

# THE PURSUIT OF GOD

An exposition of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24  
at West Hills Evergreen on March 4, 2018

**INTRODUCTION:** Where can I go and what should I do if I want to see and experience more of God?

**PROBLEM:** Human beings have commonly responded to that longing with two misguided reactions. The first is to create a sharp distinction between the common and the holy in the world. To create a priesthood or an order of holy men who do special holy things, or to create sanctuaries you call holy places, like churches or graveyards or monasteries or retreat centers. You mark off sections of the world as for God and for worship and if someone wants to be closer to God, they can go there and hopefully experience a fulfillment of that longing. That is one way to react to that desire to experience the fullness of God in Christ. The other way human beings have responded to that longing is to reject the holy and common dichotomy.

In the 1500's during the reformation, the reformers of the church rejected what they perceived to be a false dichotomy between the secular and the sacred, the common and the holy. They insisted that we obliterate such distinctions because God is everywhere. That in Christ everything is holy. And much of what they wrote was very helpful. But this point was misunderstood in later generations. And what happened functionally was the development of the idea that if everything is holy, than nothing is particularly holy. If everything is holy it doesn't matter what the church building looks like or feels like. If everything is holy than our gathering for worship in the presence of God as a congregation isn't special, and participation of the Lord's supper is just like everything else you do in life. So by hammering away at the distinction between holy and common...what ended up happening in America over the last 75 years or so, is that rather than the common becoming more holy...the holy became more common. And this was wrong.

The reformation response to the sharp distinction between the common and the holy was not to tear down priests and holy places from their sacred dignity...that was not what they were doing...they were trying to lift everything else up to the beauty of the sacred. They were insisting, that if God in Christ has made each of us temples of the Holy Spirit...then the work of the pastor and the work of the farmer are equally sacred. Both men are called to do their work to the glory of God...to offer it with worship...to perform it with joy...to cover it with prayer and thanksgiving...to strive for God's pleasure in every action...and to be purposeful about all of it. What the New Testament teaches is that the Holy God of love, comes to each one of us to change who we are and what we are...where we are. The New Testament teaches us that there is not a place you need to go, a person you need to talk to, a job change you necessarily need to make (assuming it doesn't require you to sin) if you want to see and experience more of God, there is only thing you need to do, one thing sanctifies your actions as holy, and that is Worship. And that is my main point for today...

**MAIN POINT:** In whatever situation God has called you, worship where you are.

**SETTING THE CONTEXT:** We are back in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, please open your bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In the first 6 chapters of this book, we saw that Paul was responding to a report he had received from someone who had recently visited the church and witnessed the rife conflict within the congregation. He opened the letter responding to these various conflicts with eternal gospel realities, calling this young church to repent and to follow the example of Christ. But in chapter 7 the subject changed. Paul it seems has concluded responding to the verbal report and is now responding to a letter that the Corinthians themselves wrote to him.

And what we have seen from Paul is a response to people who seem to be trying to flee from what they consider common into what they consider the holy. They are trying to avoid or escape from activities or life circumstances that they consider common in order to pursue a situation they consider more holy. So in the first 6 verses, married people have stopped engaging in sexual intimacy, because they think it is holier to be celibate. And Paul says don't do that... you're married, sex was a gift for you to bless and help each other. He says to the single people, if you are single great, serve the Lord. But if you desire marriage, and you perceive that you do not have the gift of singleness get married. One situation is not holier than another...as long as whatever you do you do to the glory of God.

Last week, Paul took things a step further. He said don't run away from your difficult relationships. I think it's telling how Paul frames his commands to them. He says to the married, don't separate, that if the unbelieving spouse wants to stay, do don't divorce them. He frames his response as if all of their questions were oriented around trying to separate from their spouses. His response suggests that they all think that they can be closer to God if they change their status from married to single, or change their circumstances. And the burden of our text today is to offer a nuanced explanation of how that isn't true but sometimes is. That you don't need to flee the common into the sacred...you need to recognize how God has sanctified everything by the presence of His Spirit...and that being said...sometimes changing your circumstances can help you serve Him more effectively. So let's now humble our hearts and minds and hear the reading of the Word of the Lord.

