



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Text 1 Corinthians 7:8-24

1 Corinthians

“On Being Content”

TRANSCRIPT

We are in a study of 1 Corinthians; we’re in chapter 7 this morning, and we’re going to look at a rather lengthy text, verses 8 through 24. As Mark was talking and made the comment that it’s a very applicable passage, it was going through my mind at the same time something similar to that. This is a book that was written 2,000 years ago, and yet it’s just as relevant today as it was then, which speaks to, I think, the inspiration of it.

This is not a dated book. This isn’t a culturally conditioned book. This is a book that is applicable in every generation of the church, just as relevant today as it was then. And that speaks to the reality of what the apostle says, and the reality of what was behind his words. This is the Word of God. This is the one who’s really speaking to us this morning, the Holy Spirit.

And a difficult text, but a text that’s very necessary for us to study; 1 Corinthians chapter 7, beginning with verse 8.

“But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I.

But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband

(but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her.

And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away.

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.

For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches.

Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised.

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.

Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.

For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave.

You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word and our time of studying it together. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we come to a text that is difficult in many ways, and yet very relevant, and we’re reminded of your grace, really, in all of this. We are frail people. We are weak. We fail. And yet you never fail us. You’re gracious and patient with

us, and you can take broken lives and broken circumstances and put them together again. You’re gracious to us. You’re merciful to us.

You save us where we are, in the conditions in which we are, and you enable us to live faithfully. And even when we fail in those circumstances, as we all do, you’re able to pick up the pieces and make something out of it – something great. Help us to remember all of that, Lord. But we’re reminded of our responsibilities. They’re difficult responsibilities in some ways.

And yet, what lies behind this is the counsel to seek to serve you; to put you first in our lives. To live obedient lives, even when it’s difficult for us and it’s uncomfortable for us, but to live obedient lives, trusting in you; trusting in your wisdom even when it may not seem wise; trusting your goodness even when it doesn’t seem like there’s any goodness around.

Trusting you, and knowing that, in time, in your right time, things will be resolved. We can trust you; we’ve sung that. We’ve sung “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” and you are a faithful God. Help us to remember that, and bless us with that understanding of the things that we’ll study. Open our minds to understand that this is a supernatural hour, in many ways.

It is supernatural in that the man who speaks in this pulpit speaks as a man, but it’s the Spirit of God who opens up hearts to understand the truth that’s spoken. And to the degree that truth is spoken from this pulpit, I pray that you would bless it, and bless those who hear it. May they think with discernment and understand the application to each and every life.

Give us an understanding of how these things apply to us, and how we’re to respond, and give us the strength and the will to respond well. Bless us spiritually. Build us up in the faith. Strengthen us. And we pray for your blessings on us materially; we need that as well, Father. We’re material people, and we pray that you bless those who are sick with healing mercy.

We pray that you would bless those who are unemployed with employment. Give them patience; give them wisdom; open doors of opportunity for them. We pray for those who are away, who are traveling in this time when people take off for vacations. We pray that you give them rest and bring them back safely. Father, we go through difficult times in life, but we can rely upon you.

We pray that in all circumstances that the Spirit of God, who is the Comforter, would comfort your people. We pray for that now as we turn to this text and we turn to a time of study. We pray that you prepare our hearts through the hymn that we will sing, and may the Spirit of God prepare us for a time of study and worship together. And we pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] If you should ever go to Rome, be sure to visit the Mamertine Prison. It may seem like an odd suggestion to go visit the city jail when you’re visiting a place like that, but it’s an unusual place. It’s a dark and damp underground dungeon that is where Peter and Paul were kept; at least that’s the tradition. I don’t know if it’s true. But Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote to the Philippians, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstance I am in.” Even in a prison.

Now, how many of us can say that? Forget being in prison. How many of us are content with our lives? With our jobs, our social situation, with our lot in life – or do you feel a little cheated? Christians can feel that way. They did in Corinth. They were restless. Many of them felt like their marriages and jobs were a kind of prison. They weren’t content, and they wanted a change.

