

## SERVE

We actually need help! [fathomchurch.org/sundays](http://fathomchurch.org/sundays)

## INTRODUCE

Well, good morning church! If I haven't met you yet, my name is Chris Martin, and I'm the Lead Pastor here.

**IT'S BEEN 105 DAYS SINCE WE WERE LAST IN THIS ROOM!**

If you've got your Bibles, and I hope you do, please open them up to 1 Corinthians chapter 7. 1 Corinthians 7. That's where we're going to be.

We want every person to have a hand on their Bible. You can open your phone or tablet and literally Google search 1 Corinthians 7.

## INTRODUCTION

I would wager that almost everyone in our world is on a quest of sorts, and that quest is to figure out who they are. Who am I? What is my identity? What defines me?

This begins when we are children.

- Are you into sports?
- Are you into performing arts?
- Are you into gaming?
- Are you good at math and science?
- Are you good at history and language?

*'What are you into'* is essentially the first stage of the identity quest.

I see it in my 5-year-old.

- We went from Sesame Street,
- to Frozen,
- to horses,
- to Moana,
- to Toy Story,
- back to Frozen
  - because of Frozen 2 released on Disney +
  - right as quarantine started,
  - so, I had a girl running around the house singing...
    - ahhhoooahhahh!
  - And I couldn't leave!
  - 'thank you' Disney...
- and now we're on to Barbie.
- Pray for me.

But this 'what are you into' thing continues into adulthood. We just think we've gotten sophisticated.

## **WORK**

So, we think that we'll find what defines us in success of our work.

- So, we go to school,
- and we get degrees,
- and we grind in entry level positions,
- all with the hope of upward mobility...of success,
  - whether it's prestige,

- or being the boss,
- or even making a difference.

But Baylor Scholar Robert C. Roberts<sup>i</sup> puts it like this: *“Upward mobility often ends not in satisfaction and peace, but in exhaustion, disappointment, and emptiness.”*

## **MONEY**

Or, we think that we’ll find what defines us in more money. In the book *Your Money or Your Life*<sup>ii</sup>, the authors found some fascinating things about the association of money and happiness.

- They found that as you get more money,
- your overall happiness DOES increase...
  - but only to a point.
- So, if you are under the poverty line,
- and you get a bump in income,
- your happiness does go up,
- but once you hit the “middle class” line,
  - wherever that is,
- no matter how much more money you get,
- it won’t, as they say, *“buy you happiness.”*
- And studies show that your happiness level
- actually goes down as you make more money.

## SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Or, we think that we'll find what defines us in improving our looks and fitness. I don't know if you've noticed, but fitness is what sells as fashion these days.

And the social influencers are

- marathoning,
- and cross-fitting,
- and 30-minute-ab-bing
- themselves to their best life now...
- and you can too!
- Just get you some stretchy pants, and let's go!

But listen...here's the awful truth...

- you ain't getting any younger, alright?
  - And you can dye it
  - and work out
  - and trim it
  - and eat better
  - and inject it
  - and whatever.

But time and gravity will win! I promise.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Or, to what Paul has talked about in chapter 7 so far, we think we'll find what defines us in sex and relationships...

- but a lie we've bought into
- in the last few decades
- is from the prophet Jerry Maguire when he said,
- *"You complete me."*
- That's just not how it works.

## TRANSITION

So,

- if success,
- and money,
- and better jobs,
- and better homes,
- and better stuff,
- and a better body,
- and even better relationships...

if those things won't bring ultimate satisfaction to our lives, then what is it?

Where can we find our identity?

What is it that ultimately defines us?

Well, let's look at what Paul has for us today. 1 Corinthians 7:17

### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:17

[17] 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.

## POINT 1: GOD DEFINES

Now, Paul begins with a principle, which is really his main point in this text, and he will actually repeat it three times in this text.

- In verse 17,
- verse 20,
- and verse 24.

And the point is this: **SLIDE GOD DEFINES WHO YOU ARE.**

That's what he's saying here when he says **let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him.**

Do you see the theology implied here?

- God has **assigned** to you the life you have.
- God is sovereign over your life.

So,

- who you are,
- where you live,
- what you look like,
- what you're capable of...
- God has gifted all those things to you.
- He is who defines you!

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## ILLUSTRATE: WHAT'S NEXT

But this is hard for us, in our self-help, *what's next* culture. We are always living for what's next.

- When I was in middle school, I couldn't wait for high school...
- and when I was in high school, I just needed to get to college...
- and in college, man, once I have a real job, then I'll have it.
- And then it's the next job.
- Or getting married.
- Or having kids.
- Or getting the kids out of the house.
- Or retirement.
- Or grandkids.
- Or...what's after that? Well, it gets grim...

Don't you see that if you're always looking to what's next to find what defines you, you'll miss it? Paul says,

- *"Hey, live your life.*
- *God has assigned it to you.*
- *God has called you here.*
- *So, find your identity in that!"*

It's not wrong to try to self-improve, or get a better job, or whatever... but don't find your life in that! That's not where identity is found!

## TRANSITION

Now, Paul goes on to illustrate where you won't find what defines you in verses 18-19.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 7:18-20

[18] Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. [What?] Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. [19] For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. [20] Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.

### EXPLAIN: CIRCUMCISION

Ok...so Paul goes into this illustration of circumcision, which is good, wholesome, Sunday morning, family talk!

