

Your Job as Ministry

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of obeying God's commands and enjoying his presence over cultural distinctives or social status.

Duration: 32:40

Scripture: Proverbs 16:9-19, Matthew 6:33, 1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Topics: "Christian Discipleship", "Faith At Work"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that our current job is God's assignment for us, regardless of how we got there. He highlights the importance of obedience to Jesus in our work and states that how we do our job is a significant part of our Christian discipleship. The speaker also addresses the issue of being a slave or a freedman, discussing a translation problem in verse 21 of the text. Overall, the message encourages believers to prioritize obedience to God and to approach their work with humility and dedication.

Transcript

This morning, our focus is on your job as ministry. The point of the message can be put first in a declaration, and then it could be stated in a prayer. So I'll state it at the outset so that you'll know where we're going and maybe be able to follow more easily along.

As a declaration, the point is this. How you do your work, that is your eight to five job or whatever shift you have, how you do that work is a big part of your obedience to Jesus Christ. It's an essential portion of your Christian discipleship.

Stated as a prayer, it might go something like this. Father, grant us all the grace to be conscious of your presence all day long through our work, and the grace to obey your commands in all the demands of our jobs and in all the relationships in which those jobs bring us. I think that's God's word for us today, and I'd like to develop it from 1st Corinthians chapter 7 verses 17 following.

So if you have a Bible, you'll want to follow along, I think, in the text. 1st Corinthians 7. Now before we look at that particular portion though, let's orient ourselves in this chapter because I think it's surprising in a sense that what Paul says here about our vocation seems out of place in the text or a chapter that deals mainly with marriage. But I think if we catch on to what the issue is in the chapter, it won't appear out of place.

The church at Corinth had this question for Paul, it seems. Here we are as Pagans discovering fellowship with the living Christ. Surely it will make radical differences in our lives.

Surely we will be drawn out of relationships in which we've lived as Pagans. And there was a great deal of uncertainty there about what relationships would be abandoned. So they ask about a few.

For example, they ask, first of all, will Christian partners continue having sexual relations? That's verses 1 to 7. And Paul answers with a resounding yes. Don't abandon that particular dimension of the marriage relationship. In verse 3, we talked about that back in February.

Then down in verses 12 to 16, they raise another question. What about if one of the partners in the marriage becomes a Christian and the other one doesn't? Surely that means you get out, you maintain purity, you abandon, you leave. How can you live together with an unbeliever? Paul's answer again, no.

Stay in the relationship in which you were called to faith. Faith in Christ as Lord and Savior will never destroy the covenant of marriage that was given at creation. But having said that, in verses 12 and 13, Paul allows for an exception.

He says, well, if the unbelieving partner won't have anything to do with it, is sick of it, wants out, destroys the relationship, abandons, then the believing partner has done what he can do or she can do and is free, is not bound to that person if they deserve. But the main point is stay where you are. Don't abandon the relationship.

Sanctify the relationship with long-suffering and prayer and humble and exemplary conduct. Try to win the unbelieving partner. That's the main point.

But it may be as Jesus predicted in Matthew 1034 that his coming might be a sword rather than a healing balm. It won't be a sword because the Christian makes the division, but it may be a sword because the unbelieving partner wants nothing to do with the faith. So the principle that's being developed so far in this chapter is stay in your God-ordained relationships with God.

Don't abandon them. Stay there. Don't destroy the relationships.

Do your best to maintain them. First in the sexual relationship, then in marriage with unequal partners and now he comes in verse 17 to two different issues to which he's going to apply this principle. Let's read the text again.

Only let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him and in 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 or uncircumcision, but keeping the commands of God. Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called.

Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity or if you've got the revised standard version, you might notice the footnote. We'll come back to this complex translation problem.

Another alternative translation is if you can gain your freedom, don't. In other words, stay in the condition, the present condition, and use it. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord.

Likewise, he who is free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price. Do not become slaves of men.

So brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God. Now the principle is the same that he has been applying all through this chapter so far. It's stated three times very clearly.