It’s probably not all that uncommon today, either. Why is that? Why would Christians not be at peace? Why have many of us not learned to be content? Well, I don’t want to over-generalize things, but I think often it’s because we don’t understand God’s providence; that he is guiding the events of our life, and we are to rest in that. That, I think, lies behind Paul’s counsel here in our text, 1 Corinthians 7:8-24, divine providence.

In fact, I would suggest that this passage turns on verse 17, which is something of a transition between the first part and the second part of our text. “Only as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.” God has assigned you your lot in life, and it has been assigned by the all-wise and almighty God. That’s providence.

Now, chapter 7 is a chapter on marriage counseling. Paul is answering a list of questions that the Corinthians had put to him in a letter they had sent to Ephesus, where Paul was. And a number of those questions are about marriage. In the first verses of the chapter he gave the general principle that unless they – the Corinthians, and all Christians down through the history of the church – unless they have the gift of continence, unless they have the gift of being single, they should marry. That’s the norm. Marriage is the norm.

Now, he deals with special situations, such as that of widows, should they remarry, and mixed marriages between believers and nonbelievers, should they separate. That’s the subject that we cover in our text. And then what seems a little off-subject, he deals with circumcision and slavery. Should a Gentile become circumcised, and should a slave seek freedom? In each of these situations, people were restless.

They were looking for a change in their circumstances. They were looking for a change in their status. Paul’s counsel is stay where you are. God called you in that circumstance of life for a reason. There’s a reason for everything. We may not understand it, but God called you in that circumstance of life for a reason, so you should remain there, and you should be an example in that circumstance of God’s grace. Be a witness.

There are exceptions to these cases, and Paul gives those. But basically, his advice is stay where you are. It’s an opportunity for service. The first case has to do with the unmarried, which may be a reference strictly to widows; it could be to others as well, but widows seem to be the focus here. Should they get remarried? Paul’s counsel is “it’s good for them if they remain as I,” and Paul was unmarried – we assume that.

We discussed this a bit last week. Was Paul ever married? It seems very reasonable to think that he was, and that at this time, he was either a widower, or perhaps when he became a Christian there on the Damascus Road, that his wife left him, divorced him over that situation. It’s not clear, but it seems clear, regardless of his background, that at this point, he is unmarried. And so when he says, “It is good for them if they remain even as I,” he’s saying, “Stay single,” or “Stay unmarried.

As Paul will explain later, in the later verses of this chapter, that single condition, that unmarried condition has great advantages for ministry. It gives great freedom to do so, and that is behind so much of what Paul has to say in this text, serving the Lord. But not all can do that. “Those who burn with passion,” he says, “should marry.” Now, he’s not saying that by way of a grudging concession to marriage. It is a realistic response to a situation.

Some people are not made to be single. Most people are not made to be single. They shouldn’t try to live the single life if they don’t have the gift of continence, if they don’t have the gift of being single. It is good to be married; it’s the norm to be married. But what about those who are married and feel they don’t need to be married, or that marriage is really spiritually harmful to them, it’s an impediment to their service?

And so he takes up that question in the next verses, in verses 10 and 11. Some Christian couples there in Corinth were wondering if they could separate. Maybe it was a hard marriage and one of them wanted out of it – it was just too difficult for them. Or maybe they both wanted to be free so that they could serve the Lord. They’d have that freedom to go and do what Paul was doing.

Well, that’s the question that Paul answers, and his answer is, “No – not even for the noble cause of service are you to break up your marriage.” And he adds that his authority for this ruling is Christ. “I give instruction, not I but the Lord.” I’m giving it to you, but really this comes from Christ himself. He taught on this, and we know he did teach on the subject of marriage and divorce in Matthew chapter 5 and Matthew 19.

Marriage is sacred. It’s been instituted by God. Jesus’ support of that from the Old Testament, from Genesis 2:24. “For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one – one flesh.” That’s the basis for our Lord’s instruction there. The only ground for divorce that Jesus gives is adultery; that dissolves the marriage bond.

But Christ – and Paul – does not instruct the person to carry out divorce. It’s not a command. It is permitted. What is best is that reconciliation is sought, forgiveness is given, and the marriage continues, but divorce in that case is permitted. Paul doesn’t deal with that issue here. But then he was not giving a systematic lesson on marriage and divorce; he was answering specific questions on the subject.