**READING:** *17] 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. [18] 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. [19] For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. [20] 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.) [22] 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. [24] So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. (1 Corinthians 7:17-24)*

**PRAYER:** God transform and renew our minds so that we might offer ourselves, bodies and all, as living and holy sacrifices to you, pleasing in your sight. All flesh will fade like the grass, the heavens will be consumed like smoke and the earth will wear out like a garment, but your Holy Word will endure forever.

**ROAD MAP:** Four things: 1) The principle underlying Paul's commands, 2.) the application of this principle to ethnicity, 3.) the application of this principle to vocation or work, 4.) Paul's theology of decision making.

**The principle underlying Paul's commands:** remain as you are (7:17)

1. So let's begin by unpacking the content of verse 17 because Paul says some pretty incredible things here. He begins by saying, 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.
2. Let me start by pointing out that Paul doesn't address this command to the church in general but to individuals in particular. He says let each person...not let some people. Not let most of you do this...but each and every single one of you ought to think about your life this way. Whether you are a man or a woman, whether you are an adult or a child, whether you are single or married, tall or short, big or skinny...This text is speaking to you and about you... ready?
3. And what he is doing is moving to explain the principle that underlies all of his previous commands. And that underlying principle is to remain as you are. Better status and better circumstances are not equal to a better life with God. It's always a temptation to think that way...but that is not typically true.
  1. This was his counsel in the first 16 verses: that it's typically better to remain as you are. And this will continue to be his application after this section as it relates to the domain of marriage and singleness. But here in this text, Paul wants to show the nuanced way that this principle applies to every domain in life.
4. Paul says lead the life that the Lord has assigned to you. The literal translation is walk in the way God has assigned to you. That is a Hebrew idiom for how you go about your life...and it has strong moral overtones. The first Psalm in the book of Psalms, Psalm 1 says Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers but whose delight is in the Law of the Lord and on His law He meditates day and night.
  1. So you can walk in the way of the wicked...you can spend your time engaging with sin and with things that will lead you to sin...OR and the contrast is important...you can delight in the law of the Lord...meditating on God's WORD day and night. This has to do with moral conduct in life...this has to do with where you will pursue pleasure as you live...will you pursue pleasure in sin or in righteousness, in wickedness or holiness?
  2. So "walk in the way" or "lead the life" has to do with bringing honor and glory to God in how you conduct yourself, to order your attitudes and actions according to the Word of God...but he is concerned with how you conduct yourself in the life situation that "the Lord has assigned to you"

3. Paul is saying walk in the way...that the Lord has assigned to you...so God has put you somewhere...now honor him there...obey him there...wherever you are, don't walk in the counsel of the wicked...don't stand in the path of sinners...let your delight be in the Law of the Lord and on His law meditate day and night. Bring glory to God in the life that God has assigned you.
4. Did you know that God assigns life circumstances? And that he has assigned the circumstances that EACH person in this room is in? God has placed you where you are today...where you are is not an accident. Where you are is not a mistake. You are right where God desires you to be...and what He wants you to do is strive for holiness in the midst of your situation.
5. So the first part of the principle is to receive your life circumstances as appointed by God, and the second part is to receive it as the context in which you are called to be holy. Paul says lead the life assigned to you by God...AND to which God has called you.
5. Many of the commentators on 1 Corinthians pointed out to me that Paul almost always uses the word for CALL here, to refer to God's royal call to our salvation in Christ. And that seems to be how he uses this word in the rest of the text. He says in verse 18, was anyone at the time of his **call** circumcised...verse 21, were you a bondservant when **called**...so on and so forth.
  1. And what that would mean for verse 17 is really of interesting. Remember the Corinthians are largely new believers. The church is only four-ish years old...and so their experience of being called by God to repent and believe is still relatively new.
  2. And so when Paul says lead the life that God has assigned and to which God has called you...what Paul seems to be saying there is when you were working as a carpenter Corinthian...God didn't call you out of carpentry...he called you to be a Christian carpenter. He called you to walk in the way as a Christ-loving, faith-filled, God fearing carpenter for the glory of God.
  3. And to bring it back to the context. God didn't save you from your marriage God saved you in your marriage to your marriage. God saved you in your singleness to your singleness. God didn't save you from your circumstances God saved you in the midst of your circumstances from sin and it's eternal consequences. God saved you in the midst of your circumstances from sin and it's all-pervasive dominion over you, and called you to walk by faith in the son of God in whatever circumstances you are in. God saved you in your situation...to be a God-worshipper IN your situation.
  4. So you take these two parts and put them together and Paul's point is becoming clear... worship and be holy in the circumstance you are in for two reasons...FIRST...God put you there...and SECOND...God saved you to be there for His glory.
6. And Paul says this is my rule, in all the churches. Recognize that this is the normative principle everywhere. And what that means is that this command is not culturally bound. This impulse to run from your circumstances thinking you will find more of God somewhere else, or with someone else is not a Corinthian problem...that is a human problem.
  1. I've told this story before but when I first became a Christian I went hiking on the Pacific Crest trail. And I had been planning it for months before I began walking with God but as I got ready to go I had romantic notions that I was going to have this profound

