

Welcome to FBH 2018. We continue this year where we ended last year: in the middle of 1 Corinthians 7. In December, we considered 7:1–9, which deal with the matter of celibacy and marriage, and 7:10–16, which deal with commitment and marriage. In this study, we move to vv. 17–24, in which Paul issues a caution concerning marriage.

A Caution Concerning Marriage (7:17–24)

In these verses, Paul pauses to give a necessary caution. His major concern is not to give man-centred marriage counsel, but rather that the Corinthian believers live Christ-honouring lives. Thus, he exhorts *all* the believers to live for Christ—whether married, single, divorces, widowed, slave, free, etc. The key verse is v. 20: “Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.” That is, remain true to Christ, no matter what your station in life.

TO THINK ABOUT

Christians sometimes want to know what God’s calling on their lives is—as if there is a perfect niche calling that will lead to ultimate and abiding fulfilment, if we can only find it. This often leads to a separation of sacred and secular—that doing your job is expected, but then you must still find your ministry calling. How does this text help you to think about this issue?

The Reason for Your Calling

Verses 17–24 are written in the specific context of marriage, but their application is broader than that. The problem here seems to be one of identity: The Corinthians thought that now that their identity had changed from that of unbelievers to believers, they needed to abandon every semblance of previous “calling.”

With the exception of v. 17, every time a form of the word “call” is used in this section (vv. 18, 20, 21, 22, 24), it is used of God’s gracious call to salvation. The implication is that your status or “call” in life (v. 17) is as much a sovereign decree as is your call to salvation. Nevertheless, your horizontal call (v. 17) is supplementary to your vertical call. That is, your calling in Christ is primary, and is to guide and direct whatever your secondary calling(s) in life is/are. This means that your identity, fulfilment and security must be found in your *primary* calling, not your *secondary* calling.

TO THINK ABOUT

In Disney’s 2016 hit animated film, *Zootopia*, Judy Hopps, a rabbit from Bunnyborough, dreams of becoming a police officer in Zootopia, despite the fact that everyone tells her that a rabbit can never work as a police officer. At one point in the film, Judy encounters a Fennec Fox who (pretending to be a child) tells her that he wants to be an elephant when he grows up. While everyone laughs this dream off, Judy says, “And you, little guy, you wanna be an elephant when you grow up, you be an elephant because this is Zootopia—where anyone can be anything.” This seems to be the core message of so many Disney films: Anyone can be anything. The subtle message is that you are only doing what you were meant to do when you find a deep sense of happiness and fulfilment in it. Is this a biblical message? How might you apply the teaching of the present text to those who do not *feel* fulfilment in their marriage (or their singleness)?

Ernest Becker writes of what he calls “apocalyptic romanticism”—hinging happiness or fulfilment so heavily on the health of a partner or relationship that one’s world falls apart when that relationship is threatened. Paul’s ultimate burden is similar here: “Our supplemental vocational call is indeed important, but we do not want this to be the source of our fundamental identity and ultimate hope” (Stephen Um). The reason that you should be able to live faithfully in your supplemental calling is because you find fulfilment in your primary calling.

The Difficulty of Your Calling

For the Corinthians, finding satisfaction in their ultimate calling was easier said than done.

Remember that the context here is marriage: There were some Corinthians who felt that their new primary calling demanded that they end marriages they were in, or that they must enter into marriage in order to find ultimate fulfilment. Paul recognises the difficulty that they face, but exhorts them to find fulfilment in their primary calling even if they do not find it in their secondary calling.

Though he is writing specifically in the context of marriage, he applies the same principle across the board: The circumcised should learn to serve God faithfully in their circumcision; the uncircumcised should learn to serve God faithfully in their uncircumcision; slaves should learn to serve God faithfully in their slavery; etc.

TO THINK ABOUT

This is an incidental application in light of the context, but critics of Christianity often accuse the Bible of wholesale approval of slavery and of absolutely forbidding slaves from seeking freedom. How do you respond to these charges, in light of vv. 21–22?

The Bible makes no apologies for the fact that living the faithful Christian testimony will invite difficulties. Marriages are not magically healed, employer-employee relationships are not magically fixed, when the Christians lives an obedient life. But we should be look to faithfully serve God even when life is difficult.

TO THINK ABOUT

When it comes to our secondary calling(s) in life, we face dual dangers: (1) to become unhealthily aspirational, or (2) to become ambitionless. Can you think of what it might look like when a person caves to either of these dangers?

The Power of Your Calling

A proper grasp of one’s primary identity in Christ breeds both humility and boldness. We see this in vv. 22–24: The “bondservant” recognises that he is free in Christ and therefore can boldly serve Christ despite his circumstances. The “freedman” realises that he cannot live as he pleases, for he is a servant to Christ and must live to please his master. In either case, the power in your calling lies in the fact that you are a (free) servant of Christ, and, regardless of your secondary calling, can live in a way that brings honour to Christ.

TO THINK ABOUT

Stephen Um observes that the declaration of freedom found in the gospel is the rationale behind the observance of the Sabbath. How does a biblical understanding of the weekly Sabbath—the cycle of resting one day in seven from our normal labours—manifest our understanding of the freedom we find in the gospel?

As noted above, the principle that Paul is driving at applies to any secondary calling that the believer in Jesus Christ enjoys. The specific context, however, is the believer’s marital status (or lack thereof). Our ultimate identity is not found in our marital status or our singleness, but in our identity as Christians.

MacArthur summarises the burden of the section:

However it is that we have been saved (“called”), and in whatever “condition” we now are in, we should be willing to “remain.” God allows us to be where we are and to stay where we are for a purpose. Conversion is not the signal for a person to leave his social condition, his marriage or his singleness, his human master, or his other circumstances. We are to leave sin and anything that encourages sin; but otherwise we are to stay where we are until God moves us.

(John MacArthur)