

# A Clear Calling

Sermon preached by Jonathan Huang for Houston Chinese Church  
Sunday, March 19, 2023

## ❖ Introduction

- I grew up as child going to this church. And I prayed the prayer to accept Jesus into my life sometime as a kid after hearing the gospel in Sunday School.
- But what many of you don't know about me was that by the summer before I was about to enter college, I was ready to leave Christianity. And the reason was I couldn't break free of my addiction to pornography that started in late middle school.
- As a high school student, I carried this enormous burden of guilt and shame because of my involvement with the musical worship team. I was living a double life.
- And I hated the hypocrite that I was.
- So by the time college came around, I'd walked away from the faith at least in my heart. I didn't want to call myself a Christian anymore.
- But also in high school, I wanted to be a doctor. So I applied to what was known as the Rice-Baylor Program, where you got accepted into both Rice *and* Baylor College of Medicine while still in high school.
- And, by the grace of God, I got in.
- Well fast forward just a little bit. I'm a freshman in college now. I'm sitting in a Sunday worship service just like this but at another church here in town. And, I hear the gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—explained in a way I needed to as an eighteen-year-old. I felt like I'd never heard something like that before.
- Obviously it probably wasn't the first I heard the gospel, but God used that moment to convict me of my need to repent and to reassure me of his love in Christ.
- As my life turned back to Christ, I found myself as a college student with this increasing angst in me. I wanted to live for Jesus. And I never prayed about signing up for the Rice-Baylor Program, at least that I remember.
- And if he were to lead me away from the path I was on towards being a doctor, I wanted follow. *But I just couldn't figure out if that was what he wanted me to do.*
- I wrestled with the possibility of leaving the medical track to be a missionary or a pastor.

- I was discontent with what I had in front of me—a straight path to becoming a doctor. Something a lot of people would love to have. I was ready to change course. But was change what God really wanted for me?
- You know, change get really get to our heads. Some of you in middle school or high school just can't *wait* to leave home and go off into college because of all freedom you think you'd have. You'll get to do what you want now without having your parents nagging at you for this or that.
- Some of you who are single or dating just can't *wait* to get married because life would then be so much better. You'll no longer be alone anymore. Marriage is where you'll feel ultimately fulfilled.
- Or others of you might be completely unhappy with your job right now and ready to call it quits. You just want to move on. Finding another job would be a welcomed change because life would just be *that* much better because of it.
- But I want to ask this morning, will change really solve all our problems? Will life really be that much better simply because we change something about our current circumstances?
- I want to invite you to turn in your Bibles to the book of 1 Corinthians, where we'll be picking up in chapter 7 verses 17 through 24.
- And I want to show you how God would speak into this issue of change and what *he* thinks matters more.
- Just for some context, last week, we studied the first part of chapter 7. There are three groups that the apostle Paul addresses in that section. Pastor Jason pointed out that, first, there was this idea spreading throughout the church in Corinth that sex was “gross.” That it was more spiritual to avoid sex even in marriage. So there was a group of people who were wanting to get divorced because of their misunderstanding of sex.<sup>1</sup> And Paul says: don't do it. Don't divorce your spouse (1 Cor. 7:10-11).
- The second group Paul addresses are the “unmarried and the widows” (1 Cor. 7:8, ESV). Pastor Jason pointed out that they were perhaps feeling inferior and less than “fully human” because they weren't experiencing sex.<sup>2</sup> Paul says that it's “good” to “remain single,” just like he was (1 Cor. 7:8, ESV). And he gives good reasons for them to stay single as we'll see next week in the last part of chapter 7.

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Tarn, “A Healthy Marriage,” sermon manuscript (Houston Chinese Church, 2023), 2, <https://en.hcchome.org/sites/default/files/sermons/2023/03/A%20Healthy%20Marriage.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Tarn, 5-6.