Verse 17, let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him in which God called him. Verse 20, everyone should remain in the state in which he was called. Verse 24, whatever state each of you in which you were called, there let him remain with God.

Now those three statements divide this text up into two halves, kind of like a three pieces of bread in a Big Mac, with meat stuck in between. And the first piece of meat between the top two pieces of bread, namely verses 18 and 19, discuss the application of this principle to the problem of circumcision and uncircumcision. And then the second piece of meat between the bottom two pieces of bread, namely verses 21 and 23, discuss the application of the principle to slavery and freedom.

And we want to look at those two and see what difference it makes for our work today. But before we can understand either of those applications, I think we've got to zero in on a key word that occurs nine times in this paragraph, namely the word call. I think we have to try real hard to understand what Paul means by that, lest we confuse it, because it has at least three different meanings in the New Testament and two of them here in this particular text.

When Paul says in verse 17, let everyone lead the life in which God called him. And when he says in verse 24, in whatever state each was called, he's referring to a divine call by which we were drawn into fellowship with Christ. We often use the word calling to refer to our vocation or our profession, and that's not the way it's being used here.

We say, my calling is to be a homemaker or my calling is to be a painter or my calling is to be a pastor or something like that. But here, that's not the meaning of the word, except in one instance, which isn't even translated calling in most of the versions. Verse 20 says literally, let each one remain in the calling state in the RSV in which he was called.

Now, that first calling does refer to our vocation or the state in which you find yourself culturally in your particular place in life. But calling in eight of the other instances in this text refers not to our vocation, but rather to the call of God, the movement of the Holy Spirit drawing us into fellowship with himself. Let's go back to first Corinthians one to get this really clear, because in first Corinthians one, the concept of calling is laid down most clearly and explained for us.

For example, in chapter one of first Corinthians, verse nine, Paul says, God is faithful in whom you were called or by whom you were called into the fellowship of his son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. So all Christians are called, and I would say I'm going to try to show that only Christians are called in this sense. This calling is very different from two others.

One is vocational calling, which we're going to talk about, and the other is the general call of God that goes out every time the gospel is preached. Every time Billy Graham gets on the television, a general call is sent out to millions of people. That's not the call that's being referred to here.

When Jesus says in Matthew 22, 14, many are called, but few are chosen. He's making the distinction, I think, that Paul is here. The call there is the worldwide call of the gospel that's sent out to everybody.

But not everybody accepts that call. Not everybody is allured by that call into the kingdom, into fellowship with Jesus. Many people hear that and reject it and put it out of their minds.

The call of God, which puts us into believing and loving fellowship, that's the call that Paul's talking about here. And we can see this most clearly from verses 23 and 24 in 1 Corinthians. He says, We preached Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

So here, the called are not everybody who hears the gospel. The called are those who hear it as wisdom and power. We can paraphrase it so that it becomes crystal clear like this.

We call everyone, we call everyone to believe in Christ crucified. But many Jews find this call to be a stumbling block. Many Gentiles find this call to be foolishness.

But those who are called hear the call as wisdom and as the power of God. So when Paul speaks of a calling that connects one with Jesus Christ and brings him into fellowship with Him, he's referring to that luring of the Holy Spirit by which we are converted and grafted into Jesus Christ. Now, we need to see how Paul applied this principle of staying in the place in which we were called, that is, in which we were converted.

That's not an easy thing to see in this text. In the process, we're going to see what the theological reason was as well for the principle, which seems so strange to us in our day. Why stay where you are when you were called? People are moving all around today.

He applies it, first of all, like this, to circumcision and uncircumcision in verses 18 and 19. If you were converted as a Gentile, don't try to become a Jew. If you were converted as a Jew, don't try to become a Gentile.

That's basically what circumcision and uncircumcision mean. And that has far-reaching cultural implications, doesn't it? If you're black, don't try to become white. If you're white, don't try to become black.

If you're Mexican, don't try to become American. If you're American, don't try to become Mexican. And then Paul gives his theological reason, verse 19.

