

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 28, 2007**

BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED

1 Corinthians 7:17-40

Two weeks ago we looked at what the apostle Paul had to say about singleness, marriage, and sex in marriage in the first nine verses of 1 Corinthians 7. Last Sunday, focusing on verses 10-16, we considered what the Bible has to say about marriage and divorce. Today, as we consider what Paul says in the remainder of 1 Corinthians 7, I want to begin by sharing with you something John Ortberg has written about the power of our sexuality. Ortberg writes:

The desire to appear sexually attractive makes people jump through all kinds of hoops. It makes people buy more clothes, try out more ab machines, go through more elective surgery than anything else. It makes young girls in our society starve themselves, sometimes to death. The prospect of a few moments of sexual gratification has the power to make powerful people – politicians, pastors, church leaders, university presidents, CEOs – trash their reputations, ditch their marriages, capsize their families, and lose their careers. The prospect of a few moments of sexual excitement makes some of the smartest guys in the world act like they have a lower IQ than Cookie Monster. Why?

There are two ways you can take this question. One is: Why would people pay that kind of price for sexual gratification or excitement or fulfillment? Why would they pursue it with such desperate, unflagging urgency?

The other way you could ask this question is: Why do we make such a big deal about it? Why do we use loaded terms such as betrayal or molestation or abuse or sexual immorality? Why do we use moral language around it when, physically speaking, it's just a simple act? It's just body parts and nerve endings. It only involves the expression of inevitable biological urges. (At least, that is what some would have us believe.) Why does it have this power to create longing and desire, folly and regret, guilt and shame, hope and joy or remorse like no other activity on earth?

The Bible says sexual intimacy is not just a simple act, and does not just involve body parts and nerve endings, and is not simply biology. When it comes to sex, the reason it is so explosively powerful is that we're dealing with something that deeply involves the human soul. I want to tell you something that is important to spiritual life. Bodies and souls are much more connected than most people think. Craig Barnes notes that, according to the Bible, God did not create you as a soul and then just wrap you around a disposable body. He created Adam's body, we're told, and then breathed into it the breath of life. And that means that what goes on with your body

is intimately connected with what goes on in your soul. They are inextricably linked.

Never forget that. You may be as uncomfortable having me talk about this as I am. But it is critically important in this sexually-oriented society of ours to be clear on what God says in His Word and to have a biblical perspective on our sexuality and its proper expression in the midst of a fallen, broken world.

There is not sufficient time this morning to look in detail at Paul's counsel to those who are virgins – specifically young women who are not yet married – in verses 25-35, to engaged couples in verses 36-38, and to widows in verses 39-40.

I do want to call your attention to what Paul says in the second part of verse 28. In the NIV it says: “But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.” Remember that Paul is speaking here to unmarried young women.

THE MESSAGE paraphrase puts it this way: “All I am saying is that when you marry, you take on additional stress in an already stressful time, and I want to spare you if possible.”

The New Living Translation (NLT) says: “I am trying to spare you the extra problems that come with marriage.”

Extra problems. Many troubles. Additional stress. Doesn't paint a very positive picture of marriage, does it? We know Paul was not anti-marriage. In point of fact, what he says is true. (Of course it is! It is the inspired Word of God.) The truth is that marriage does complicate life. And when you are married with children, it gets even more complicated. It is intuitively obvious. But the complications and stresses and challenges of marriage and parenthood do not mean that it is necessarily easier or better to be single. The complications and stresses of marriage are offset by the blessings and joys it can bring. It is better to be single if God calls you to be single. And it is better to be married if God calls you to be married.

Because marriage brings extra cares and concerns, Paul urges the unmarried men and women in Corinth to remain unmarried, if it is the Lord's will, in order to be more fully devoted to the Lord's service. But whether married or single, it is God's will for His people to be usefully engaged in His service in the places and circumstances in life in which He has called them. In which He has called us.

This is the point Paul emphasizes in verses 17-24. Three times in these verses – in verse 17, and then again in verse 20 and verse 24 – Paul says that we should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to us (verse 17) and remain in the situation we were in when God called us (verse 20). Or, as it says in the New Living Translation (NLT):

You must accept whatever situation the Lord has put you in, and continue on as you were when God first called you (verse 17).

Whatever situation you were in when you became a believer, stay there in your new relationship with God (verse 24).

We saw last Sunday in verses 10-16 how Paul applied this principle to marriage. Remember what he said: A new believer's commitment to Christ does not alter the marriage bond. The believer is not to seek to dissolve the marriage bond because his or her spouse is not a believer. But if the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave the marriage, the believer is not bound.

The principle is: If you are married when you come to faith in Christ, do not think that your new faith compels you to change your marital status, even if your spouse is not a believer. If you are not married when you become a follower of Christ, do not think that you must be married in order to serve God faithfully.

