As The Lord Has Assigned

1 Corinthians 7:17–24 — Week 16

First Christian Church, Greeneville, Tennessee — Sunday, November 1, 2026

Introduction

Let me ask you a question to start: how much of your life is lived in the sentence that begins, "When… then"?

When the kids are a little older, *then* I'll have time to serve. *When* I get the promotion, *then* I'll be content. *When* we get out of this season, *then* I'll really start taking my faith seriously. *When* things settle down, *then* I'll be the husband, the wife, the parent, the Christian I know I ought to be.

Most of us don't live in our actual lives. We live in the waiting room of our lives — that imaginary next chapter where everything is

finally arranged the way we think it ought to be. And a waiting room is a strange place to spend your life. Nobody hangs pictures in a waiting room. Nobody settles in. You just sit, and watch the clock, and wait to be called back to where your real life is supposed to happen.

The church in Corinth was living in a waiting room. If you've been with us through chapter 7, you know Paul has been answering their questions about marriage and singleness, and underneath those questions was an assumption: some of them believed that real spirituality required a change of circumstances. If you're married, maybe you'd be more devoted if you weren't. If you're single, maybe you're missing something until you are. They had come to believe that their present condition was the problem — and that a different

condition was the answer.

And right in the middle of the chapter, Paul stops and lays down a principle. He says in verse 17 that this is his rule "in all the churches." Not a Corinthian exception. Not a Greeneville exception either. A rule for God's people everywhere.

Here it is: *"Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him."*

Three times in eight verses Paul repeats it — verses 17, 20, and 24. And his point, the point of this whole passage, is this: **because God has sovereignly assigned our circumstances and graciously called us in Christ, we are to live faithfully right where we are, and refuse to build our identity on external status.** Your life is not a waiting room. The place where God has put you is the place where He means for you to walk

with Him.
Paul makes the argument in four movements. First, the principle itself.
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1. Receive Your Present Life as the Lord's Assigned Sphere for Faithful Walking (v. 17)
Look at verse 17 again: *"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."*That little word "only" at the start is a gentle
brake pedal. Paul has just given detailed instructions about marriage in verses 10 through 16, and he's saying: before you draw the wrong conclusion from any of that — before you conclude that faithfulness requires rearranging your life — *only* this. Hold everything else up against this rule.

Then Paul gives us three words worth slowing down for, because together they carry the whole passage.
The first is **"assigned."** The Greek word is *emerisen* — the Lord has apportioned, divided out, handed to each person their portion. Notice who the subject is. Not fate. Not your boss. Not your parents, not the economy, not blind luck. *The Lord* assigned it. Paul says something similar in Acts 17:26, that God *"determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place."* Your address, your family, your job, your season of life — none of it is accidental, and none of it is outside His rule.
Now, that doesn't mean God approves of everything in your circumstances. Paul is not baptizing sin — not yours, and not sin done against you. He's saying your

situation, however it came to you, is now under purposeful providence. It is not a detour. It is an arena.

But here's something we can easily miss, and I think it's one of the most encouraging things in the verse. When Paul says the Lord has "assigned" something to each of us, the context of this very chapter suggests he's not only talking about circumstances. Back in verse 7, Paul said each person has his own *gift* — his own *charisma* — from God, to live as married or as single. And Gardner, one of the commentators I leaned on this week, makes the case that what the Lord assigns in verse 17 includes the grace-gifts — the *wherewithal* — to live the life He's called us to. In other words: God doesn't just assign you the place. He assigns you the provision for the place. He never hands a man an assignment and then

walks off to let him figure out how to fund it. The grace fits the calling. Whatever sphere He's placed you in, He has apportioned to you exactly the grace required to be faithful in it. That's why Paul can say to people in hard situations — and some of the Corinthians were in genuinely hard situations — "stay." Not because the situation is easy, but because the supply is sufficient.

The second word is **"called."** *Kekleken* — and it's in the perfect tense, which matters. A perfect tense describes a completed action with results that keep going. God called you — that's finished, settled, done — and that call is still defining you right now. Paul's point is that the decisive change in your life has already happened, and it wasn't a change of circumstances. It was a change of *ownership of identity*. You are not

fundamentally "who you were." You are who God has called you to be in Christ.
And the third word is **"lead the life"** — literally, *walk*. *Peripateito*, a present-tense command: *keep on walking*.
Walking is the Bible's picture of ordinary, daily, step-by-step obedience — Ephesians 4:1, "walk in a manner worthy of the calling"; Colossians 2:6, "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him." Paul doesn't say, "Wait dramatically until your circumstances improve." He says walk.
Put one foot in front of the other, today, in the life you actually have.

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther recovered this truth and it shook the world.
In Luther's day, people believed there were two tiers of Christians: the truly holy ones — monks, nuns, priests — and everybody else,

stuck in ordinary work. Luther said no. The mother caring for her children, the farmer in his field, the cobbler at his bench — their work is a *calling*, a station assigned by God, and faithfulness there is as holy as any monastery. God doesn't need your circumstances to be impressive. He asks for your obedience to be real.
So the first question of the Christian life is not, "How do I get somewhere more spiritually promising?" It's, "How do I walk faithfully *here*?"

