

Blooming where you're planted

(1 Corinthian 7:17-24)

Have you ever said to yourself or heard someone else say something like, Life would be so much better, if I could just find another job, or if I could just get out of this city, or if I could just find a godly husband, or if I would have never decided to get married? When one of my sons was about 10 years old, he was upset because we disciplined him for misbehaving. So, he found a family portrait, took a pair of scissors and cut himself out of it. When we asked him why he would do such a thing, he said, "I don't want to be part of this family anymore."

Do you know that sometimes what keeps people from being productive in life is not always the challenging circumstances that may be beyond their control? Often times it's that people can be so miserably consumed with wishing that their circumstances were different and looking for a way out of them that they don't consider how they might serve the cause of Christ right where they are.

Let me be clear, there are times when doors of opportunities open for people to better their circumstances, like getting a new job or a promotion at work, or moving to a better neighborhood. And taking advantage of these would not necessarily be wrong. Although change can be scary for some people, venturing out into a new experience can be a great thing. There may also be times, like being in an abusive or sinful relationship, when we need to get out and move to a safe place.

Nonetheless, we will all find ourselves in difficult circumstances and relationships and the answer is not always to look for a better situation elsewhere. In fact, often times our unhappiness in life will not be remedied by a change of circumstances, but by a change of attitude. Often what people need today to flourish is not a change in scenery, but a changed of heart that leads to a change of action. The main obstacles to flourishing in life is not always our difficult circumstances, but rather the lens by which we view are circumstances.

Main idea: Counter cultural Christians don't languish until their circumstances change for the better, but instead seek to flourish in faith where they are planted.

This morning we are going to consider three principles from our text about flourishing in faith where we have been planted.

1. Recognize your present circumstance as a kingdom assignment from God.

The first principle to consider so that you can flourish where you are is to **recognize your present circumstances as a kingdom assignment**. Having made an appeal to stay committed to the covenant of marriage even in difficult circumstances, like when a Christian is married to a non-Christian, Paul continues:

“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” (1 Corinthians 7:17).

We don't always get to choose our circumstances. Life chooses for us. However, in order to rise above our circumstances we must recognize that God is sovereign over all of life. When Paul exhorts the believers in Corinth to *lead the life the Lord assigned and to which God has called him*, he's not speaking of full-time church ministry per se, although it can apply. What Paul is referring to is the situation or circumstances individual believers in Corinth were in when they got saved.

It's important to note in our text that every time Paul uses the word *called*, except in verse 17, he's speaking of a believer's conversion to Christ. But in verse 17 Paul uses the word *called* to speak of an **assignment** from God related to one's vocation in life, marital status or culture. But again, in the subsequent verses Paul uses the word *call* in reference to a sinner's conversion to Christ, which is where they are to find their primary identity.

We are living during a time, especially in America, where people are seeking to find their primary identity and fulfillment in life in their careers, marital status or culture which can include religion. When any of these fail to deliver the satisfaction they're looking for, they seek change. But while they wait for a change or a new opportunity, their hearts can become increasingly cynical, pessimistic, and even envious of others who are where they wish they could be.

When it comes to one's vocation, our American culture tells us that the ideal situation is to have a career that you are passionate about and that brings you self-fulfillment. There's nothing necessarily wrong with enjoying what you're doing for a living, unless you're a bank robber. The problem comes when we seek to find our primary identity or sense of significance in a career, even one that may be rewarding.

I was a Police Officer and now a full time Pastor for a number of years. Both vocations can be very rewarding. But being a Police Officer doesn't feel very rewarding when you're standing in formation in riot gear trying to hold back violent protestors shouting obscenities at you while you're getting pelted with rocks and bottles. And although one of my great joys in life is being a Pastor, Pastoral ministry can also have its challenges. In this polarizing time we are living in, many Pastors are leaving the ministry because no matter what they do or say someone is unhappy. And the pressure of it all feels too overwhelming for many Pastors. Because of all the polarization and pressures, Police Officers and Pastors today are retiring or quitting in record numbers.

What enables you to stay in a vocation when it gets hard—when your supervisor seems to have it in for you or when you feel undervalued and under paid? The ability as Christians to stick it out, and give our best efforts depends upon where we are finding our ultimate security and sense of significance.

When we find our primary identity in Christ by whom we were called to salvation and service, we can flourish where we are. When we recognize that our vocation, our singleness and our marriages are not just about us, but are divine assignments from God to fulfill, we can make

an eternal impact for Christ, even in difficult situations. When we do our work for an audience of ONE and seek to please God more than man or even ourselves we can experience a freedom that enables us to flourish even under adverse circumstances.

Commenting on this passage, Steven Um writes, “Boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964) learned to find their security, comfort, and identity in work that often left them unfulfilled. They passed on to Millennials (born between the 1980’s and 2000) the idea that work provides security, comfort, and identity, but they added the idea that work should provide ultimate fulfillment and satisfaction as well. The result is a generation of individuals who are seeking their identity and fulfillment in their work, but lack the kind of steadfast commitment that might actually afford them some level of proper satisfaction in their work.