So he doesn’t answer every question that you and I might have about this. What he does answer is that marriage is permanent, and it cannot be terminated for reasons of convenience or even the noble reason of service. If, however, that should happen – if, for example, a wife should leave because the marriage was just too difficult for her – then she’s not to remarry. She must remain single, Paul says.

I assume that Paul is making allowance here for human weakness. In other words, he was not condoning divorce, but he was recognizing that in an imperfect world it happens, and it even happens among Christians. And he knows we’re weak, and so that concession, and in that case, he says, “Okay, if that happens – it shouldn’t happen, but if it does happen, she must remain unmarried, or else reconcile to her husband.” And the same is true for a man.

Marriage is sacred, and it’s not to be dissolved. But what about spiritually mixed marriages between a believer and a nonbeliever; are they sacred? Should they remain

together? There were people there in Corinth who were concerned about this, and you can imagine the reason why that would be. You can just imagine the situations. It’s a pagan city. It’s a corrupt city.

And so here are two pagans married, and they’ve been married for some time, and then one of them becomes a Christian. So now it’s a Christian married to a pagan – that’s a division within this marriage. So the Christian’s wondering, can I stay in this marriage, or is this an unholy union? Have I now joined Christ to Satan? Should I separate for the sake of purity? That’s the question that seems to be behind all of this.

And Paul’s answer is given in verse 12. If the unbeliever consents to live with the believer, the believer was not to divorce her or him. They were to stay in the marriage. That’s Paul’s instruction, though here he says, “I say, not the Lord.” Now, that doesn’t mean that this is merely Paul’s opinion, or that he’s speculating somewhat on it, but what it means is that Christ has not given previous instruction about this.

On the other situation that he spoke of, he had. He’d spoken on some things about marriage, but Christ didn’t speak about every issue and situation that people face. He didn’t speak about this particular situation. This was a Gentile situation. So Christ has not spoken on this; that’s all that Paul was saying, and so he had not given instruction, so Paul’s not basing it on previous instruction that Jesus gave. This is his own instruction.

But as I say, it’s not merely some kind of opinion on his part. Paul made this ruling on the authority of an apostle. He could have said here what he will say later, in verse 40, that he has the Spirit of God. He does have the Spirit, that’s true. This is inspired instruction. This is the instruction of an apostle, and it was given in order to reassure these Christians that they were not to worry about their marriages being defiled.

In fact, Paul says in verse 14 the opposite is true. The unbeliever is blessed by the believer, “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.” A lot has been read into that statement that is just not there.

Charles Hodge, for example, a man for whom I have the highest respect, interpreted this as proof of infant baptism. Charles Hodge was a good Presbyterian and he saw Presbyterian doctrine here. He wrote that since the children of a Christian are holy, they are recognized as belonging to the church, and recognized as having a right to baptism and being treated as Christians.

That, in my opinion, is proving far too much from a text that says nothing about church membership or baptism. In fact, there’s not one example in the Bible of an infant being baptized. But if we accept that view, that children can be baptized because they are holy, then logically we could baptize unbelieving spouses, since they’re called sanctified. I’m reducing this to the absurd to make the point that that’s proving far too much.

That’s not what this is about. That is making far too much out of Paul’s word for “holy” than he intended. Well, the natural question is well then, what did he mean by that? What was he saying? How are these unbelievers sanctified, and in what sense are the children to be considered holy? Well, not in the sense of being saved, and not in the sense of being made pure by the Holy Spirit.

There are different kinds of sanctification. There is progressive sanctification. That’s what we normally associate with the Word. It’s what it normally means, where the Spirit of God is working within the believer – and this is true of every believer – to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. It’s a lifelong process. It’s never finished in this age. It’s finished when we see Christ face to face, and then we become like him – we’re glorified.

That’s not Paul’s meaning here. The basic meaning of the word – and this is how Paul is using the words holy and sanctified here – is set apart. That’s the root idea for the word sanctified. It’s the root idea for holy – just set apart. And in a family such as this, where there’s a believer and unbelievers, the unbelievers are exposed to the light of God through the believing member.