- And the third group of people we encountered last week were Christians wanting out of a marriage with non-believing spouses because they thought leaving them was the more spiritual thing to do.<sup>3</sup> And Paul says to them: don't follow through with your impulses to separate. Stay together, as much as it depends on you (1 Cor. 7:12-13).
- And in all these cases, we find people who are thinking about making some serious changes to their lives because of some angst inside them. They're being drawn towards change because they think change will solve their problems.
- And so, in our passage today, Paul zeroes in on this issue of change. And I want you see that there are four different kinds of people in this passage, all looking to change something about their lives for different reasons.
- Think of these as four different myths. As we move along, I want you to ask yourself if you can identify with any of these myths that we see here in chapter 7.
- I'm going to start with the main point of the passage and then we'll dive into the four different myths.
- And what I hope you take away from our time together is this: **Change isn't everything. So focus on the things that matter most.**
- And there are three things Paul calls us to focus on in this passage.
- ❖ **The first is this: Because change isn't everything, focus on the life God's already assigned to you.**
  - This is the main point of this entire passage...and we see it first in verse 17. And then repeated in verses 20 and 24.
  - Look down at verse 17 with me. "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" (ESV).
  - I think the NIV translation helps us understand the first part of this verse just a little bit more. It reads, "Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer *in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them*, just as God has called them" (emphasis mine).
  - The Greek word for the phrase "lead the life" has the sense of "to live or behave in a specified manner."<sup>4</sup> It's the same the word for "walk" that we find in Ephesians 2:10, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should *walk* in them" (ESV; emphasis mine).

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<sup>3</sup> Tarn, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Logos Bible Word Study for "περιπατείω" (lemma: περιπατέω).

- So Paul’s saying here, “You might be tempted to think that change will solve all your problems. But what’s in front of you matters more. Focus on that. Focus on the kind of life God’s already assigned to you.”
- The Greek word for “assigned” here has the sense of “to give out as one’s portion or share.”<sup>5</sup> So it’s no accident that God has you where you are right now.
- If we believe the sovereignty of God in all things, then we have to believe with all our hearts that whatever station of life we’re in *right now* has been assigned to us. It’s been apportioned to us.
- Where you find yourself right now, *that’s* your lot in life that’s been hand-picked by God and given to you.
- You may be a stay-at-home mom, or an engineer, or a teacher, or a student. You may be single or married or widowed. Whatever it is, the Bible says, that’s your assignment. That’s where God has you for this season of your life.
- Now look at verse 20. “Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called” (ESV).
- And skip down to verse 24. “So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God” (ESV).
- One commentator explains that the idea of calling in this passage basically refers to the time of one’s conversion to Christ.<sup>6</sup> So, for example, verse 20 would mean that “each one should remain in the condition in which he was called” *to Christ* (ESV). Called *to become a Christian*.
- This same commentator goes on to explain that the “life that the Lord has assigned to” you in verse 17 is the “social situation” that you find yourself in when you first became a Christian.<sup>7</sup>
- And he points out that Paul was basically trying to say that whatever life situation you’re in when you first came to Christ, even though that situation could change, you have what it takes to be a faithful Christian.<sup>8</sup>
- Now I think this principle can apply to you even if it’s been a long time since you became a Christian.

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<sup>5</sup> Logos Bible Word Study for “ἐμέρισεν” (lemma: μερίζω).

<sup>6</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 309.

<sup>7</sup> Fee, 310.

<sup>8</sup> Fee, 309.

- And, of course, there are going to be some situations where it makes sense to get out as soon as possible, like if your job required you to be involved in prostitution or blatant sin.
  - But the point is, change isn't everything. So focus on the life God's already assigned to you. He has you there for a reason. You can live out your Christian life to the full right where you are and trust him with your future.
  - I still remember a conversation I had while visiting Japan as a college student. At the time, I was really wrestling with whether or not God wanted me to be a missionary to Japan. There was angst for sure. There was a lot of uncertainty. The stakes were high.
  - In my mind at the time, being a missionary would mean taking a totally different path than the one I was on with med school. So one day, I was taking a walk in the city with a Korean missionary much older than I. And at one point in our conversation, she said something like this to me, "You know, if you were my son, I would tell you to go to med school. And let the Lord turn the steering wheel of your life when he wants."
  - You see, I was itching to leave the path God had placed me on. Yes, I was trying to be obedient to God, open to doing whatever he wanted. But here I was with a missionary to Japan herself, telling me to stay on the path God already had me on. It was enough. I could rest content, focusing on the life God's already assigned to me in that season.
  - So Christian, think about the kind of life God's assigned to you. You might be wearing all sorts of different hats—father, mother, husband, wife, girlfriend, boyfriend, student. You might be just starting out in your career or at the tail end or even retired.
  - Are you discontent in any of those roles? Are you itching for change for whatever reason? Pray and ask God to fill your heart with contentment, knowing that you can live out your Christian walk with him in any situation in life.
  - Change isn't everything. It's not going to solve all your problems. So focus on the things that matter most. Focus, first of all, on the life that God's already assigned to you.
- ❖ **And second, focus on pleasing the right Person. I'll explain more what I mean in just a little bit.**
- Here's where the myths come in. Now in your outlines, I've written these four myths down for you. And I'm going to group the first two myths together, followed by the second two myths because of the way Paul arranges things in our passage.
  - Again, I want you to see if you can identify with any of these myths.
  - So the first myth is this: *change will solve my social insecurities.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I'm indebted to Jason Tarn for the idea of insecurity in our discussions about my sermon.