Circumcision is nothing. Uncircumcision is nothing. But keeping the commandments of God is everything, would be a more literal way of rendering it.

That's about the most offensive thing Paul could have said in his day. Circumcision is nothing. Can you imagine what a Jew would have thought when he heard that sentence? And if we stop and think about the broad cultural implications of saying, it doesn't matter if you're a Jew, it doesn't matter if you're a Gentile, it's offensive to us too.

But it's true. There's a whole of a difference between the way Paul gives a rationale for keeping cultural distinctives in our day and the way people do it today. Isn't there? We say white is beautiful, black is beautiful, red is beautiful, yellow is beautiful, therefore maintain your cultural distinctives, right? Paul did exactly the opposite.

White is nothing. Black is nothing. Red is nothing.

Yellow is nothing. But keeping the commandments of God is everything. Therefore, maintain your cultural distinctives and don't feel like you have to become one or the other.

Paul is a very unfashionable thinker and therefore eternally relevant. He is radically God-oriented. Everything, absolutely all of our distinctives fall before the priority of God.

And that's imperative, absolutely imperative for us to see or we're going to create a new legalism out of these texts. The old legalism said you must be circumcised in order to be saved. You've got to be white in order to be accepted, approved.

The new legalism might say if you're circumcised, you can't be saved. If you're white, you can't be accepted. We've got to guard ourselves against that by seeing the theological underpinnings of this text.

We would pervert Paul's teaching and miss his intention. If we take the sentence, let him who is uncircumcised not be circumcised and turn it into an absolute condemnation or prohibition of all cultural adaptations. It's not that.

Paul doesn't want to condemn all of that. And this is clear from the fact that Timothy, when he picked him up on his second missionary journey, he was a Gentile, at least he had a Gentile father and a Jewish mother, wasn't circumcised. And Paul circumcised him to avoid putting any stumbling block in the way of his ministry among Jews.

We hear Paul saying in chapter 9 of this same book, I become all things to all men that I might win some. What Paul was doing wasn't giving a blanket condemnation of either giving up or adapting certain cultural distinctives. What he was doing, I think, was showing that obedience to the commands of God, verse 19 stresses this, obedience to the commands of God is so much more important than any cultural distinctives that we might have, that we shouldn't feel any compulsion whatsoever to take them on or give them up in order to ingratiate ourselves with God or to improve our standing in the world.

It simply is no big deal whether we are white or black or red or Swedish or anything else. And we ought not to make a very big deal of it. We ought to make a real big deal of obeying the commandments of God and maintaining a close fellowship with him.

And then, as Paul implies in Romans 2.25, and only then some of our cultural distinctives may become beautiful secondarily and derivatively as an outworking of the obedience of faith. In a word then, the application of this principle to cultural distinctives like circumcision and uncircumcision is this. Don't fret and don't boast about your present state of cultural distinctives.

Don't despair and don't get proud. They are of little importance when compared to the tremendous importance of obeying the commandments of God and devoting ourselves 100% soul, body, and strength to that. Now, moving down to the bottom half of the Big Mac, verses 21 to 23.

How does he apply this same principle to the issue of whether you are a slave or whether you are a freedman? Here we run into this translation problem in verse 21. And I was baffled to know what to do with this since I don't want to belabor my difficulties here. But I'm going to belabor it anyway because I don't know how to preach on it if we don't know what the text means.

The text in most of the contemporary translations say, were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. Now, that may be correct, but I find it really hard to accept that that is being stated as an illustration of the principle that sandwiches it.

The principle in verse 20, everyone should remain in the state in which he's called. The principle in verse 24, in whatever state in which you were called, let him remain with God. It seems wholly out of place for Paul to stick in between these two.

If you can get your freedom, seek it. Change your state, in other words. And not only that, but there are words in the original text that are ignored by this translation and would be brought out in a different one.

For example, this is the one I suggest. Were you called as a slave? Never mind. But even if you can become a freedman, rather make use of your present position.