And friend, if you're here this morning and you're not a believer — let me speak to you for a moment. You may feel this restlessness too, this sense that the next change will finally fix things. Paul would tell you the problem runs deeper than your

circumstances. No rearrangement of your life can reconcile you to God. What you need is not a new situation. You need to be *called* — and the good news of this passage is that God does call people, right out of ordinary, unremarkable, even messy lives, into fellowship with His Son. He may be calling you today.

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2. Refuse to Ground Identity in External Markers Rather Than Obedience to God (vv. 18–20)Paul now proves his principle with two
illustrations, and the first one is, on the surface, a strange choice: circumcision. Verse 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."*

Now, this is not theoretical. In Paul's world, this was an actual, live issue — in both directions. Some Jewish men, embarrassed by the mark of their covenant in a Greek culture that mocked it — it would be visible in the gymnasium and the public baths — actually underwent a painful procedure to hide it. It had happened before, back in the days of the Maccabees. And on the other side, some Gentile believers were being told that if they really wanted to belong to God's people, they needed to *get* circumcised. Men were literally having surgery in both directions, trying to fix their identity.

We smile at that. But before we smile too long — we do exactly the same thing with

different labels. Ours are just less surgical. The job title. The degree on the wall. The neighborhood. The denomination you grew up in, or the one you left. The size of your platform, the success of your kids, the number that follows your name on a screen. We may not boast in circumcision, but we boast in family history, in education, in being from the right place or knowing the right people.

Paul takes the single most
sacred identity badge of the old covenant — the very sign God Himself commanded Abraham — and says in verse 19:
*"For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God."*The Greek is blunt: circumcision is *ouden*

— *nothing*. Uncircumcision is *nothing*. Not "less important." Nothing, as a ground of standing before God.
Now wait. Did you notice the tension? Circumcision *was* one of the commandments of God. How can Paul say circumcision is nothing but keeping God's commandments is everything? Because in Christ, God's commands have been gathered up and fulfilled, and Paul tells us elsewhere what the keeping of them actually looks like. In Galatians 5:6 he writes almost the same sentence and finishes it differently: *"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."* And in Galatians 6:15: *"For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.
"*Do you see it? What counts is not a badge.

What counts is a new creation — a heart changed by the Spirit — and that new life proves itself one way above all: **faith expressing itself through love.** Love is the authenticator. Circumcision once claimed to certify that a man belonged to God. Paul says the certification has changed hands. Now the mark that you are God's is not something done to your body or printed after your name — it's a life of obedient love, flowing from a heart God has made new. The prophets saw it coming: God would circumcise the *heart* (Deuteronomy 30:6), put His law *within* (Jeremiah 31:33). In Christ, that's arrived.

So verse 20 lands the refrain again: *"Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called."* Labels on the outside cannot change what is inside. And what is inside — a new creation, loving and obeying

God — is the only thing that was ever really the point.

If you're not yet a Christian, hear this plainly: Paul is ruling out every ground you might be standing on. Your heritage won't do it. Your morality won't do it. Being raised in church, being a good Greene County neighbor, being better than the fellow in the next pew — *nothing*, all of it, as a claim on God. The only thing that counts is the thing you cannot manufacture: a new heart, received by faith in Christ.

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3. Reinterpret Every Social Condition Through Union with Christ's Lordship (vv. 21–23)Paul's second illustration moves from the

religious marker to the social one — from circumcision to slavery. And we need to feel the weight of this for the Corinthians. In a city like Corinth, perhaps a third of the population were slaves, another third were freed slaves. Slavery was the bottom rung of the ladder, the status everybody was desperate to escape. A slave had no legal marriage, no legal rights, and his daily work — however menial, however degrading — was treated by the "spiritual" people as evidence of a lesser life.

To that man, Paul writes verse 21: *"Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it."*

Don't miss what Paul targets. Not the reality — he never pretends slavery was fine — but the *anxiety*. "Do not be concerned" means: do not believe that your condition puts you at a spiritual disadvantage. Do

not believe God is nearer to the free man in the third pew than He is to you. Your status is real. It is just not ultimate.
And notice the parenthesis, because it matters: *"(But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)"* There's a long-standing debate among translators about this clause — whether Paul means "make use of your freedom" or "make use of your slavery." I'm persuaded, and most of our translations agree, that Paul means: *take the freedom.* The nearest word in the sentence is "freedom"; that's the thing to make use of. And it fits Paul's pattern all through this chapter — he states the principle, then grants the exception. If they are not using self-control, let the single marry. If the unbeliever departs, let it be so. And here: remain as you are — but if the door to freedom opens, walk through it with

a clear conscience. Change is not forbidden. Change is just not *salvation*. It's permitted, but it's not essential. The Corinthians' error was never wanting better circumstances. Their error was believing their souls were waiting on them.