- Look down at verse 18 with me: “Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision” (ESV).
- So here, Paul first addresses Jews who had become Christians in the Corinthian church who were now itching to get rid of their “marks of circumcision” (1 Cor. 7:18a, ESV).
- What was driving this?
- We know that circumcision was originally what marked a person off as being in the covenant community of God’s people in the Old Testament. It signified that you were a true Jew.
- But now that these Jews were Christians, they were ready for some change. Circumcision possibly didn’t *mean* much to them anymore. In fact, what was bothering them *more* were their social insecurities.
- One commentator explains how back in the day, Jews would be mocked because of their marks of circumcision in Greek gymnasiums. Circumcision ended up being a source of shame and social ostracism.<sup>10</sup>
- So the change they sought was through a kind of surgery that would hide their marks of circumcision. And by doing so, they were hoping that this physical change would lead to them being more accepted by others.<sup>11</sup>
- Now this isn’t all that different from the kind of social pressures many of you in here might be facing when parents or well-meaning friends keep asking you the dreaded question: “Are you dating anyone yet?” Or when you receive unsolicited advice, “You know, you should really try to get married soon.” As if making a change in your relationship status will solve all your problems—when in fact, those of us who *are* married can assure you, it doesn’t!
- So Paul challenges the Corinthian Christians in this situation to forget about “[removing] the marks of circumcision” (1 Cor. 7:18b, ESV). Don’t be fooled into thinking that making this superficial change will actually solve your social insecurities.
- Which brings us to the second myth, which is this: *change will solve my spiritual insecurities*.
- The second kind of people Paul addresses are Christians who were uncircumcised at the time of their conversion (1 Cor. 7:18c, ESV). These are Gentile Christians we’re talking about here. Let’s see what *they* wanted to change.

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 551..

<sup>11</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*.

- Look down at the second part of verse 18 with me. “Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision” (ESV). These were people who were buying into the false teaching that in order to be a *true* Christian, you needed to get circumcised just like the rest of the Jews.
- Until then, you had a deficient faith. You weren’t *fully* Christian.
- Of course, this was completely antithetical to the gospel. And Paul spilled a lot of ink in his writings trying to fight against this kind of thinking.
- And so these Christians, you could say, are looking for change because they’re spiritually insecure. They’re not really clear about what God wants of them.
- And they were hoping that change—in this case, getting circumcised—would lead to them being more accepted by God.
- Now this isn’t all that different from people these days, maybe even some of you sitting here, who think that to be fully accepted by God, for God to be really pleased with you, you’re going to have to fix up your life and be a better person. You’re feeling spiritually insecure and you think that if only *this* or *that* about your life changed, you’d finally be accepted by God.
- I’ve heard it said before that Christianity and morality are two completely different things.<sup>12</sup> You see, many of us can get this relationship wrong by thinking that in order to become a Christian, you’ve got to become more moral. But the opposite is true.
- None of can be moral enough to become Christians. Becoming a Christian is about putting your trust in the good news that Jesus Christ lived the perfect life you should have lived and the died the death you should have died as a consequence of sin.
- And as you grow in your relationship with God which was given to you and not earned, you begin to love the things God loves and hate the things God hates. And over time, people looking in on your life are going to see the fruit of a more moral life. But the relationship comes before the changed life. Not the other way around.
- So the people buying into myth #1, thinking that change will solve their social insecurities, are being driven to change in order to please other people.
- And people buying into myth #2, thinking that change will solve their spiritual insecurities, are being driven to change because they want to please God, but trying to please God in all the wrong ways.

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<sup>12</sup> I believe I learned this concept from Chris Seay, Lead Pastor of Ecclesia.