In verses 18 and 19 Paul applies the principle to circumcision. Circumcision, of course, was a big deal for the Jewish people. It was the sign of God's covenant with them. Some Jewish Christians insisted that Gentile believers should be circumcised. They wanted to force Gentiles to become Jews, in effect, as a condition of their acceptance into the Christian church. On the other hand, many Jews in the 1st century Greco-Roman world attempted to remove the evidence of their circumcision by undergoing a minor surgical procedure called *episposmos* which made them appear to be uncircumcised.

What does Paul say? "A man who was circumcised before he became a believer should not try to reverse it. And the man who was uncircumcised when he became a believer should not be circumcised now. For it makes no difference whether or not a man has been circumcised. The important thing is to keep God's commandments" (7:18-19, NLT).

"Circumcision," says Paul, "is nothing." It counts for nothing of eternal significance in God's eyes. "And uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (7:19, NIV).

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said:

I believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure or avoid pain. The end of life is to do God's will, come what may.

Doing God's will – keeping God's commands and serving Him in the circumstances of life in which He has placed you – this is what counts.

It is interesting to note that on two other occasions, both in his letter to the Galatians, Paul emphasizes this point about the insignificance of circumcision. In Galatians 5:6 he says:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value.
The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

(Or, as *THE MESSAGE* puts it: “What matters is something far more interior: faith expressed in love.”)

And then in Galatians 6:15 he says:

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.

What counts is the gracious work of God’s Spirit in us, redeeming us and making us new creations in Christ, enabling us in the power of His Spirit to do the will of God.

Paul is saying: It does not matter whether or not you bear the outward marks of being a Jew or a Gentile. What matters is your heart relationship to God. God wants you to serve Him faithfully and gladly in the place and in the circumstances in which He has called you.

Paul then applies the principle to slavery and freedom. It is important to recognize right up front that Paul was not an apologist for slavery. His point is that even if you are a slave – and Roman slavery in many cases was considerably different from slavery in the American South – you are not to let your slavery be an impediment to your faithful service to Christ. If you were a slave when Christ called you, Paul says, “don’t let it trouble you” (verse 21), for God can use even a slave in his or her circumstances to bring Him glory. Of course, Paul says, if an opportunity for freedom arises, the slave should seize the moment and gain his freedom.

Now, you may ask, what does all this have to do with us? How does all this apply to our lives today, to your life and mine?

First of all, just this: Where you are in your life is not an accident. You are where you are right now by the sovereign plan of God. You may be in a hard place. You may be going through a difficult time. Your job may not be your dream job. You may be facing some major challenges in your life – at work, at home, with your health. But right now, God has placed you where you are. He has a reason for you to be there. And your assignment is both to recognize His sovereignty and wisdom and goodness in placing you where you are, and to bloom where He has planted you.

God wants you to serve Him – to serve Him faithfully, to serve Him effectively, to serve Him with energy, intelligence, enthusiasm and love – in the place and circumstances where He has called you. For as long as He calls you to be there. As John Piper has said, God is much more concerned with the way you do the job you now have than He is with whether you get a new job. What lies most in the heart of God, says Piper, is not whether we move from one job to the other, but whether in our present work we are enjoying God’s promised presence and obeying His commands in the way we do our work.

A woman was discouraged at work. She said to her pastor: “My boss treats me horribly. Everyone makes fun of my faith. Out of 100 employees I think I’m the only Christian there. I dread going to work each day. I’m getting so discouraged, I’m ready to quit.”

Sounds like a tough environment, doesn’t it?

The pastor replied: “God must think a lot of your faith.”

“What do you mean?” said the discouraged worker.

“He must think a lot of you to entrust all 100 of those people who don’t yet know Him in the hands of only one Christian employee. Perhaps you need to stop looking at your job as a way of making money and begin to see it as your mission field. I don’t think God would have you quit, and remove the only light from that workplace, do you?”

“I never thought of it that way before.” So this woman began praying for her co-workers, and she made it her aim to show them the love of Christ in practical ways, rather than just putting in her hours to get a paycheck. She began to bloom where she was planted.

Which is what God wants each of us to do in the places and circumstances where He has called us.

You don’t have to change your job or your circumstances to serve God. That is Paul’s primary point here. But there are some jobs and circumstances in which you cannot remain and be obedient to God. For example, you cannot continue to be in a sexual relationship outside marriage and be obedient to God. And there are some jobs that are simply incompatible with Christian discipleship – jobs involving prostitution, pornography, drug-dealing, and organized crime. There is no such thing as a Christian prostitute or a Christian stripper or a Christian mobster. Genuine commitment to Christ precludes one from staying or engaging in that kind of work.

Paul’s larger principle is not to prohibit or criticize job changes. It is rather to say: You do not need to change your job or your vocation if you can stay in it with God. If you can serve God faithfully there.

Wherever God has placed you, whatever the circumstances of your life, that is where God desires to use you. So bloom where God has planted you. Look for creative ways to make a difference for Christ where you are. Let your light shine for Him. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have in Christ (1 Peter 3:15).

Do not waste your energy being envious of where God has planted someone else. Do not daydream about greener grass somewhere else. Bloom where God has planted you. Let Him use you in the place where He has called you, to the glory of His name.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.