Then verse 22 — and this is the thunderclap of the passage: *"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."* Everything reverses. The slave is *free* — not metaphorically free-ish, but the Lord's own freedman. And the free man discovers he's not autonomous at all; he has a Master. One of the commentators puts it memorably: slaves knew better than anyone that when it comes to identity, the key question is not *who* you are, but *whose*

you are. Paul's word "freedman" would have landed
with precision in Corinth, because manumission worked a particular way. When a Roman slave was freed, he didn't become a free agent. He took his former master's *name*. He owed his former master — now his patron — continuing service and loyalty. And in return, the patron was bound to look after his welfare and advancement.
Freedom, in that world, meant a transfer of belonging, not an end of belonging. Paul knew exactly what he was doing with that word. The Christian slave is Christ's freedman: he carries Christ's name, he owes Christ his service — and he has Christ Himself as his patron, the Lord who looks after his welfare better than any earthly master ever could.
And underneath it all is the oldest story in

the Bible. Verse 23: *"You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men."* "Bought with a price" is exodus language. It reaches back to Exodus 6:6, where God says to slaves in Egypt, *"I will redeem you with an outstretched arm."* God bought Israel out of Pharaoh's house — and then what did He do? He didn't turn them loose to be their own masters. He brought them to Himself, to be *His* servants, under *His* lordship. Redemption in the Bible is never a transfer from slavery to independence. It's a transfer of lordships — from a cruel master to a kind one, from Pharaoh to God, from sin to Christ. The price in our case was not silver. It was, as Peter says, *"the precious blood of Christ"* (1 Peter 1:19).

Which is why Paul's conclusion follows with such force: *do not become bondservants

of men.* You've been bought by *that* price, claimed by *that* Lord — do not now hand your deepest allegiance over to human beings. Don't make yourself dependent on the value judgments of people. Don't let public opinion, or the pressure to climb, or the fear of what the church crowd or the work crowd thinks, govern a life that belongs to Christ. People in Corinth were actually doing this, by the way — some free men would sell themselves into a wealthy household as a career move, trading freedom for connections and advancement. Paul says: you, of all people, cannot do that. You already have a Master, and He paid too much for you.

And here's the beautiful fruit of it: in the early church, slaves and masters sat at the same table, broke the same bread, called each other brother. The world said that table

was impossible. The gospel set it anyway — not by pretending the hierarchy didn't exist, but by announcing a deeper truth that made it relative. A new Owner defines your identity, not your old situation.

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4. Abide with God in Your Present Condition Because His Presence Defines Your Life (v. 24)

Paul closes where he began, verse 24: *"So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God."*

"Brothers." After all the instruction, he addresses them as family. And then listen to the two words the whole passage has been walking toward: **"with God."** In Greek it's *para theō* — at God's side, beside Him. Paul doesn't just say "remain there." He

says "remain there *with God*."That changes everything about the
command. "Remain" by itself could sound like resignation — grit your teeth, accept your lot, endure. But "remain *with God*" is not resignation. It's companionship. Paul is telling a slave in Corinth, a person in a hard stage of life, a single person who feels overlooked: you are not alone in your condition. You will not spend one day of it outside the company of God. Your life is not finally defined by *where* you are. It's defined by *who is with you* there.
And there's a second edge to it, a sobering one: to remain "before God" is also to remember that we are accountable to Him for how we live within our condition. We are not alone — that's the comfort. We are not unobserved — that's the call to take our ordinary obedience seriously.

Comfort and responsibility, in two little words.

There was a man in the 1600s named Nicholas Herman, a poor, uneducated Frenchman who ended up working in the kitchen of a monastery in Paris — washing pots, mending sandals, doing the work nobody wanted. The monks knew him as Brother Lawrence. And Brother Lawrence became famous, not for escaping the kitchen, but for what he found in it. He wrote that he learned to do everything — every pot, every errand — in conscious fellowship with God, and he said the time of his work did not differ from the time of his prayer. He remained exactly where he was called. He just refused to be there without God.
That is Paul's final word. Not "get out." Not "give up." *Remain — with God.* Your life is

anchored to God, not to your circumstances.---

Conclusion

So let me gather it up. Our identity is not printed on our circumstances. God — the Lord who assigns, the God who calls, the Christ who buys — He is the one who defines us. And He has not left you unprovided in the place He's put you: He assigned the grace along with the assignment. Circumcision is nothing, status is nothing, the ladder is nothing. What counts is a new creation, a heart that obeys, a faith that works through love, a life walked out step by step at the side of God.

Maybe this morning you're not a believer, and you've heard all of this as a word about a calling you haven't answered. The deepest problem in your life was never your situation — and so the solution was never going to

be a new one. The solution is a new Master, and unlike every other master, this One bought you not to use you up but to set you free. He is calling. Answer Him where you sit.

And for those of us who are His, Paul's principle presses us with one searching question, and I'll leave it with you, because it's the question this text asks every one of us:

If God has already assigned your present sphere of life and Christ has already purchased you into His service, where are you still assuming that a changed circumstance, improved status, or outwardly upgraded identity is what you really need in order to live faithfully before God?