They’ve been set apart, as it were. They’re in a different situation than most people. The Holy Spirit is there in that home, and he’s using the believer as an example and testimony to have an influence upon the unbelieving members of the family. To have a restraining influence on them; to have a positive influence on their behavior; to possibly even bring these unbelieving members of the family to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

So in a very real sense, they are set apart and privileged. They have light and opportunity that others don’t have. There were many families there in the city of pagan Corinth who had no light at all; no exposure to the Word of God, no exposure to the example of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. There were people outside

that city in the distant forests of Germany who were so steeped in paganism there was not a bit of light coming there.

These people were set apart. These people, unbelievers though they were, had great, great privilege. So as I say, in a very real sense, they were set apart, having the light of God that others didn’t have, they received real benefits from the life of this believing spouse, or believing mother. Now, that’s not a reason for marrying an unbeliever. There’s no such thing as missionary marriage – not in that sense of marrying an unbeliever.

But there is in the sense of being married once one’s in this situation, in which the believer can have a great influence. Being unequally yoked is forbidden, and so that kind of marriage is forbidden from the outset. But while that marrying an unbeliever forbids such marriage, this situation is a reason for staying in marriage. The marriage is real, is what Paul is saying.

This is the condition you’re in. You can’t change that. You can’t get out of that. That’s not to be done. This is a valid marriage, and the believer will be a benefit to his or her spouse and children. That’s how this believing person, this wife who’s a believer, is to see the situation. Not as something to flee, but as an opportunity for selfless service to her spouse and children.

That’s how so much of this is to be looked at – as an opportunity of service. Now, the exception to Paul’s instruction here to remain married is if the unbeliever wants out of the relationship. Then the believer should allow the marriage to end. That’s Paul’s instruction in verse 15. If the unbeliever takes the initiative and files for divorce, the believer is not to contest it.

That doesn’t mean that the believer isn’t to seek reconciliation and to do whatever he or she can to bring that about. But if that fails, then he or she is to let the person go. There are three events that end a marriage: death, adultery, and what Paul describes here, abandonment. He says the believer is not under bondage, meaning no longer bound by the marriage. It’s over, and he or she is free.

At that point, assuming, I would say, that there has been an attempt to reconcile, to bring that person back into the marriage – assuming that that has happened, that’s taken place, and it has failed, then I would say that the person is free to remarry at this point. The principle that is to guide all of this, though, is peace. Paul said, “God has called us to peace.”

A believer is not to go to war with an unbelieving spouse over divorce in order to keep the marriage. But this principle covers more than that. This principle of peace covers the entire marriage. It really covers all relationships that we’re in. To the degree that it is within our ability or our power, we are to be at peace with all men, and certainly in marriage, that’s true.

And in this particular situation that’s true. When the two remain together, they are to be at peace. Husbands and wives are to seek to be at peace. They’re to be accommodating to one another. They are to strive to promote peace in the relationship. But when that relationship comes to an end, as Paul is describing here, then as well, peace is to govern the breakup of that marriage.

We are to seek peace; we’re not to seek to force people to do our will. That doesn’t accomplish the purposes we want. And Paul holds out the hope that where this is the driving principle and attitude, this attitude of peace, and this effort at peace, Paul holds out the hope in verse 16 that the path of peace may lead to the conversion of the unbeliever. That’s the ultimate goal.

“For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband?” Peter wrote something similar to that in 1 Peter 3:1, where he told wives, “Be in submission,” or “Be submissive to your own husbands, so that if any of them are disobedient to the Word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives.”

In other words, without the wife saying anything; simply living a godly life in the presence of this ungodly man, he may be convicted, and he may be brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. That’s a great hope that the Word of God gives to those in these kinds of marriages, where a believing woman is married to an unbelieving man. Her behavior may very well lead to the conversion of that man.

That’s great incentive, and a great encouragement to live a life of obedience to the Word of God. And that’s happened. One of the great examples of that in history is Augustine. He was born into a family that was a spiritually mixed marriage. His father was a pagan; his mother Monica was a very godly Christian woman. Through her prayers, Augustine was greatly influenced as a young man.

