : 22] He knows full well that circumcision in the Old Testament is a command. But, for Paul and for the rest of the earliest Christians, the Old Testament needed to be read and applied through the person and work of Christ who fulfilled the Mosaic Law and inaugurated what they spoke of as the New Covenant.

And read through that lens, it meant that many of the ceremonies and the regulations and the boundary markers of the Mosaic Law were no longer binding. That God had opened up something new.

And so, what matters isn't the outward sign of circumcision or belonging to this or that cultural family or group, but what matters is now living a life by God's grace that pleases God.

It's easy to be captivated by an in-group, isn't it? Whether it's the cool kids in your middle school or the elite inner circle of your profession.

I remember being in middle school and all of my friends had Nike t-shirts, the ones with a really big swoosh on the front.

[17 : 42] And I just thought, man, if I could get one of those, then I'd be in. I'd have it. Then I could be one of the group. And of course, we look back at that and we think, that's kind of silly.

And then we look at our lives today and we realize that we do the exact same thing in every other social environment that we're a part of. C.S. Lewis once described this as the draw of the inner ring.

To be in that inside, privileged, exclusive group, to have their approval, to feel superior to those outside, even if we wouldn't quite put it that way out loud.

And yet, for Christians, the status that we have in Christ changes how we feel about all of that or at least it should. After all, was not Christ the ultimate insider who went outside for us to bring us outsiders inside to God?

And so, friends, we know that true, real life isn't found in trying to get into some inner ring. If anything, knowing this, Christ compels us to go outside or better yet, to remain where we are and to see everyone as an outsider in need of God's grace regardless of whether they happen to be in or out in the world's eyes.

[19 : 18] God's grace is found in verses 20 through 23. And now, this one to our modern ears is a bit harder to, I think, come to grips with.

Look down at those verses and I think the immediate thing you think, or at least that I think when I read those verses is, man, is Paul saying that slavery is okay in these verses?

If you're a bondservant, don't worry about it. Well, okay, we need to keep two things in mind when we run across these kinds of passages.

First, when we hear the word slavery, what do we immediately think of? We immediately think of what took place in the antebellum American South, a kind of slavery that was race-based, lifelong, and unbelievably cruel.

A horrible human institution. In Paul's day, slavery was actually quite a very different thing.

[20 : 32] It wasn't race-based. It wasn't necessarily lifelong. Dale Martin, a professor here at Yale, has written a whole book on this topic published a number of years ago.

But he showed that for many in the first century, becoming a slave or a bondservant, as the ESV, I think helpfully translates it here, becoming a slave provided not only for many economic security, but also upward mobility.

It was a totally different reality than what we think of. Something maybe even more akin to what we would think of as indentured servitude, although there's not perfect analogies between those two.

So slavery was kind of a different thing in Paul's day. We need to acknowledge the historical difference there. However, just acknowledging that, that doesn't mean that Paul was for or against it.

In the letters we have of Paul, he's not reflecting on the first century institution of slavery as such. He's never sort of taking a step back and saying, let's think about the cultural institution of slavery and let's make a judgment call about it based on the gospel.

[21 : 39] He never does that in his letters. Slavery was such a pervasive reality of his world that in his letters he's trying to help Christians live faithfully in that world. Imagine finding a few letters written by an army chaplain in the field of combat to soldiers under his care.

My guess is you wouldn't be able to necessarily tell where that army chaplain stood with respect to pacifism or just war theory based on the counsel he was giving his troops, his men in the middle of battle.

His letters were probably more concerned with helping those men in the situation they were in. I guess what I'm trying to say here is that we can't just sort of look at this text carte blanche and say, oh, Paul in the New Testament was for slavery.

That's just not a careful reading of the text. In fact, I think if you read the rest of verse 21 through 23, you actually get the opposite sense. Here's what I mean. As soon as Paul says, don't freak out if you're a slave, Paul immediately says, but if you can gain your freedom, be sure to do it.

And then, he totally deconstructs the freed-slave dichotomy in light of the gospel. Look, the bondservant is really free in the Lord. The free is really a bondservant of the Lord. The power dynamics are totally turned on their head in light of the Lordship of Christ.

[23 : 07] And then he says, flat out, to conclude it all, by the way, don't become bondservants of men. Add on top of that the fact that all of the things in which we think of that would have fallen under our modern conceptions of slavery, the Bible would have looked at those things and condemned them.