- Paul gives the same exhortation to both types of people. Look down at verse 19 with me: “For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God” (ESV).
- In other words, change isn’t everything. And because change isn’t everything, focus on what matters more. Instead of trying to make changes because of your social insecurities, trying to please other people, focus on pleasing the right Person. And that’s God. And instead of trying to make changes because of your spiritual insecurities, make sure you know what really pleases him.
- When I was a junior in college, I started to think really seriously about whether to date the girl who’s now my wife. I wouldn’t say I felt overly pressured to get married. But I certainly knew the overwhelming desires to leave singlehood and be married.
- And, guys, by nature, I’m just an anxious person. I mull and mull and mull over things. And I can take *forever* to make decisions.
- It was that year I had a discipler, named Daniel Wang, who patiently walked me through this decision.
- And in the midst of all the anxiety I was feeling, I still remember two words that Daniel said to me one day, “Daily obedience.” Daily obedience. Focus on daily obedience and living to please the One who mattered most.
- Change wasn’t going to solve any insecurities I had. And in my unsettledness over this decision, daily obedience was the call to action. Whether I remained single or whether I changed my relationship status, what mattered most in either situation was still the same: daily obedience. Daily obedience to Christ.
- So for those of you who aren’t Christians in this room right now, your next step of obedience might be to finally get off the fence and figure out what you really believe about Jesus Christ. Let me encourage you to reach out to a trusted Christian friend later today.
- Schedule a time to sit down together and just talk through your doubts or any questions you want about the Christian faith.
- Because you can’t be neutral about Jesus. You’re either with him or you aren’t. And keeping God’s commandments would look like for you to be obedient to his gospel. To repent and to turn to Christ as your Lord and your Savior.
- Now, if you’re already a Christian and are saying to yourself, ok, so instead of trying to change things because of my social insecurities and wanting to please others, I need to focus on pleasing God, where do I start?



- I think this is where forming a habit of daily Bible reading is so crucial to living this out.
- So I want to share with you something that I've tried to incorporate into my own times of Bible reading that I first learned from Ken Werlein, pastor of Faithbridge Church. It's called the SOAP method. It's basically a way to journal as you're reading the Bible
- So when as you're studying the Bible passage for the day, focus on just one or two verses that you want to pay attention to or you feel like God's drawing you to. Write that down as your S – which stands for Scripture.
- Then take some time to make observations about those one or two verses – observations would be the O.
- After that, write something down that reflects how you want to apply Scripture to your own life in a tangible way. This is the A – application.
- And finally, there's P, which stands for prayer. Where you write down a prayer in response to what God's been teaching you that day.
- I would say, from my experience, that it makes a big difference when you journal and read your Bible at the same time. You force yourself to make connections from Scripture to your own life. You find ways to actually live out what the Bible says rather than just add to your intellectual understanding of God's Word.
- And when you do something like this SOAP method day in and day out, what you're really doing is giving God the opportunity to show you little by little, day by day, the kinds of things that please him. And you'll be better equipped to “[keep] the commandments of God” as it says here in our passage today (1 Cor. 7:19, ESV).
- If you do this as regularly as possible, over a long period of time, I assure you that your life will be more like Christ, regardless of what changes you end up making to your circumstances.
- You see, change isn't everything. It's not going to solve all your problems. So focus on the things that matter most. Focus, first of all, on the life that God's already assigned to you. Second, focus on pleasing the right Person, the One who matters most in this world.

❖ **And third: focus on what it means to be a bondservant of Christ.**

- Myth #3 goes like this: *change will solve my identity insecurities.*
- The third kind of people Paul addresses are Christians in Corinth who were bondservants or slaves when they were converted. And the change they were seeking was to be free from this bondage.

