

1 COR 7:17-24—THE PRIMARY VERSUS THE SECONDARY

INTRO: Let me begin by asking a question—you don't have to answer out loud, but think about it—the question is, “In what do you find your greatest sense of personal fulfillment or happiness?”

I have a book entitled *The Western Intellectual Tradition*. The writers summarize that “**in the 500 years since Leonardo, two ideas about man have been especially important. The first is the emphasis on the full development of the human personality. The individual is prized for himself. The second of the two grand formative ideas . . . is the idea of freedom. . . . These two main ideas are linked together. There could be no development of the personality of individuals, no fulfillment of those gifts in which one man differs from another, without the freedom for each man to grow in his own direction.**”

Especially here in America, these ideas of personal development and freedom are supplemented by the powerful idea known as the “American Dream.” IOW, there is no royalty or aristocracy, we are not bound by the circumstances of our birth, class, or station in life. Instead, anyone can rise above his or her circumstances as high as one's talent, ambition, drive, and hard work will take us. And since we have the freedom to do so, if we are true to ourselves we should use our abilities to rise above our circumstances.

Most of us tend to accept these things as a given. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson enshrined this whole outlook on life in the Declaration of Independence when he said, “**We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.**”

Why do I raise all this? I raise this because Jefferson says these rights have been endowed by “the Creator.” That Creator is God. That fact raises a competing issue: namely, we are created beings. If that is true, then we have to ask the question, “Is the focus of life as developed in the Western intellectual tradition and enshrined in the Declaration of Independence what *God* would have us focus on or not?” This is important because it goes to the fundamental, underlying issue of what is *primary* in our lives, what defines us, versus what is secondary.

Today's passage of Scripture—**1 Cor 7:17-24**—deals with these very issues. In fact, I think that what Paul tells us in this passage may be about the most important message that we as modern American Christians—both as individuals and the church as a corporate body—need to hear. [**READ 1 COR 7:17-24**]

O/S: We are going to look at this passage in three ways: (1) We will consider the *context* of the passage; (2) We will consider the *principle* of the passage; and (3) We will consider the *implications* of the passage for our lives individually and corporately as a church.

I. CONTEXT

A. The immediate context of this passage concerns the issue of marriage. All of **ch. 7** relates to marriage. So in **ch.7**—both before and after today's passage—Paul deals with a host of issues related to marriage: sexual issues; lust; being single; Christians married to non-Christians; divorce and re-marriage; and related matters.

Today's passage falls right in the middle of that lengthy discussion. So in one sense Paul is telling all of us—whether married or single, widowed or divorced, as he indicates in **v.17**, “God has placed us where we are. So we can be at peace and find contentment and satisfaction in our particular circumstances.” We can accept and have peace in our situation because our being married, single, widowed, or divorced is not an accident; God is with us in our circumstances. But additionally, as we will see, Paul is arguing that we can accept and have peace in our circumstances because even our marital status—however important that is—is not a primary matter but is secondary.

B. But the discussion of marriage in **ch.7** is part of a greater context. Thus, in **chs. 1-4** Paul looked at what we *base* our lives on and contrasted what are wise and foolish in the world's eyes with what are wise and foolish in God's eyes. In **chs. 5-7** he applied this to the issues of our bodies, sexual immorality, marriage. In **chs. 8-10** he will go on to talk about what we eat and how we interact with people different from ourselves. In **chs. 11-14** he talks about how we do church and exercise our spiritual gifts.

Paul places all of these fundamental matters in the overarching context of: *How does our relationship with Christ affect the focus of our lives?* To put it another way: If we are in Christ, do we define personal fulfillment and happiness the same way as how non-Christians define those terms? Do we view our outward circumstances the same way as non-Christians view theirs? Those questions are behind the *principle* of today's passage of Scripture. So let's look at that principle.

II. PRINCIPLE

To do that, look at how **vv. 17-24** are structured: 3X—at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the passage—Paul states the principle: **v.17 [READ]**; **v.20 [READ]**; and **v.24 [READ]**.

In each case the principle essentially is: “*Live in the condition in which you have been placed,*” or “*bloom where you are planted.*” In between each statement of the principle, Paul gives a major example from life: **vv. 18-19**—circumcision; **vv. 21-23**—slavery. Let’s unpack this.

First, because the immediate context concerns marriage and singleness, what Paul is saying is: “*If you’re married, stay married; if you’re single, don’t be just dead-set on getting married.*” This is in line with what he says elsewhere in **ch.7**, for example **v.27 [READ]**.