Friends, whatever Paul is doing here, he's not supporting slavery as an institution. In fact, many commentators look at these verses and see that Paul's sowing the seeds here that's eventually going to undo the institution of slavery in due time.

Well, how do we think about applying all this to us today? Well, I think it's very easy for us to think that real flourishing is found if we could just get into a different socioeconomic status.

if I had a different job, if I made more money, if I belonged to a more respected profession, if I only owned my house, if I only lived in such and such a neighborhood, then I'd really be able to live.

Now, again, notice how careful Paul's advice is here and how it's actually a little nuanced for each thing he's talking about. Notice Paul's advice to the bond servants. Look, if you can get your freedom, do it.

[24 : 30] Paul is not against socioeconomic improvement either for the individual or for communities, just the opposite. And the Bible as a whole has a lot to say about justice and righteousness for the poor and for the marginalized.

However, friends, if the ruling desire of our hearts is to climb the socioeconomic ladder, if that's what drives our thoughts and our hearts and our aspirations, if that's what we find ourselves waking up and thinking about, if that's where we're sort of placing fullness in the shape of our life, if that is the case, then we're missing an important way in which the gospel applies to us.

Because the status that we have in Christ frees us from seeing ourselves solely through the lens of social class. That our dignity and our worth doesn't ultimately come from our job title or our salary amount or our housing situation.

Friends, Christ was infinitely wealthy and became utterly poor for us so that we who were spiritually poor might become spiritually rich toward God.

and if you know that you have that status, yes, you'll seek improvement and the improvement of those around you, but you'll know that that's not your life and it's okay to remain where you are.

[26 : 03] Instead, you can be open to how the Lord might be using you for his kingdom right there, right where God has you. And in fact, friends, I would contend that it's not until we find that deep contentment with where we are that we can actually work in a good way for social change.

Without vindictiveness, without an unhealthy animosity and hatred, we can actually do it from a place of strength and peace, which is what the world so desperately needs.

Third application. Verses 25 through 28, Paul deals with marital status.

And this actually brings us back to the main theme of the chapter, doesn't it? Paul's sort of gone on a bit of a loop and now he's come home. Now next week, Matt's going to pick up in verse 25 and take us through the rest of the chapter and he's going to preach a whole sermon on singleness.

So I don't want to take too long here, but the point I want us to see is that marital status is not ultimate for believers. Just like cultural background, just like socioeconomic class aren't ultimate either.

[27 : 25] Friends, the church should not be making an idol of marriage and the church should not be making an idol of singleness. Now since Jesus didn't give specific commands about what Paul's going to talk about during his earthly ministry, during Jesus' earthly ministry, Paul then proceeds to give some apostolic advice.

And it's this, if you're single and you want to marry, do it. It's not a sin. Marriage is a good thing. But if you're single, consider that there are benefits to that as well. In verse 26, Paul mentions the present distress.

What does he mean by that? Well, I think what Paul has in mind here is probably some sort of trial or difficulty that the church or the city or maybe even the region was going through. A lot of commentators think Paul might be referring to a famine that afflicted Corinth during this time.

Our present struggles and trials. Whatever it was, in Paul's mind, it would have made marriage and providing for a family very difficult. Keep in mind, in the first century, birth control wasn't super reliable.

So, getting married probably meant you were going to have a family. And if you lived in a time of severe economic hardship, that was going to be a hard thing to take up.

[28 : 43] And so, Paul advises, you know, it's good if you can remain as you are. You'll experience a lot less worldly trouble that way, as he says in verse 28. But of course, there's nothing wrong about marriage.

You have the freedom to do that as well. So, if you want to marry, go, get married. It's good. Friends, isn't it surprising how open Paul is toward either option?

Yes, he's leaning toward singleness here. He's commending it as a way of life. But you know, when you step back for Paul, marriage or singleness wasn't the be-all, end-all of a Christian's existence. Because there's a status that means infinitely more than that and brings infinitely more comfort, freedom, and significance.

And it's our status in Christ. The one who loves us with an everlasting spousal love and who will remain faithful to us all the way to the end.

And as we take in all three of these applications, it would seem that what Paul is saying is don't obsess over what you don't have. Instead, realize who you are in Christ and as a member of his church which far outstrips any of these finite worldly statuses.

[30 : 06] So, brother and sister, this morning, if you're tempted to envy what others have, remember that you, you, have been purchased by the Lord and that his steadfast love to you will not fail.