Namely, adorn it with your obedience to your master. Don't be anxious, but instead use your position. Now, I think that it is true in the final analysis that Paul would not condemn a slave always for accepting liberation.

We'll talk about that at another time. Any more than it was an absolute that a person who was uncircumcised shouldn't be circumcised. Even though he said, let him who is uncircumcised not seek circumcision.

But if you translate the verse, seek freedom if you can, then the real point of the passage gets obscured. Namely, when you are called into fellowship with Christ, slaves, when you are called into fellowship with Christ, you gain a wholly new, radically Christ-centered set of priorities. So much so that your slavery ought not even cause you to fret.

That's what the first two halves of the verse mean. Are you a slave when you are called? Never mind. Never mind.

Doesn't matter. Don't let that cause you to fret. Is yours a menial job? This would be the application for today.

Don't fret. Don't let that weigh you down. Don't be discouraged or downcast.

Is yours a job that doesn't have high esteem in our particular culture? Never mind. It's the same point that he's been working with through all the other cultural differences. Were you circumcised when you were called? Never mind.

Were you uncircumcised? Never mind. Those things don't matter. What matters is something else.

Now, Paul could have given the same theological justification here that he did above. He could have said, slavery is nothing and being free is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is everything. That's true, but he didn't say that.

He gave us a different argument and takes us a little deeper. The reason he says in verse 22 that a person can say, never mind if he is called as a slave, is that the one who is called in the Lord as a slave is the freedman of the Lord. And the reason, he turns it now to the person in the upper echelons, the reason a person who is a freedman when he is called in the Lord can say, never mind, is because that person is, in Christ, a slave.

It's kind of a reversal of roles. I love to watch Paul's theology at work here in this practical situation. He's saying, isn't he, that the gospel is an antidote, on the one hand, to despair and discouragement for those who have menial jobs, and the gospel, on the other hand, is an antidote to pride for those who have highly esteemed jobs.

He looks at the slave and he says to this slave who may be very hopeless and discouraged and beaten down, and he says, in Christ you are a free man. You were bought with a price. Let no man enslave your soul.

Rejoice in the Lord. Look to him for hope and you will be freer than all the anxious nobles in the world. Then he looks at this noble free man and he says, don't you become proud because remember, you are a slave of Christ.

There is an authority over you. You must be submissive and subordinate. You must be humble.

And so the upshot of this is that whether a person is a slave or a freedman, it ought not to cause them to despair on the one hand or to be proud on the other. They ought to be able to say, never mind, to their job. He ought not to boast if he's a doctor or a lawyer, and he ought not to despair if his job is regarded by his society as less esteemed than one of these professions.

So, brethren, Paul concludes in verse 24, in whatever state each was called, let him remain with God. With God. There's the key phrase.

Let him remain with God. What matters in this life and in eternal life is not where you work, but whether you are there with God and can be there with God, enjoying his presence. What matters is not whether your job is high or low.

What matters is, are you being encouraged and humbled day by day in your work by the presence of God? And putting the two applications together here, the one relating to cultural distinctives and the other relating to slavery and freedom, the point seems to be this. Obeying the commandments of God, verse 19, and enjoying the presence of God, verse 24, are so vastly more important than culture or job that we ought to feel no compulsion whatever to change our position in life. We ought to be free to stay right where we are.

We ought not to be driven by despair out of one, nor lured by pride and greed towards another one. We ought to be able to say, never mind. You are not my life.

My life is obedience to Jesus. Now, let me conclude just briefly with four applications to our practical situation today. First of all, God is much more concerned about the way you do your job than where you work and what your job is.

He is not very interested in whether you can move from one job to the next. We've got in this congregation nurses, teachers, carpenters, artists, secretaries, bookkeepers, lawyers, receptionists, accountants, social workers, repairmen of various sorts, engineers, office managers, waitresses, plumbers, salesmen, security guards, doctors, military personnel, counselors, bankers, police officers, decorators, musicians, architects, painters, house cleaners, school administrators, housewives, missionaries, pastors, cabinet makers, and many, many more. And that is a beautiful thing.