Nathan Hatch, the president of Wake Forest University, noted that there are a disproportionate number of students who are majoring in finance, law and medicine. Hatch notes that this reality is reflective of a belief that vocational fields in finance, law and medicine will guarantee a high salary, reputation, prestige, and success. So, instead of asking, ‘Which jobs will help other people flourish?’ many are now asking, “Which jobs will help me flourish?’ This is reflective of our views of marriage as well. Marriages are no longer about ‘us’ but ‘me.’ We are constantly asking our partner, ‘What can you do for me in this relationship?’ No wonder there is so much dysfunction in marriages today. This self-centered orientation can be found in our approaches to both relationships and vocations.”

Now recognizing our present circumstances as an assignment from God and making the most of them for the kingdom of God extends beyond our careers, but also to culture. Paul writes: “*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*” (1 Corinthians 7:18).

When Paul talks about being circumcised and uncircumcised he's referring to more than a physical state. He's talking about being a Jew or a Gentile, which is what being circumcised or uncircumcised represents, along with all the related cultural and religious implications.

In light of this, what Paul is saying is that if you were raised in a Jewish culture or Gentile culture and you came to Christ in either one, you don't have to abandon your culture. It's important to note here that Paul is not implying that cultural traditions have authority over the clear commands of God in the scripture.

In fact, it's because of the two great commandments in the New Testament to love God and our neighbor that we would continue to follow cultural traditions for the sake of others even when technically we have freedom to do otherwise. Consider the reasons Paul gives for continuing in your cultural traditions:

“For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God” (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Paul's reasoning for not abandoning the culture in which you were converted, whether it was Jewish, Greek, Puerto Rican or American, had nothing to do with cultural distinctive, traditions, or preferences. In fact, Paul says the opposite; the distinctiveness of the culture in which you come to Christ doesn't count for anything.

No doubt Paul's words that cultural distinctive, like being circumcised or uncircumcised, *count for nothing* would have rubbed Jews and Gentiles the wrong way. People in Paul's day and in our day take great pride in their culture, ethnic heritage, and religious traditions. So, for many, like the Jew and Greeks in Paul's day, who took great pride in their culture, even to the point of feeling superior to others, hearing Paul communicating that it counts for nothing, would have offended some folks.

It's important to clarify that Paul is not saying that it's wrong to appreciate certain aspects of your culture. I love me some Puerto Rican

food, and I value my freedom as an American. What Paul is communicating to the culturally sensitive Corinthians is that the primary motivation for staying within one's culture is not what you like about it. Paul says what counts is not keeping our culture, but *keeping the commandments of God*.

In other words, the primary motivation for staying where we are, as a relates to vocation, marital status, and culture, is that we have an assignment from God to represent Christ where we are as we practice the commandments of God, namely the law of love. This is so counter cultural, especially in a society where the two great commandments people live by seem to be: "Just follow your heart," and "Do whatever makes you happy."

When the prospects for a better life looks more appealing elsewhere what compels a Christian to stay where they are? Why would a retired Christian couple stay in Chicago rather than move to Florida where they could live out the rest of their days on earth fulfilling what many believe is the American dream? Why did Asuntha Charles, a World Vision director in Afghanistan, recently choose to stay in the country, amidst all the danger to continue helping women and girls? She remained in that culture where people desperately need to know the love of Jesus because she knows His love to the satisfaction of her soul. And His love compels her to live out her Kingdom assignment from God to make His love known where God has planted her.

What compels you to stay or to go? Listen to Paul's answer: *"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."* 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

Keep in mind that Paul isn't saying that it's wrong to accept a better job offer, or to move from Chicago to Florida or to embrace another culture. Concerning ministering the gospel in other cultural contexts the Apostle Paul wrote, *"I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some"* (1 Corinthians 9:22).

When Paul exhorts the Corinthian believers to remain in their culture he also doesn't mean that if the culture you came to Christ in embraces sins like ritual prostitution, as did the culture of Corinth, that it would be alright to fornicate with a prostitute so long as you gave her a gospel track afterwards. What Paul is advocating for is that a believer, who finds their primary identity in their call to follow Jesus, need not abandon their culture, but can find their satisfaction in Christ and fulfill His assignment no matter where they are in life.

This brings us to a second principle for flourishing in faith where God has planted us.

2. Remain in your kingdom assignment until God opens another door.

In addition to **recognizing your present circumstances as a kingdom assignment**, a second principle to flourish in faith is to **remain in your kingdom assignment until God opens another door**. Paul continues,

“Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. ²¹ Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)” (1 Corinthians 7:20-21).

Remember, when Paul exhorts believers to remain in the *condition* in which they are called, he is speaking of their circumstances when they first got saved. And the *conditions* that Paul emphasizes in this chapter involved one's marital status, culture and vocation.

