



FAITH
COMMUNITY BIBLE CHURCH

Gospel Atmosphere
I CORINTHIANS



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Let me begin this morning by asking you a question. What are the "if onlys" of your life. "If only this were different." We all have them. These are things that you would love to see change in your life. They cause you anxiety, distress, turmoil. They upset the rhythm of life. They intrude on your plans. They make life uncomfortable or

upsetting. They aggravate and bother. What are the "if onlys" of your life.

- If only we could get a little more money so we could get some new carpet
- If only we had a little more space in our house
- If only we were a little less busy
- If only I were married
- If only I had time to focus on my hobby that I love.

Or maybe your if onlys have to do with difficulties centered around relationships and even ways you've been damaged by other people.

- If only my father had been there for me and been
- If only I had been raised in a Christian home
- If only I had not been sexually abused
- If only my husband put a little more effort in with the family. He puts effort in with everyone else and then when it comes to us, he's a limp rag.
- If only my wife would understand how hard I work.
- If only my kids would listen to me

OR maybe your if onlys have to do with your identity.

- If only I had longer legs or thicker hair or bigger eyes or darker lips or a broader smile.
- If only I was smarter
- If only I didn't struggle with same sex attraction
- If only I was better at my sport
- If only I was taller, thinner, browner, whiter, more muscular

Now something in that list had to have grabbed you. Something in that list resonated with you. Yeah, I really have wanted that. I really do want that.

Now in our text today Paul wants us to finish the sentence. If only this thing could be different....that's a sentence fragment. Finish it! Why? What? Then what? What do you think is going to happen when your circumstance changes and you get what you want? What's your goal in trying to change that circumstance (if it's even changeable).

For most of us the answer is pretty simplistic. I want to change my circumstances, because if I change my circumstances I think I will be more comfortable. Your goal is to move toward less discomfort.

Paul in the passage today wants to change your goal. I want to raise your sights higher than that. Paul wants us to change our reason for wanting to change our circumstances. It's not wrong to want to change your circumstances, but let's get the reason right.

Paul reminds us that circumstances give you a platform for the gospel. Your main goal, way bigger than temporary personal comfort should be, to maximize your gospel platform. If a change of circumstance means a greater gospel platform then by all means! But sometimes the opposite happens. Sometimes changing our circumstances makes us more comfortable but removes our gospel platform. So before we go launching off trying to change our circumstances, Paul wants us to ask this question first, "Will these difficult circumstances give me some way of sharing Christ uniquely? Will my voice have special impact or a special force because of these hard circumstances?" And if the answer is yes, we should be very slow to want to change the circumstances. Paul says, the default should be just stay where you are. Bloom where you are planted.

So let's read the text and see this. Remember we are in the context

of Paul encouraging people to not try and change their marital circumstances and now he's going to broaden the application.

1 Corinthians 7:17-24, Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision.

For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who 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. You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

In the verses leading up to this, Paul has been talking to people about their desire to change their marital circumstances. Some wanted to change from being married to unmarried. Others wanted to change from unmarried to married. They had strong desires. And those desires were for understandable reasons. Their situations were uncomfortable.

But Paul said, you need to submit those desires because there is something bigger going on here. Paul's encouragement is change your perspective not your circumstances. Stop trying to change your circumstances and think about what you might be losing if you got what you wanted. Each of those unique states represents a unique platform for the sake of the gospel.

And so Paul in our passage today is simply broadening the application. Wanting a change in our marital state is a subset of a larger desire change uncomfortable circumstances in general.

Removing discomfort is not the ultimate end. Paul wants us to view

discomfort differently. So here's three perspective shifts that happen when we view uncomfortable circumstances in light of the gospel. Here's the first shift we begin believing.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVE NOT CIRCUMSTANCES

1. Marks of Identity are Meaningless in Christ

Now we are talking here about badges we carry around that identify us with certain groups. These are always outward things. The clothes we wear, way we talk, the possession we tote around. As the gospel begins to change us, we begin to recognize what people care about, is not what God cares about.