And by her witness, his father became a believer at the end of his life. Now, it’s not an easy thing; it’s not an easy situation. Marriage to a difficult person can seem an impossible challenge, and it can even seem to be a bad situation to be in. But

it’s not. Staying in the marriage is good, and we can say that, and we can know that, and we can believe that, because that’s God’s instruction.

Hard as it is, that’s God’s instruction, and he is all-wise. He knows best. We have to trust him. We do not know what is right and wrong; not in and of ourselves. We think we do. The world may tell us what the right path is. But we live, as it were, in the dark without the revelation of God’s Word. This is the revelation of the all-wise God. We have to trust him.

He is all-powerful, and he can provide strength and wisdom to enable the believer to endure such a difficult situation, and even triumph through it; have a great witness through it. And he will do that. In fact, it’s in such situations that God’s providence is demonstrated to us. It’s really in the very difficult experiences of life that we see most clearly the hand of God in our lives, and in our circumstances.

It may not be immediate; it may be over time, but eventually we will see the hand of God to bless us, and that’s Paul’s counsel here. To stick with is under difficult circumstances, and know that God is with us in all of that. And he reinforces that in verse 17 by stating that these things, as difficult as they may be, all fit within God’s plan. He determines the circumstances of life.

So we’re to trust him, and not think so much about changing our situation –our situation in marriage or our status in society – not think so much about changing that as we should about ministering in that circumstance. That’s how Paul concludes the first part of this passage, and in a kind of transition, how he introduces the second part of the passage.

He says in verse 17, “Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches.” Things could’ve been different for you, couldn’t they? Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever realized that things could be completely different for you? God could’ve made you very different from the way he made you.

He could’ve put you in a different circumstance altogether. He could’ve given you different gifts, different abilities, but he didn’t. He made you who you are. He put you where you are, in this time, and in this place. It’s not random. This didn’t happen by chance. You aren’t here without any reason or explanation. It’s all by design. Paul indicates that here when he says that “The Lord has assigned to each one.”

That is, he has assigned each one our place in this life, and the circumstances of this life. He determined whether you would be male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free. He gave you your genes. He gave us the color of our eyes. He gave us our physical stature – all of that – our mental aptitude. He made us, and then he called each one of us, every believer, to himself, while we were in that situation.

Not to come out of the circumstance of life in which we were saved, unless of course it’s an immoral situation, but generally the circumstances of life, we’re not saved in those circumstances to bring us out, but rather to serve him in those circumstances. So Paul says, “In this manner let him walk,” meaning in the condition in which you were called, live. Live in that situation.

Live in that circumstance and minister. Look, since God made us who we are and put us where we are, he can certainly change our situation and our circumstances, or give us opportunities to improve our lot in life. But absent that, absent that opportunity, and in the meantime, until that opportunity comes, we are not to be anxious or preoccupied about changing our situation.

We are to walk in it. We are to obey Christ where we are and be used of him. Now, that’s the advice Paul gave to all the churches. Christianity is not about overturning society. It’s not about changing circumstances. God does that, and he does that through the church, and he changes society greatly through the influence of the church.

But Christianity is first and foremost about changing individuals in society and making them useful where they are, so that they can serve God there, wherever they are, for his glory. He called us. We didn’t call him. He took the initiative in our relationship with him. Our calling was not based on our good deeds, or our gifts, or anything in us. It’s based solely upon the unconditional love of God.

Paul makes that point in numerous places. He makes that point, for example, in 2 Timothy 1:9. Peter says it in 1 Peter 2:9. God called you out of darkness into light. He called each one of us for a purpose, and that was to make us useful to serve him. So the implication is, do that. Serve him. Become useful. Walk with him, and he will empower us, and he will use us when we do that.

Walk by faith, and as we walk by faith, he blesses us. That’s what we’re to be doing. Paul then considers two circumstances in which they wanted to do that. They

wanted to change their circumstances, that of circumcision and slavery, the two great religious and social distinctions of the day, verse 18.

“Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised.” For the Jews, circumcision was of great importance. It was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant. It was a sign of their election. It was the sign of their Jewish identity. And so for many, many Jews, it was a very important thing for them.

But for many, it was not, because for many Gentiles, circumcision was a sign of scorn. It was a sign of derision. And so there were many Jews in that time who were Hellenistic in their thinking, wanted to be like the Greeks, wanted to adapt and fit in with the times. And so they would try to hide the fact that they were circumcised, and they would do it sometimes through a surgical procedure that made them uncircumcised.

It’s recorded in books like 1 Maccabees that the Jews who wanted to adopt Greek culture did this so that they could participate in the gymnasium and appear to be enlightened and fit within Greek society. Paul says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters anymore. It’s not something that one should do, one should even think about doing.

Jews shouldn’t try to lose their identity. Gentiles shouldn’t try to gain some new identity by becoming circumcised. God’s finished with that. The old covenant is at an end. In fact, he told the Galatians that if they did that – if they adopted circumcision as part of the gospel, as part of being saved, in order to be saved – then he says they’ve adopted a different gospel.

What matters, as Paul tells us here, is keeping the commandments of God. What matters is being obedient; living a life that is pleasing to God, and as Paul said at the end of chapter 5, glorifying God in our bodies. It’s as simple as this – it’s being a kind and loving Christian. That’s what’s important. Seeking to serve God and serve one another.

Nationality or race doesn’t determine whether we can do that. Paul was a Jew who taught Gentiles. Gentiles could teach Jews. We can serve Christ as we are, with the gifts that God has given to us, and the opportunities that he has given to us. So Paul tells them to remain in the condition in which they were called. Be content, even when it’s a very tough situation to be in, like slavery.

Many of the early Christians were slaves. Historians have estimated that anywhere from 30 to 40 percent of the Roman population were slaves. Rome’s economy was built largely on slave labor. So there were probably a number of slaves in the church in Corinth, and you can imagine that many of them were chafing under that yoke. They resented being another man’s property.

They wanted a change. They wanted to be free. But Paul says, “Don’t worry about it.” If God called them while they were slaves, he will give them the grace to live as slaves. He wasn’t advocating slavery, but he was discouraging revolt. He was discouraging civil unrest. Now, he does add, “If you are able to become free, rather do that.” That, of course, is better, and God could make that happen.

God in his providence could so work things that these individuals, these slaves could have their freedom. But apart from that, they were to serve as good slaves. That sounds strange to our ears, I know. This counsel sounds a little strange to us, I think, but Paul was saying to them that their freedom was not the most important issue. It’s an important issue, no doubt, but not the most important issue.

The most important issue for them, and for all of us, is serving Christ where we are. They’d been called to salvation, and into a relationship with Christ, while slaves, and that was a condition in which they could be a special witness for Christ to those slaves around them, and to their masters. So they were not to despair of their situation, but recognize God’s providence in their lives, that there was a purpose in it.

And they were to use their situation as an opportunity to give the gospel, and to live out the grace of God before other people. And really, in the most important sense, because they were now joined to Christ, they were already free –free in the truest sense. In fact, he says in verse 22 that every Christian is both free and a slave.

We are free from the power of sin. We’re free from the penalty of sin. We are free in the truest sense of the word. In fact, Christian slaves were freer than their pagan masters, who are enslaved to sin and its penalty. And yet at the same time, all Christians are slaves; we’re slaves to Christ. He is our Lord, and whatever he has put us to do, and whatever situation he’s put us in, we are to live and be content.

As he says in verse 23, “You were bought with a price. Do not become slaves of men.” He wrote that earlier, back in 6:20, but he repeats it here, because it is essential that we remember who we are, and why we are who we are. We are not the

captains of our soul. We’re bought and paid for. The price that God paid for us, and in paying for us, saved us from a terrible end, is the precious blood of Christ.

Our salvation did not come cheaply, which shows the great love that God has for his people. It is an infinite love. It is love so great that he would sacrifice his only begotten Son for us. That tells us everything we need to know about his love and his care for us. We may be in a hard place in this life, but we’re not there out of neglect. The Lord never neglects us, never neglects his people.