Second, since today’s passage is part of a greater context, the principle he gives us is not limited to the issue of being married or single. Instead, Paul is giving us a general principle of life—and that is clear from the two examples he uses—circumcision and slavery—since neither of them has anything to do with marriage. Let’s briefly take a look at those two examples:

- *Circumcision.* Circumcision was of paramount importance for Jews. But now, for those who are in Christ, Christ is our circumcision. Thus, **Col 2:11** says **[READ]**. IOW, Christ was cut off—not just a part of his body, but on the cross he was cut off from the Father so that we could be grafted in. Or, as **Rom 2** puts it, because of what Christ has done, in Christ we now have “circumcised hearts” by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, Paul is saying that it really doesn’t matter what our outward, physical status is, because Christ has fundamentally changed the most important part of us.
- *Slavery.* As with circumcision, Paul is arguing here that Christ transforms us regardless of our outward status. Christ frees us from the greatest bondages of all: the bondage of sin and the bondage of death. Compared to those, everything—even slavery—is only relative. As he says in **v.23 [READ]**. IOW, compared to who we are in Christ, even having the lowest position in this world is only a secondary matter. In fact, because Christ is our true Lord and Master, we can thrive in less than ideal earthly jobs—even slavery.

I heard once of a stewardess who saw a passenger reading a Bible on the airplane and told the passenger, “You know, I really don’t work for this airline.” When the passenger recovered from his shock, she added, “Yes, I’m employed by the airline, but I’m really working for Jesus.” She understood what Paul is saying in **vv. 21-23**.

Third, Paul is not giving us a principle or philosophy of fatalism, or do-nothingism, or the caste system. We see that from his own statement in **v.21 [READ]**. Improving our situation is a good thing. He has said the same thing regarding marriage elsewhere in **ch.7** where he says in essence, “*I wish everyone was like me (unmarried) so you could be single-minded toward the Lord. But if you choose to get married, that’s fine; it’s no sin—just get married in the Lord.*” So Paul is *not* saying that if you’re in an abusive marriage or a terrible job you must just submit to it. Not at all; do something about it; improve your life if you can.

But recognize this: God has us all in different life circumstances because he needs his people in different places to reveal Christ to different kinds of people in in all kinds of different situations. Therefore, the *motivation* for making changes in our lifestyles primarily should be to glorify Christ and not merely to improve our outward, physical circumstances.

We can summarize everything Paul is telling us in this passage by saying:

PROP: *Christ is primary; our circumstances are secondary.* **[REPEAT]** What are the implications of this for us both individually and corporately?

III. IMPLICATIONS

If you are a Christian, you may be thinking, “*Christ is primary; our circumstances are secondary*—that’s a given. Tell me something I don’t know.” It’s sort of like “*Love your neighbor as yourself*” or “*Do unto others as your would have them do unto you.*” But let’s think about it. To “*Love your neighbor as yourself*” or “*Do unto others as your would have them do unto you*” means that we should spend the same amount of thought, time, effort, and money helping others as we spend on ourselves. How are we doing with that?

In the same way, the fact that *Christ is primary; our circumstances are secondary* has profound implications for *everything*—particularly in how we as Christians define personal fulfillment and happiness. Let me explain.

A. Individually. The fact that *Christ is primary; our circumstances are secondary* of necessity affects our *attitudes* and our *actions*. Attitudes are of first importance, because our actions arise out of our attitudes.

Is Christ really primary? It is easy to tell. How? Look at what really excites us, turns us on, upsets us, or what we really get passionate about. Before my most recent trip to East Africa, on two separate occasions Nancy and I were having dinner with different Christian friends. On both occasions the conversations turned to politics, the government, the upcoming elections, the deal with Iran, and other political issues. In those conversations some of us (me in particular) became very animated, engaged, even passionate in discussing these things.

When we discuss Christ, the church, the kingdom, yes, we are interested, but it's not the same. There is not the same passion, the same personal, emotional involvement as when we are discussing politics. That tells me something. It tells me that, at least for me, despite my beliefs, in reality my circumstances, the things of this world are primary, and Christ, the church, the kingdom are secondary.

Do you really think that the Christians living in the Roman Empire the first three centuries after Christ, when they were sitting around talking, were primarily animated by the fact that “the first legion beat the Visigoths!” or “This is terrible; I can’t believe that the Visigoths beat our first legion; our government policy in this whole war is insane!” Do you think that’s what really yanked their chain? Obviously not. But paradoxically, it was for the very reason that Christ was primary to them and their circumstances were secondary, they were able to live in such a way that they turned the Roman Empire upside down.

Don’t get me wrong. Particularly in a land where we have the right and freedom to vote and get involved in the political process, I think it is wrong not to do so. Matthew Strenn is doing the right thing getting elected to and serving on the county board. The issue Paul is talking about is: What are we passionate about? Where do we find our personal fulfillment and happiness? What is primary and what is secondary?

We say Christ is primary but pretty much our world revolves around, not just politics, but ourselves. The things that really grab us are the circumstances we face in this world: politically, economically, and socially. For example, how does Christ, the church, and the kingdom factor into how we spend our money? For most of us the number one consideration for how we spend our money is how it will benefit us individually or as families. Christ may be a consideration, but is he—his glory, his church, his kingdom—the *primary* consideration?