Now in Paul's day, what did people care about? What were the human markers of identity that people cared about? In the example Paul chooses, he talks about the difference between circumcised or uncircumcised which is another way of talking about the difference between Jew or Greek.

In Paul's day, these two groups were pretty distinct and pretty estranged. The Jews have had a reputation through all of history of

being resilient to whatever cultural forces exist around them. In the first century they were masters at resisting Hellenism, this administrative policy of encouraging Greek culture. They were impressively distinct. Annoyingly so to those around them. And they kept their identity through outward physical markers that branded them as Jewish. And even today, Jews are distinct. You go to New York and you identify a Hassidic Jew from a mile away.

- They keep the Sabbath.
- They wear the black coats and top hats and have the curled side burns.
- They don't eat certain foods.
- They wear a prayer shawl with the little tassles hanging out the sides.

And if you're a Jew these markers are super important. They keep you distinct. They make you part of this group.

So if you were a Jew in the first century you would say to yourself, "These markers tell us who we are but they also tell us who we are not. We are not those guys. We are not Greeks."

And if you are Greek, you have your own markers. I'm definitely going to steer clear of all those makers. I'll never accidentally be seen wearing a hat like that guy. And then you adopt your own markers that identify you with your own group.

You see all cultures of all times have external, human markers of identity.

This starts when we are young and never stops. If you are in JH or HS, do you have the right shoes or do you have a State Sweatshirt. If you have those outward signs you are part of a certain group.

But it doesn't stop there. What kind of car do you drive? What kind of clothes do you wear? What kind of job do you have? What kind of house do you live in? These are all cultural markers of identity.

And it extends into how you look, your natural abilities, your accomplishments. As a people, we are just constantly sifting, sorting, judging people by these external markers of identity.

Now here's the point. The root of so much of our desire for change is so that we can change these cultural markers of identity. We want to change how we are being identified.

- I want to be identified as more successful than I am so I want to change houses.
- I want to be identified as more popular than I am so I want to change groups of friends.
- I want to be identified as more beautiful than I am so I do some things to my physical appearance.

And Paul's point is simply, that in Christ, these are meaningless. Paul says in verse 19, "For neither circumcision nor circumcision counts for anything." Paul's discussion that circumcision was nothing would have shocked his Jewish contemporaries. Being distinctly Jewish could have hardly been more important.

But the gospel changes this. The gospel removes this as something that matters. The gospel tells us that cultural markers of identity have nothing to do with your value in Christ. He doesn't care about those things. They won't count for anything. That's good language. They don't COUNT. It's not put on the scale and weighed.

Imagine going in for a work interview and you spend days and days just refining your resume. You shell out \$40 for this cool Microsoft

Word resume template, you just anguish over the words, you have people read it for you and proof-read it. You just really want the job. And then in the end, the decision maker never even reads it. He says, "Listen if the department head knows him and gives him a thumbs up, so do I. That's all I care about." In this case, the guy put all his effort toward something the employer never read and didn't even care about. And we are just like that. We put so much time and effort into these markers of human identity that God literally doesn't even care about. He's not going to judge your worth based on it. He just doesn't care. They count for nothing.

- God just doesn't care about your shoes, or the lingo, or the technology or the accessories we tote around. These human markers of identity mean everything prior to Christ and mean nothing after Christ.

In Romans 10, Galatians 3, Colossians 3 says, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek. These human distinctions are erased in Christ.

How might this look? I'd love to change houses since we've outgrown this house as a family and changing houses would not be unwise. We have plenty of money to do it. And I'm sure that if we did make that change, people would view me as more successful. That's all true. But I don't care about how people view me. What I care about is my neighbor and we are having these great conversations and if I change houses I'm going to lose my opportunity to share Christ with this guy so we are going to delay moving.

So that's Paul's first point. There is this perspective shift that happens when we view uncomfortable circumstances in light of the gospel. Human markers of identity become meaningless in Christ.

But what is meaningful? If he doesn't look at the resume of human accomplishment what does he look at?