experience with God in the wilderness. But when I got out there...I came face to face with how brutal nature is...everything is trying to hunt and eat everything else. Is it beautiful yes? Is God's glory reflected everywhere in what He has made? Yes.

2. But you know where I felt closest to God...when we would stop for the night and I would spend time in the Word and pray. I didn't need to go into the wilderness to do that. That was the dual mistake of thinking I could go somewhere special to have more of God... and that I couldn't have just as much of God right where I was before.
3. DON't make that mistake. Lead the life that the Lord has assigned you...recognizing God saved you to your circumstances, not from your circumstances. So that is the principle stated. Now let's look more closely at the principle applied. So Paul, desiring to take this principle out of the context of marriage to show how it applies everywhere starts with ethnicity or culture.

### **This principle applied to ethnicity or culture (7:18-19)**

1. He says "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.
  1. Here is what Paul is saying...
2. If you are Jewish, don't try to become a gentile. If you are a gentile, don't try to become Jewish.
  1. In the greater Roman world outside of Israel...there was Jewish communities scattered across the mediterranean. And one of the things that would happen is young Jewish men would feel pressured to fit in with their gentile peers by removing the marks of circumcision. One writer describes it as a Jewish man taking his place in the Roman world.
  2. You might be thinking why would you get surgery to do that...how would people even know. And the answer is that gymnasiums and bathhouses were significant parts of greco-roman social life and those were both activities that men did without clothes on. Guys worked out naked? Yes. Why? I don't know let's stop taking about it now.
  3. Paul doesn't say exactly why a Jewish man would do this...but one thing is certain... doing it would be to deny outright your cultural ethnic heritage. Perhaps when some of the Jewish men became Christians, and realized that salvation comes by faith in the risen Christ, and not by the sign of circumcision in the flesh...they started doing the math and thinking...well if circumcision doesn't really matter...than maybe I can take this step to advance my career and stop being ostracized for being different.
  4. ON the other hand Gentiles might be tempted to receive circumcision for the opposite reason...this has always been the mark of belonging to God...and I belong to God...and I really really really want to be as close to Him as I can...maybe I'll get the physical sign and become Jewish
3. And Paul's response is to say that physical affiliation with a culture doesn't count for anything...even when that culture is the culture of Israel. Your outward identification with a

culture doesn't count for anything...obeying the Lord is what matters. Verse 20 each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.