He bought us because he loves us, and he has a good purpose for us, and a good purpose for every circumstance we’re in. Now, I don’t know that because I have some special insight into every circumstance in my own life, or in your life. I know that because that’s what the Word of God tells us, and I have to live by that, and trust the Lord. But it’s that understanding, it’s that conviction that was the reason that Paul could tell the Philippians that even in a dark, cold, damp Roman prison, he was content.

The Lord had assigned that place to him, as difficult as it was, the providence of God was in this, and so he used that circumstance and that situation for God’s service and glory. Now, the slavery that we are to avoid, the slavery we are to escape is what is described here as becoming slaves of men. This isn’t literal slavery. This is moral and spiritual bondage.

We can fall into that. As Christians, we can flirt with that. We can draw near to it. We can put ourselves in some kind of bondage, which is adopting the standards of the world. It is living to please men. It is striving for the things that the world values rather than what the Word of God sets forth as the things for which we should live. It’s living for self rather than living for the Lord.

That’s slavery. That’s the kind of slavery we’re to avoid. We fall into that, we fall into sin, we fall into the principles of the world, we begin to drift, which is what the author of Hebrews speaks about in Hebrews 2:1. We’re not to flirt with that. We’re to beware of that kind of slavery. There’s no tolerance of that. We are to escape that.

So Paul ends the text by saying in verse 24, “Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.” Well, maybe that seems too difficult for you. Maybe your job or your marriage seems like a prison. But maybe instead you should see it as an opportunity for service. That’s Paul’s counsel. Does

that mean that it’s wrong to change jobs; that if I’m an accountant, and I want to be a schoolteacher, I can’t change?

No, it doesn’t mean that. Paul told slaves that if they could be free, take the opportunity. And when these opportunities come, and they do come for us, take the opportunity. But some things can’t be changed, and some things shouldn’t be changed. We’re not to resist in those circumstances. We are to be content and glorify God where we are. We are to serve him rather than serve ourselves.

Our problems, remember, are not changed with a change in circumstance. The change that needs to take place is within the human heart. But as that change takes place within our hearts, and as we serve our Lord, we find that he blesses us in our circumstances, even very difficult circumstances. And because Paul learned contentment in a Roman prison, he was able to be a witness to his jailers.

He was able to witness to the whole Praetorian guard, that special elite guard that was Caesar’s guard. And in fact, he was even able to witness to Caesar’s household – he tells the Philippians that. Your prison can become a pulpit, and your marriage a blessing. God can do that for you. He’s done that in the past. He’s done that many times.

Consider Jacob. He was a deceiver who met his match when his uncle Laban tricked him into marrying a woman he didn’t want to marry, Leah. And yet from Leah, Jacob had four sons. Two of them, Judah and Levi, became the fathers of the kings and priests of Israel. God blessed that marriage, and he can bless yours. What we must do is learn to be content, as Paul did.

We do that by trusting the Lord. We do that by trusting in his providence, that he knows what’s best for us, and he does. Well, may God help us to do that – to rest in him, to trust him. But that promise that God will bless us in all of our circumstances of life is a promise for the believer in Jesus Christ. So as we conclude, I ask, have you believed in Jesus Christ?

That’s the first step of obedience – the obedience of faith. And all who believe in Christ at the moment of faith are saved forever. He paid the price for salvation in his death on the cross, where he died our death so that we could live his life. And we do that through faith in him. We’re joined to him, and joined to him forever. We have one who is the Master over the universe, and he’s the Master over our circumstances.

And so trust in him, and enter into the very best life that anyone can have. Enter into real life, eternal life. May God help you to do that, and help all of us to greatly appreciate the life that he’s given us, and know that it is to be lived in the most difficult of circumstances, and we can live it to his glory and triumph. May God help us to do that. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we’ve come to a text that’s difficult, but it’s one that you’ve given us to study. A text written nearly 2,000 years ago, but just as relevant today as it was then, because it’s your Word. It’s inspired, and what you have to say here, though it may sound difficult to some of our ears, it is nevertheless the wisdom of the all-wise, almighty God. And we need your grace and your help to submit to it, and to follow it.