CHANGING PERSPECTIVE NOT CIRCUMSTANCES

1. Marks of Identity are Meaningless in Christ
2. Marks of the Spirit are Meaningful to Christ

Look at verse 19. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. What matters is keeping the commands of God.

In other words, God looks at the fruit of being justified. He looks at obedience. That's what counts. He looks at the fruits of the Spirit, the evidence of obedience that spills out of a life that is controlled by the Spirit of God - keeping the commands of God.

Now what kind of obedience does Paul have in mind here? Just general obedience, general command keeping or perhaps something more specific? It could be referring to just general obedience but I think we can do a little better. I think the context can guide our understand of what kind of obedience and command keeping Paul is talking about. Now to get at this let's we have to start by understanding verse 23 which is not immediately obvious.

In verse 23 it says, "You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men." So somehow there is a link between being bought with a price and the logical inconsistency of then becoming bondservants of men. What do you make of that? Because it follows this section of slavery, some interpret this as saying, "Don't voluntarily enslave yourself to another person." Of course that would be true and good advice, and it would make sense contextually but I think there is a better interpretation based on the thrust of what Paul is trying to say in the entirety of chapter 7.

Paul in the greater context is trying to make the point, "Don't be divided in your single minded devotion to Jesus Christ." Getting married is good but it changes your circumstances such that it divides your attention.

So given that, when Paul says, "You have been bought with a price," what is his emphasis? It means you were purchased to do a job. You were property of someone else and now you become property a new owner. That might sound a little surprising to our independent American ears. We tend to bristle at the idea that anyone can tell us what to do, even God. We tend to read the Scriptures and hear the phrase "bought with a price" as referencing this imagery where we were in prison and we were purchased and now set free. The Bible does speak of freedom. But it's freedom in our newfound position as slaves of Christ. That purchase did not change our status. We were slaves and we are still slaves - we just have a new owner. We are property that is owned. We are either slaves of sin or we are slaves of Christ. We are never autonomous and free.

So when Paul says, "You were bought with a price, now don't be slaves of men" I think it's a reference to the job we are to be about now that our master has changed.

You were bought with a price so don't cheat your master. Employers don't take kindly to employees spending hours on Facebook, texting, taking two hour lunches with friends. Why? Because they bought you with a price. They expect you to do what they asked you to do.

And that's Paul exact point! What kind of obedience is Paul talking about here? Staying on task for kingdom purposes. God gave you a mission for you to accomplish. And the cost to purchase employees for this mission was not cheap. He bought you with the price of his own Son. Blood was spilled. He's completely invested to purchase you to be single-minded in your kingdom mission. He purchased you so you could be completely focused and yet your wandering off enslaving yourself to people. Your using company time to do other people's projects. That's not very fair.

We can be enslaved to all sorts of things. Things of this world can enslave our affections, our time, our mental resources. In fact, physical slavery doesn't even hold a candle to this type of slavery. I think what he is saying big picture is don't allow the things of this world to enslave you away from devotion to Christ, away from obedience to his command to take the gospel to all parts of the world.

How do we enslave ourselves? All sorts of ways.

- By spending our time worrying about our identity or
- by absorbing ourselves in making more money or
- climbing the corporate ladder or
- trying to get physically fit or
- playing games or
- entertaining yourself to death.

And the point here is this: You were bought with a price. You were

bought to do a job. What I care about is that you focus on what you were paid to do. Stop enslaving yourself to men. You are my servant. So when Paul says in verse 19, circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. What matters is keeping the commands of God, I think that's the idea. Stay focused on what you were purchased to do. Do not cut your attention into pieces. Or as verse 24 says, "remain with God." Focusing ourselves on kingdom work, not some other kind of work.

Now let's get practical here. How do we avoid enslaving ourselves to our culture? How do we instead focus on keeping the commands of God? Let me give you a single principle to consider in this regard, we'll call it the principle of the mortgage.

It's really fun to buy a house. You get to shop around. Your cash is all free. You have no obligations. Should we go out to dinner tonight? Absolutely! We have no mortgage. You wander from house to house and just inspect. How does this one look? What about this one? And the whole system is setup to make it as easy as possible for you to purchase.