4. Keeping the commandments of God is what matters. What is the heart of the law? Love. Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself, for on these two commandments depend the Law and the Prophets (Mt 22:37-39).
5. This is so important...becoming a Christian doesn't mean adopting an outward culture, it means entering a kingdom. It doesn't mean listening to a certain kind of music...it doesn't mean wearing a certain kind of clothing to church...it doesn't mean speaking with a certain kind of jargon or anything else...that stuff doesn't count for anything...you know what matters? Walking in the way of the Lord. Obeying the commands of our God...keeping his precepts...meditating on His law day and night.
  1. It can be challenging sometimes to separate biblical things from cultural things in your own mind...especially the longer you have been in the church.
  2. And rather than offering you then litany of observations in myself and others I want to suggest this to you as a general rule...ready...feel strongly when the bible speaks clearly. If you feel really strongly about something that the bible doesn't articulate clearly...you probably shouldn't have a strong opinion about it. There are too many things that the bible is extremely clear on...LOVE GOD...LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR...to waste your time being passionate about stuff that isn't clear.
  3. It's easier to get hot and bothered about the precise mode of communion...it's easier to throw yourself in the why and the how of that question than it is to throw yourself into growing in your love for God and your love for others.
6. Here is the principle applied. Jewish people shouldn't try to be gentiles and gentiles shouldn't try to be Jewish. Mexican people shouldn't try to be white and white people shouldn't try to be mexican...why because there aren't things we can learn from each others cultures that can help us better obey God...NO? Because that is not at the center of our concern. The center of our concern is obeying God's commandments...and when our heart and mind starts there, from a heart that is resigned to obey God in everything...than we are prepared to learn from one another in light of God's truth.
  1. When a mexican person like me and a white person like Jeanine got married...one of the first things that happened was my family came into town to for a 10 day vist. And when your family comes into town...where should they stay...in your one bedroom one bathroom apartment or in a hotel? My culture says...our apartment...Jeanine's culture said hotel. And welcome to the first significant conflict of my marriage.
  2. And what is the way forward in that conflict...me becoming white or jeanine becoming mexican? No the way forward is to ask, how can we best obey God in this situation. What would be the most loving thing to do here...maybe it's not my way...let's try and consider others more important than ourselves and think through what love looks like in this situation rather than assuming that our cultural disposition is right.
7. If you are Jewish don't try to become gentile, if you are gentile don't try to become Jewish. Why because there is nothing to be gained from each other? No. Because that is not the point...the point is obeying our God and walking in His ways...and when that is our starting place we will make righteous, god-pleasing decisions. You can serve God as a mexican or a

white person as long as your desire is to walk with Christ in whatever situation you are in. You don't need to change your culture...you only need to obey your God. Let's now look at how Paul nuances this issue with respect to vocation.

### **This principle applied to vocation (7:20-23)**

1. Paul says "Were you a bondservant when you were called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity). 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.
2. Here is what Paul is saying. He says first: Don't worry about changing your job if you have no control over the situation...you can be a christian anywhere.
  1. And here is what is important to realize about that. In Roman culture, being a slave or being free was related to your status as a human being. When you became a slave you became less than a person in the eyes of the law. You could be demeaned and dehumanized by your master if they wanted to do so and you had no protections from the law to resist.
  2. Thus becoming free was as much about being restored to your status as a normal person with normal legal protection as it was about being out of debt. To become free was to move upward socially.
  3. And Paul recognizes that people who were slaves don't want to be slaves anymore and for good reason...but most of them have no choice in the matter. And so he says if you are a slave don't worry about it...why should we not worry about it Paul. Because even though you are still a bondslave...Christ set you free from slavery to your sin.
  4. Can you go wherever you want and do whatever your heart desires for the Lord Jesus? No. You're still a slave to a man. But can anything stop you from taking joy in the salvation God has offered you in Christ? Nope. Can anything or anyone stop you from prayer...or from confession...or from thanksgiving...or from doing your work for the Lord...or from meditating on the Word...NO! You can serve God freely even though situations where you are constrained. You can be free despite your constraints because you are free from the bondage of a grudging complaining spirit.
3. Now...that being said...if you can be free...be free. Just recognize that your pursuit of freedom needs to be a pursuit of bond service to Jesus Christ. Paul says if God saved you as a slave...you are a freedman of God...he has set you free from sin's power...and if you are free from the rule of a man...you are free to be a bond slave of Jesus! why? How! He bought you with a price.
  1. While you were yet an enemy of God, Christ died for you. While we rejected God and rejected His ways...and lived lives consumed with ourselves and our stuff...God so loved us that he saw us starving for life...starving for meaning...starving to experience eternity...seeking eternity in created things...and He sent us His own beloved Son...the bread of life...to fill the hungry with good things.
  2. To give us life and life eternal. Our gracious and loving Father looked upon our sins and transgressions and saw that justice was required...that a debt was owed...that a payment must be made if there was going to be grace and forgiveness in our fallen world...and the

Lord looked in the heavens and the earth and found no one and nothing that was adequate enough...perfect enough...worthy enough...strong enough...righteous enough to serve as a substitute for our eternal souls...