Or, if you're tempted to pine away with regret over what might have been, you're not looking at others and thinking I wish I had what they had, but you're looking at your past and thinking I've lost it.

I wish I had something else there and now I'm in a position that, ugh, just isn't where I wish I was. Friends, instead of pining away after those things with regret, you can be confident that your sovereign and gracious loving God has you in a place where he can advance his kingdom through you.

God's not making mistakes with your life and your mistakes aren't so big that he won't turn them for your ultimate good and for his kingdom's glory.

Remain where you are with peace, with confidence, with a restful heart and trust that God has you there for a reason. You might not be here forever, but make the most of it while you are and don't wonder whether God could or can or might be able to use you.

- [31 : 38] As Paul told the Corinthians back in chapter 1, God delights to choose the weak things in the world's eyes to shame the strong and to choose the foolish things in the world's eyes to shame the wise and the low and the despised things in the world's eyes to bring to naught the things that are.

So maybe you're not a part of the in crowd at school or at work. Maybe you don't have a flashy job or a profession. Maybe you wish your marital status was different, but friends, don't be afraid to remain where you are.

Be at peace. For ultimately, God is with you. Notice the end of verse 24 where Paul summarizes this church-wide principle he's been laying out.

What does he say? Remain with God. With God. That's what matters. Being with God.

Because one day, God is going to remake and renew this world from the top to the bottom. And that brings us to the third and final point.

- [32 : 56] The overarching reason why we can take all of this to heart because God's future is coming, friends. In verses 29 through 31 at the end of our text, Paul says, in essence, don't cling too tightly to the things of this life.

Live as though you don't really have them. In other words, don't sink your identity too deeply in those roots.

Don't rest your whole heart on them. because even your most intimate human relationship, like the relationship between a husband and a wife, as Paul says in verse 29, is only a reflection, a glimmer of the intimacy of what's to come.

And soon, your mourning will give way to joy and your joys will give way to bliss and your business and your busyness will soon give way to a kingdom that cannot fade and a feast that does not end.

Paul's not saying that this life is of no importance. It matters deeply. But this life is not an end in itself, you see.

- [34 : 18] And the present form of this world is not the final word. The ethnic divisions, the class distinctions, all the ways in which our world is fractured and divided these things aren't going to last forever.

The present form of this world is passing away and a new creation is dawning. Now, yes, it's been 2,000 years since Paul wrote these words.

But when he says that the appointed time has grown very short, he's not thinking about regular chronological time, a certain number of days or hours that pass off as the clock spins round.

This sort of empty, neutral time that we can fill up like space. No, friends. The appointed time. Here it's the Greek word *kairos*.

This is time if you will have it from God's own perspective. This is time that is imbued with God's redemptive purposes.

- [35 : 31] And in that sense, for the entire church age, the appointed time has grown very short. we, too, with Paul, wait on the edge of the drama of redemption knowing that the next act is the finale.

And if the next act is the finale and if the curtain is already beginning to sway and if the orchestra is tuned and poised and ready to strike up the music for that final scene, then, friends, why are we wasting any time fussing and fretting over whether I'm in seat B7 or B8 or whether I'm circumcised or not or whether I'm a bondservant or not or whether I'm single or not?

Why struggle and strive and let your heart be consumed with being somewhere else or someone else or with somebody else if the Lord has called you and here you sit on the cusp of redemptive history?

Those things don't have to define you any longer. You're the Lord's. And the present form of this world is passing away. God's new creation is imminent. The renewal of all things and thus you need not cling to this world, its joys and its sorrows, its business and its busyness.

Be faithful where you are. Don't grasp and claw for something else as if that's going to justify you or satisfy you. Christ has already done that, friends.

[37 : 03] And soon, the curtain will open. And like we read earlier from Zephaniah, we will see the Lord God in our midst, a mighty one who will save and he will rejoice over you with gladness and he will quiet you by his love and he will exalt over you with loud singing and he will gather those who mourn for the festival and we will suffer reproach no more.

Let's pray. Amen. Oh Lord, make us a people who are so enraptured with you and who we are in Christ.

Help that reality sink so deep down in our hearts, God, that we can sit loose to the worldly statuses that so often pull and push and tear us apart.

God, give us that deep wellspring of contentment in Christ. And Lord, help us to keep our eyes on you and help us to be faithful for the coming of that day.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.