But the second you purchase, you are locked in. All your free money is now tied up. Now all of the sudden going out to the same dinner feels tight. You locked yourself up. Not only that, it's pretty hard to get free again. You've committed. In order to uncommit you have to sell your house which is not easy. You have to fix all the things you broke or never got finished. You have to paint. You have to get it all clean and ready to show.

We all understand this concept of being shackled for decades of our life by a decision that took 15 minutes. So take this principle of a mortgage and apply it to other areas of your life. Because the

principle of the mortgage can apply to time, mental energy, emotional energy. We can make contracts with things that cost almost no money but we are making giant daily installments of our time so that we have nothing left for kingdom purposes. So before you start, ask yourself the question:

- Can I continue to stay kingdom minded if I take up this hobby?
- What is the real cost of owning a piece of vacation property. How much of my time, my money and my mental energy will it consume?
- What is the real cost for signing up for a sport.
- What is the real cost for mom getting that second job?
- What is the real cost for starting that side business?
- What is the real cost of the RV, boat, vacation, hunting or fishing trip.

Now you might hear all this as the idealism of a rambling preacher, "Well, common Jason, with that reasoning, I can never do anything." That's not true. We all need breaks and refreshment. Even slave masters give their slaves rest. And smart slave owners through history have allowed healthy amounts of rest and recreation because they will get the best work from their slaves. Rest is part of the rhythm and schedule of life. We all need time to relax and be refreshed. But, there is a big difference between a period of rest that brings legitimate refreshment to your soul without distracting you from your kingdom focus and something that enslaves you and prevents you from being kingdom focused. Don't do an all or nothing here. Truly evaluate your life and say, "Is this a healthy refreshment or kingdom distraction." If you truly bring this to the Lord, it is very possible to be honest with yourself in this.

I think one of the great criticism of our culture is that we are chronically crushed with distracted busyness so we have no time for the kingdom. It's death from a thousand paper cuts. Most of us are

running on 1% reserves or worse we are frantically in the red so when a kingdom opportunity comes we are so enslaved by things of this world that we grieve our inability to respond.

Realize that every decision we make requires something of us. The simple ask here is this: before you enslave yourself for long periods of time through that 15 minute decision, invite God into that decision and say, God will this be a distraction or will it be refreshment? Does this decision have redeeming kingdom impact? So many times we don't even ask. I have some margin, therefore suck it up. Bad, bad idea!

Now there is an objection here. I don't want to give up my distractions. I know I'm supposed to be a slave for Christ, but I don't want to be a slave! I have to take everything I want to do and ask God if I can first do it? I'd rather be free. Paul says, the only way to be free is in voluntary surrender.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVE NOT CIRCUMSTANCES

1. Marks of Identity are Meaningless in Christ
2. Marks of the Spirit are Meaningful to Christ
3. Marks of Enslavement are Reversed in Christ

Now I think the most interesting part of this text is what Paul says about slaves here. It really is a pretty amazing section and what it

does is force us to take our theology seriously.

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

In order to understand this text you have to allow Paul to mean what he says. We want to correct him and say, no Paul, you couldn't possibly mean what you are saying here. Paul in this passage is shockingly unconcerned about some pretty difficult circumstances. In our minds slavery is one of those situations that sounds an emergency alarm and we say, "All hands on deck. We need to divert all energy until this situation is altered." Paul is surprisingly unconcerned and patient.

He says, "Sure, if you have the opportunity to get free take it." But take it not primarily because you will then be able to use your resources to make yourself more comfortable. Take your freedom so you can be more effective for the kingdom." But if you find yourself a slave, you have a unique platform. Don't waste it.

Now keep in mind, slaves of the first century were not the same thing we think of in our American history. Slaves often held positions

of influence. If you were a slave for a good master, it would be way more equivalent to an employer/employee relationship today. But they were still slaves and there definitely were slaves that were treated horribly.

Now the reason Paul can be this unconcerned about physical slavery is because he has a direct sight line to the reality of ownership.