3. WE were guilty...our sins were great...and there was no one and nothing in the heavens above or earth below that could save us from our sins...
4. Until...the voice of the Son of God proclaimed with a loud voice...here I am...SEND ME. I will go I will suffer...I will die...not for my own sins...for theirs...not for their glory...but for yours father...I will suffer and I will die and on the third day I WILL RISE to bring new life...a new kingdom...a new order into the world where sinners can be forgiven...where slaves in their bondage can become free...where free men can find in their freedom...a greater freedom in the service of Christ...
5. And because the Son of God is your master...if you can help do not become a bonds lave of a man. Because freedom means greater bond service to Jesus pursue freedom. IS my rule in all the churches to remain as you are? Yes. Is that true in every situation in the exact same way?
6. No...what is true is that where ever you are and whatever you do...do everything you can to live more and more as a bondservant of Jesus. And that doesn't require you to flee circumstances...most of time you can do it exactly where you. Sometimes changing your circumstances CAN enable you to live more as a bondsave to Jesus...especially if your current situation actually is bond service to a man.
4. But whether you are slave or free, make it your ambition to live as a bondservant of Jesus to the greatest degree possible, don't willingly give your life and your time to someone else... strive to give it all to Jesus...NOT AWAY from your marriage...IN YOUR marriage...not away from your culture...IN YOUR CULTURE...not apart from your JOB IN YOUR JOB... unless you can be more free to do that by leaving than do it...do you see the underlying theme here?
5. What is the implication for this in the silicon valley. Christ bought you with His blood, so don't take a job that would make it more difficult to live entirely for Him. Men, your primary call is not provider in your family...your primary call is worshipper...provider is secondary to that. Both are important. But they need to live in your heart and mind in that order.
  1. That means when you are considering a new job...where it's located, how much it pays and whether or not this would be a good career move is secondary to how it will impact your ability to worship. How it will impact your ability to serve Christ in the world...it's not that those first questions don't matter, it's that they need to be kept in the right order.
6. For most of us most of the time...we can serve God right where we are. Some of you might have jobs that seriously impact your ability to serve and worship God. If that is the case... then you need to hear Paul's message here...if you can gain your freedom avail yourself to that opportunity. It's better to live a modest life...that is pleasing to God than to have a house and satellite TV.
7. And that brings us to our conclusion...

Paul's Theology of Decision Making (7:24)

1. Verse. 24 "IN whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God."

2. God came to you where you are
3. God did not call you out of your marriage, your singleness, your ethnicity or your job...he called you out of your sin.
4. Where you are is where God has appointed you to be, thus you are not going to find more of God somewhere else.
5. Your life is not enriched by better status or a better situation. Your life is enriched by having more of God in Christ.
6. So you are thinking...I have a big decision to make. What should I do. How should I think about it. Here is my suggestion - staying or changing your circumstances should always be primarily about staying as close as possible to God.
  1. If you are going to take a different job, how will it affect your ability to worship, and pray, and be in the Word, and make disciples. Will help or hinder? If you are going to move...is there a church with a loving community...and righteous men of God serving as elders that will faithfully keep watch over your soul? Do you know? You should probably find out!?
7. Paul says it's normative to strive for contentment where you...why? Because God is there. And your goal should be to be as close to God as possible. Don't let yourself be in the business of trying to tear everything down into the common...be in the business of taking every aspect of your life and lifting it up to go in the holy.

**MAIN POINT:** In whatever situation God has called you, worship where you are.

**COMMUNION:** Explain the change of mode...explain why we come up and don't pass out... read 1 Cor 11