In the culture of Corinth, which was part of the Roman empire, the vocations that people occupied, like a teacher or a doctor could also involve being a bondservant or slave. Often when we think of slavery what comes to mind is the horrific transatlantic slave trade that brought Africans into this country to be sold into forced labor. But under the Roman empire, people of all races were slaves for a variety of

reasons. Some people became slaves after their countries were defeated in war. Others became slaves by choice to make a living. Some, who had the opportunity to be free, remained slaves because the alternative seemed too difficult. Under the Roman empire slaves functioned in a variety of vocations. They were teachers, doctors, lawyers, and household managers. In fact, some bondservants were wealthy and had slaves of their own.

Nevertheless, being a bondservant wasn't a desirable position to be in and depending on who your Master was some bondservants had to endure great hardship. But now even if you were a bondservant when you came to Christ the principles that Paul is communicating also applied. Our assignment to shine brightly for Christ does not become null and void because we happen to be in a difficult situation, whether it's being a bondservant, as in Paul's day, or dealing with a difficult supervisor at work in our day.

It's important to note that Paul's instructions to believers, who came to Christ as bondservants, not to be concerned or anxious about it, does not mean that Paul condoned slavery or that he was against the abolishment of slavery. In fact, Paul goes on to say parenthetically, "*(But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity)*" (v.21).

Now, although Paul was not condoning the inhumanity of slavery, he understood that even in unjust systems God's people still had a responsibility to demonstrate the love of Christ so that sinners could come to faith in Jesus. In fact, it was the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire and beyond that abolished slavery in many parts of the world, including the transatlantic slave trade that we are more familiar with.

Once again, Paul is not advocating for the institution of slavery to remain. He is advocating for Christians in adverse circumstances, whether it's a difficult marriage, vocation or cultural pressures, not to become so anxious about it that they lose sight of why God still has us on this earth.

When in a difficult situation, committed believers, who find their fulfillment in Christ, don't just think in terms of "how can I get out of this bad situation." They ask, "how does God want me to serve His kingdom purpose in this difficult circumstance?"

When it's time to move on, God will open the door. But until then, compelled by the love of Christ, we keep on shining for Jesus where we are in the strength that He supplies. Often, it's adverse circumstances and how we respond to them in faith that leads to open doors of opportunities from God into our next kingdom assignment.

This brings us to a third and final principle for flourishing in faith where God has planted us.

3. Rest in God's presence to flourish for Christ where he has planted you.

In addition to **recognizing** your present circumstances as a kingdom assignment and **remaining** in your assignment until God opens another door, the third principle to blooming where you are is **resting in God's presence to flourish for Christ where he has planted you.**

After exhorting believers not to be concerned or anxious about their status as bondservants, and therefore miss fulfilling God's kingdom assignment, Paul continues:

"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." (1 Corinthians 7:22-23).

To encourage those who may have been anxious because of their social status as bondservants, Paul reminds them that those who were called or converted to Christ when they were bondservants, are free in Christ. On the other hand, a person who was free when they came to Christ is

a bondservant of Christ. In other words, what Paul is conveying to the believers in Corinth is that, whether they were free when they came to Christ or bondservants, their truest identity is no longer found in their social status.

How many of you know, the place where you find your primary identity is going to control, shape and define your life? In light of this, our freedom as Americans is important and we should greatly value it. But as valuable as it is to us and as valuable as it was to the Corinthians, societal freedom is not what should define who we are. Paul continues in verse 23, *“You were bought with a price...”* In other words, what should define us and shape our lives is that we belong to Christ, who redeemed us with His precious blood.

So, no matter if the Christians in Paul’s day were bondservants or free and no matter what our social status as Christians is today, we are free in Christ to serve His cause and represent His Kingdom on earth in the power of the Holy Spirit. And because Christians have been bought with the precious blood of Jesus and belong to Him, Paul exhorts the free Corinthians not to become bondservants of men no matter what social and economic advantages they might gain (v.23).

In the same way, we don’t have to be enslaved to a vocation because of the earthly advantages we may gain. Because we belong to Christ we can forgo a promotion that requires us to work longer hours and instead stay where we are because we have a satisfaction and security in Christ that money can’t buy.

Since we are not our own but have been bought with a price and belong to Christ, who we can trust to supply all our needs, Paul concludes, *“So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.”* (1 Corinthians 7:24).

We can remain where we are because we are not alone. As we remain, we can trust that God will remain with us. And it’s in Him that we find what are souls long for the most, namely fullness of joy in His presence.

“What matters in life and in eternal life is staying close to God and enjoying his presence. What matters is not whether our job is high or low in man's eyes. What matters is whether we are being encouraged and humbled by the presence of God.” (John Piper).

Conclusion

O brothers and sisters, wherever we are in life, whatever our marital status or vocation, we can confidently remain where we are, even if it's not easy, when we **recognize** that God in His sovereignty has a divine assignment for us to fulfill in our present circumstances.

And when we **remain** where He's called us, we can **rest** in God's promise to remain with us and empower us by His Spirit to flourish in Christ as we fulfill His kingdom assignment wherever we've been planted.