- So here were Christian slaves who probably felt socially inferior. By securing their freedom one way or another, they could change their status in life and no longer be looked down on as mere slaves.
- Their sense of value and worth was found in where they stood in society. They were insecure in their identity.
- Now this isn't all too different from some of you who might feel unhappy or discontent with where you're at in your workplace. You might be feeling that if I could only get *this* job or change over into *that* role, I'd feel better about myself in comparison to others.
- What does Paul say in this situation? Look down at verse 21. "Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity)" (ESV).
- So clearly, there's room for change. Paul doesn't mean that we can never change jobs or careers or our relationship statuses.
- I love how one commentator puts it: "Change may occur, but one's calling in Christ means that change is unnecessary, and certainly not to be a compulsion."<sup>13</sup>
- So Paul's saying here, "Slaves, bondservants, don't worry about the fact that this is the life God's assigned to you for this season." Why?
- Look down at verse 22. "For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord" (ESV).
- Paul calls bondservants to remember that they are "[freedmen] of the Lord." Yes, the world might consider you lowly and unimportant. But even so, your worth and sense of value and significance should now be found in the fact that you belong to another. You are Christ's.
- Which brings us to the fourth and final myth: *change will solve my financial insecurities*.
- This final group of people were Christians who were free from slavery when first converted, but are now trying to enter *into* slavery in search of financial security.
- Look down at the second part of verse 22. "Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men" (ESV).
- There were different reasons people became slaves back in the day. But, as one scholar points out, some would sell themselves as slaves in order to "pay off a debt."<sup>14</sup> There

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<sup>13</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 318.

<sup>14</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 562-563..

were even Christians who went into slavery so that they could “pay for food for others.”<sup>15</sup>

- These people were looking to change—in this case, voluntarily becoming slaves—so that they could gain a better financial footing.
- Now this isn’t all that different from people today who base their decisions on whether to make a change for purely financial reasons. That job’s going to pay me *way* more. It’s a no brainer!
- Paul reminds us all that, above all, we are “bondservant[s] of Christ” (1 Cor. 7:22b, ESV). We are “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 7:23a, ESV).
- Which means that you shouldn’t make decisions in life simply because making that change will make you more money. Don’t make a move simply because you feel financially insecure.
- Why?
- Because if Christ is your master and you are his bondservant, you’re constrained to do his bidding—to live at his beck and call. He paid a price for you by being “pierced for [your] transgressions” and by being “crushed for [your] iniquities” (Isa. 53:5, ESV).
- If he says stay, you stay. If he says go, you go. You don’t leave simply because you’ll make more money. We are “bondservant[s] of Christ” (1 Cor. 7:22, ESV).
- Change isn’t everything. So focus, instead, on what it means to be a bondservant of Christ.
- For me, being faithful to Christ looked like going ahead with med school and putting my head down to finish off my training. But then in the middle of residency, God put me through this period of soul searching. I wrestled hard with trying to discern if God really wanted me to be a doctor or a pastor for the rest of my career.
- Obviously, change in this case would mean certain implications in terms of social status and finances if I were to go one way or another.
- But one way God made his will clear to me was through the counsel of others. I spent time talking with people who knew me well, who could help me figure out whether to change course or not.
- And in the end, I concluded that Jesus really wanted me to walk down the pastor route. And after graduating from residency, I ended up starting seminary part-time and working as a doctor part-time until I graduated from seminary last year.

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<sup>15</sup> Thiselton, 563.

- So in the end, change isn't everything, though change can happen. It's not wrong to want to change things about your life or move on to something different.
- But Christian, make sure that your decisions aren't simply based on what would improve your position in life or make you the most money. Focus on what it means to be a bondservant of Christ, bought with a price. And let Jesus lead you through your decisions. To stay as long as he wants you to stay. To go only if he wants you to go.
- But, besides prayer and the Word of God, how will we know how to make these kinds of decisions?
- I think, like in my story, one key way is to rely on the local church. We need to rely on the counsel of others in our church to know when to make changes in our jobs, our careers, our relationship statuses, and so on.
- Don't be a lone ranger and try to figure out the complexities of change on your own!
- We need others to help us discern whether we're trying to change out of godly motives or selfish motives.
- We need to invite others to speak into our lives and we need to be willing to speak into each other's lives.
- We are the "body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27, ESV).
- So here's my final call to action.
- If you've been itching to make some sort of change in your life and struggling to figure out what God would have you do—maybe it's some sort of job or career change or you're wanting to get into a relationship, or you're just discontent with your current stage in life, what I want you to do is to text or email someone in our church, by tonight, who you know is older and wiser than you as a Christian.
- This might be your small group leader or a close friend or one of our pastors.
- I want you to set up an in-person meeting or a phone call to talk through how you're feeling about your current situation. Let another more mature and trusted believer help you navigate through your feelings of angst and discontentment and desires for change.
- Let the church be the church for you. To help you live out what God's calling you to do.
- And remember, change isn't everything. So focus on the things that matter most. Focus on the life God's already assigned you to. Focus on pleasing the right Person in life. And focus on what it means to be a bondservant of Christ.