I get excited when I think about the church dispersed in the world. But the word to all of us is this. The thing that's heavy on God's heart is not moving among these professions.

But obeying God in them right where you are. He is not interested in your moving up into some more highly esteemed job. He is very interested in maintaining fellowship with him and obeying him where you are.

Second implication. I think this has been implied already. The command is not an absolute prohibition of changing jobs.

God is not always against your moving from one job to the other. We know this because of the exceptions mentioned earlier in the chapter, but also because the scripture pictures such things happening. We all know, for example, that there was a tax collector who became a preacher and there was a fisherman who became a missionary and so on in the Bible.

But we also know this. There are professions in which you can't stay with God. You can't be a prostitute with God.

There are certain kinds of indecent and corrupting entertainment that cannot be run by Christians. There are businesses which will force you to exploit people in which you will not be able to stay and obey God. So Paul is not saying to the Corinthian professional thief or cult prostitute, stay where you are when you got converted.

That would be absurd. The question at Corinth was, when we become a Christian, what must we leave? And Paul's answer is, don't leave anything where you can stay with God. Don't feel any compulsion to be driven out of your job.

He wants people to be dispersed everywhere in the world. And I think that's a very unfashionable thing to say today, because I think it cuts the nerve of worldly ambition. Probably a lot of you are kind of feeling uncomfortable, in fact, right now, because you've got your eyes set on some position out there.

It may not be wrong for you to get that position. But the nerve of worldly ambition is cut when Paul says, you ought to be able to be fulfilled in whatever job you have. You ought not to despair.

You ought not to be proud. You ought to be fulfilled in Christ and not feel any compulsion to leave. The word of God to us success seekers is this.

Take all that ambition that's flowing into upward mobility and pour it into obedience to Jesus, wherever we are, all day long, in the job that we have. Third, young people who don't yet have jobs or have not yet decided on professions, what's the implication of the text for you? When you ask yourself the question, what should I do with my life? What is God's will for me? The answer should come back with a resounding, God's will for my life is, one, maintaining close fellowship with Him, and two, obeying His commandments wherever I am. And then do whatever you want.

Enter any profession you please. I am absolutely confident that if our young people are bending every effort towards sanctification and fellowship with God, God is going to distribute them in the world perfectly, exactly where He wants their influence, and therefore I've counseled dozens of Bethel students who come to me, what should I do with my life? Do whatever you want with your life, but seek holiness with all your might every minute of the day. Then there'll be no problem.

And finally, fourth, the text implies that the job you now have is God's assignment for you. That's very clear in verse 17. Let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him.

God is sovereign. You are not where you are by accident. A man's mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.

Many are the plans of a man, but the purpose of the Lord will be established. The lot is cast in the lap, but the decision is holy from the Lord. Where you are is God's assignment for you now, even if you got there by fraud.

And you need to be real careful in whether you decide to move. How you fulfill the commands or the demands of your job is just as essential to your Christian life as your being here on Sunday. And that's what I want to make really clear today, because I read in a recent article in Leadership Magazine that a businessman said he'd never heard a sermon in 23 years that gave him the impression that his discipleship had anything to do with his 8 to 5 job at his big executive business.

And the one point I want to drive home is your Christian discipleship has every bit as much to do with the way you fulfill your job during the week as it does with your ministry and your presence here. The prayer that every one of us should have tomorrow morning as we set out to work is this. God, go with me today.

That's the presence. Go with me and make me conscious of your presence. And encourage my heart that I not be discouraged in my job if I'm dissatisfied with its menial nature.

And humble me if I'm inclined to pride because my job is one that's highly esteemed in this society. And then secondly, give me the grace to obey your commands in all the relationships that my job brings me and help me to fulfill its responsibilities for your namesake. May the Lord of labor and the God of your job grant you to know His presence all through the week and may He grant you the grace to do all your work in conformity to His commands.

Amen. Your discipline.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/16/SID16407.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/your-job-as-ministry/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net