If we are believers we are all slaves of Christ. I'm not ultimately worried about the concept of slavery because slavery as a concept is a good thing. Slavery was a relationship God created. The ultimate perfect relationship is slavery to Christ. Now of course there can be bad slave masters which is another point entirely, but I'm not at all worried about the concept of slavery.

In fact, there's not another arrangement. You are either a slave to Christ or a slave to sin.

Paul says, even if you have no human master and by the world's definition you are free, you are really horribly mercilessly enslaved to sin.

Conversely,

If you have a human master and by the world's definition you are a slave, you are really, truly wonderfully, free.

Now, you may agree with this in theory, but how can this really be a comfort in reality? The quality of life differences between a slave and a freeman are pretty significant. Can a slave really feel free knowing he is free in Christ while every moment of his day is controlled by his

earthly master. Does that really work? What do we do with all those feelings of injustice?

1. Earthly Slavery is a Megaphone for the Gospel.

Now it's not like he is unaware of how being a slave affects them. There's a big difference in the quality of life between a slave and an emperor. But he's focused on a higher goal. It's like a coach whose watching his player scream in pain and while he sees the pain, he's not too concerned about it because he knows that it's only through the pain that the end goal can be reached. Paul is laser focused on the second part.

He says, redeem your slavery. Don't you know that the harder your circumstances and the louder you praise God in those circumstances the more unexplainable your behavior becomes. That's not quite right. It's not that your behavior is unexplainable, it's that it has one explanation. You see the world is out there trying to accuse Christians just like Satan did to Job. Well of course he's happy. Of course she's happy. Look at all the great things in their life. Look at that hedge of protection. Look at that smiling cute Facebook family on vacation with the cute pintrest kitchen. Of course they are happy. It has nothing to do with the Lord. But take away the stuff and they will curse you to your face. The smiling behavior has multiple explanations one of the main candidates being physical comforts. But take those physical comforts away, take the freedom away, make a person servile to another human being, and when you see them still happy, still free in their soul, singing in their spirit, what is the explanation. It's not that this behavior is unexplainable, it's just that it has one explanation. Paul is in prison, beaten, shakled and singing praises to God that he was counted worthy to suffer for his name. The explanation is Jesus Christ. That

is freedom! All Christians are free in Christ, and you can never take that away. That is a powerful testimony to a watching world.

Now if your slavery can have that kind of kingdom impact, Paul says, leverage it. If you are in a difficult marriage, leverage it. If your parents are unreasonable, leverage it. If your kids are painfully resentful, leverage it.

2. Earthly Slavery is Temporary.

The other thought here is that Paul knows this is temporary. Either the Lord returns or we die and go and be with the Lord, but either way, the ship of this world is sinking and we have a different future ahead.

Sure this world is not perfect. It's broken in a thousand ways and slavery is one of the ways in which it is broken. And if the brokenness is repairable, then you try to repair it, but the second you determine that the brokenness is irreparable then all your priorities shift. If the Titanic is sinking you don't try and repair a cracked cylinder in the engine. The main priority is get people off the ship!

And that's Paul's attitude. The main goal is to save people. And if you are slave then you are right where you need to be. Be a light for your slave master. Nobody else is going to be. You are the only preacher he'll ever see. If you can get free, great, but don't overly concern yourself because everyone needs to be saved and your right there to save him.

This allows us to understand how Jesus could ask people to stay in hard marriages, suffer in prison, be slaves, die as martyrs. Why?

Because the whole ship is sinking and we are in the business not of arranging deck chairs and trying to tan ourselves. We are in high alarm mode of racing around at great discomfort to ourselves trying to save people in this short window of time that we have available. When that is over, we can pull out the sunscreen and rest.

Application

What do we do with this. I hope this message helps you to think about your kingdom mission. This year's theme is gospel priorities. This is not a joke. This isn't just a pretty graphic to look cool. Are you making Jesus Christ and his mission number one in your life. This isn't an option. He bought you with a price. You are the slave. **NUMBER ONE PRIORITY.** Not number two or three, number one.

What would revival in this church look like? Waking up, and the first thought is how to be a light for Jesus Christ in this world.