My guess is that most of us who are Christians live our lives with the unstated assumption that it’s all about me: my happiness, my fulfillment, my material wellbeing, me, me, me. We have been co-opted by the world, and to a very large degree there is no visible difference between Christians and non-Christians. In wartime, everyone intuitively knows that our personal happiness, wellbeing, even our lives, are *not* as important as the overall cause. On the other hand, in our lives here and now, although we face various difficulties, we don’t face persecution, or war, or extreme danger. Therefore, we *can* pursue physical and material happiness and personal fulfillment *and we do*. These things become primary and Christ becomes secondary.

The way out of this morass is to truly take Christ in. By that I mean, think deeply about, meditate on, talk with your spouse and mature Christian friends, and ask God to truly help us to fully grasp and be enraptured by: who Christ is; what Christ has done for us; who we are in Christ; and what we have in Christ. For example:

- As we take in the fact that Christ gave up everything he had so that we can inherit everything he is and everything he has, it frees us to stop clutching so tightly onto what we have now and helps us to be more like him and give to help those in need and spread Christ’s kingdom.
- As we take in the fact that one day we will fall into the arms of our true and ultimate spouse and lover, we can recognize that great disappointment in marriage or relationships does not define who we are; on the other hand, even a great marriage is only a dim foretaste of what is to come.
- As we take in the fact that Christ was totally rejected by the Father so that we can be totally accepted, it enables us to face the rejections and disappointments life throws at us because we know we have the acceptance and approval of the only One who ultimately matters.
- As we take in the fact that Christ died and bore all of our deserved hells on himself but then rose again to new life so that we who are in him are guaranteed a glorious new life in glorious new bodies on a glorious new earth, we can recognize that our true and lasting fulfillment and happiness do not lie here; therefore, we can stop frantically living as if they do. We can start seeing the wonder of our lives as we see the hand and presence of God in our circumstances even though those circumstances are less than ideal.
- As we take in the fact that Christ is our true and ultimate king who is reigning even now next to the Father, it frees us to not get too bent out of shape by political matters since we know the end of the matter has already been determined and, for those of us in Christ, the future is of unlimited and virtually indescribable good.

B. Corporately. If Christ really is primary for us as a church, that should affect us both internally and externally. By “internally” I mean that we should be striving to grow closer to Christ. Our Community Church self-assessment process has already pointed the way in this regard. It has recommended that we must deal with our Sunday School and discipleship program. That is being addressed.

But if Christ truly is primary to us as a church, then his values and priorities also should be our primary guides for what we do externally. For example, in Jesus’ last major prayer before he died in **John 17**, he prayed that his followers “be one” even as he and the Father are one.

Our “external” assessment group pointed out that: there is a huge heroin addiction problem right here in the Valley; 350 people, including 200 kids, are homeless every night in the Fox Cities; and for the past 7 years, each day more people turn 85 than are born, and that aging of the population is bringing with it a host of unprecedented issues.

These are the types of problems that cry out for corporate church involvement. But they cry out for more than that; they cry out for inter-church cooperation—a joint effort among several like-minded churches to address these problems that are common to this whole Valley. Such working together among the churches would be a clear demonstration to a disbelieving world of the “oneness” Jesus seeks. If we work with other churches to provide practical and spiritual help for people in need, the world will see that: the church is relevant to life; Jesus Christ is alive; and he makes a difference in changing individual lives and whole communities.

Quite frankly, I don’t know how we can work out the practicalities of this. But I do have three thoughts:

- First, how we act corporately (just as how we act individually) and our corporate budget (just as our individual budgets) reflect what truly is primary to us and what is secondary. That cannot be hidden.
- Second, here at Community Church we have already done a lot of the groundwork for practical engagement with the community to demonstrate that Christ truly is primary to us. But we have to follow through. We have to actually decide what we are going to do and do it.
- Third, with respect to inter-church cooperation, since we, like every church, are a corporate organization, the responsibility for initiating formal cooperation with other churches largely has to rest on the leadership—our pastor and elders—in connection with the pastors and elders of other likeminded churches. Let us hold them up in prayer that God would guide them in this area.

CONCL: Paul is telling us today that *Christ is primary; our circumstances are secondary.* Who we are, how we define happiness and personal fulfillment, what we are passionate about, how we react to the circumstances of our lives, all demonstrate whether Christ is primary or not. I know in my own life, to a large degree, I do not live that out. I need to take Christ in much more—who he is, what he has done for me, who I am in him, what I have in him. You may or may not be in the same place. But if you are, that’s where we have each other: to build each other up, to encourage each other, to challenge each other.

But more than that: As a corporate fellowship of believers we can do things that none of us can do individually. As we take into ourselves that Christ is primary, it should affect what our priorities are and how we formally cooperate with other churches.

To truly take in—both individually and corporately—the fact that *Christ is primary; our circumstances are secondary* will affect us such that people will see that Christ is alive; he makes a difference; and he changes lives. When we get serious about Christ, Christ will get serious about us and then, as Christ himself said, **“The gates of hell will not prevail against the church.”**