So, circumcision...we need to do the back work historically to understand this passage.

- In the Roman Empire,
- to be uncircumcised meant that you were a civilized person.
- The Romans viewed circumcision as a barbaric practice,
- and looked down upon it.

But, the Jews circumcised their sons when they were eight-days-old as a sign that they were God's covenant people. It was unbelievably important!

Now, in Roman society,

- business and politics were often done
- in these public bathhouses where men were nude,
- and so, we have reports of Jewish men,
- who wanted to look like Romans,
- who would pursue a surgical option,

- kinda like ancient plastic surgery,
- to effectively make them look like they weren't circumcised.<sup>iii</sup>
- Yikes!

And I just always say, gentlemen, we don't require any surgery to become a member at Fathom Church.

- Glory to God!
- To quote Paul, remain as you are.
- Ok?
- You're welcome! – Moana quote.

## POINT 2: CIRCUMSTANCES

But the point Paul is making here is that this whole circumcision vs uncircumcision thing is madness! It's ridiculous!

And I'll make the point here: **SLIDE CIRCUMSTANCES DON'T**

**DEFINE YOU.**

- I mean, talk about going to extreme measures to fit in!
- Elective circumcision or circumcision-reversal...
- all in order to be accepted by people.
- I mean, people would never go under the knife
- just to be accepted...right?

You see the application here?

**Your circumstances, or even a change in circumstances, don't define you.**

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## ILLUSTRATION: PERCEIVE ME

I can see this in my life:

- *“I want to look this way,*
- *I want to be perceived this way,*
- *and I even want others to be envious of this thing in me.”*

It’s actually the adult version of what I talked about kids doing, but it’s not “the jocks vs. the artsy kids vs. the brainy kids.”

It kind of elevates it to,

- *“This is who I am...*
- *I’m the upper-middle class,*
- *drive-a-Audi,*
- *have a five-bedroom house*
- *with a great yard*
- *and a man-cave...*
- *kind of guy.”*

But don’t get too comfortable if that’s not you, because there’s the blue-collar version,

- *“I’m not some,*
- *Audi- driving,*
- *fancy-coffee-drinking,*
- *skinny-jean-wearing sissy.*
  - *I am a Coors drinking,*
  - *\$2 hamburger,*
  - *kill-my-own-dinner*
  - *kind of guy.”*

But you've got this weird kind of *"This is who I am. These are the lenses through which I want you to see me."*

## **APPLICATION: COMMANDMENTS**

And Paul's argument is that even if you get that...even if you define yourself with whatever life you decide is most attractive to you, **it doesn't count for anything**. You won't find fulfillment there.

He says, **neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but keeping the commandments of God.**

Now, that sounds strange, right? Cause circumcision was a command of God to the Hebrews. So, what's he doing?

- I think he's making a point about internals and externals.
- You see, a change in your circumstances
  - to try to be accepted,
  - or loved,
  - or feel good about yourself
  - is an external.

But Paul is commending us towards an internal change.

- God defines who you are,
- In the life he has assigned us,
  - **and we keep the commandments not to find our identity...**
  - **but because of that identity.**
- We talk about inside-out Christianity, not outside-in.

As commentator David Garland says: *"What is important is not the state that one is in, but how one lives in that state."*

## TRANSITION

Your circumstances don't define you...God defines who you are. And now Paul gives us the second illustration in verse 21:

### 1 CORINTHIANS 7:21-24

[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.) [22]

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. [23]

You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. [24]

So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

### EXPLAIN: SLAVERY

So, Paul moves from the example of circumcision,

- and men trying to be accepted because of their external status,
- to a more socioeconomic example,
- and men trying to be accepted because of their social circumstances.

And I think this is basically illustrating the same principle. But let's talk about it.

So, Paul uses the idea of slavery. Where the ESV reads **bondservant** it literally means slave. And I think we have to address the issue, because this passage had been massively abused to actually condone slavery.

So, elephant in the room: is the Bible actually condoning slavery? The answer is “no,” the scriptures do not condone slavery. But we need to understand the context, in order to understand why Paul chose this illustration.

**First**, in Corinth, one-third of the population were slaves, and another third were people called freedmen:

- freedmen were former slaves,
- and were one tier above slaves
- on the Roman social pecking order.

So, this illustration would have made sense to everyone in his church.

**Second**, some will attempt to make slavery sound better in the Roman empire than the slavery in the American South, and while there are some differences, I don't find that compelling.

- Slavery is always a sin.
  - Slaves in Rome were not legally persons.
  - Slaves had no legal rights.
  - They were classified as things.
- This is a sinful system,
- that goes against
- basic Biblical ethics of human worth, value, and dignity.

And I'll tell you this much, I would say the exact same thing of racism in our cultural moment.

- Racism is sin.
- And systemic racism in our country is a result of the fall.
- And it has no place in a Christian worldview.
- And as followers of Jesus
- we should care about all issues of human dignity.
- Racism, slavery, abortion, human trafficking.
- These are all issues we should care about
- and fight against
- because all people are created in God's image.

So then, **third**, Paul says "Don't be concerned about your slavery." But in the same breath he says, "But if you can gain your freedom, go for it."

- So, does Paul want them not to be bothered by being a slave
- OR does he want them to pursue freedom?
- The ambiguity here has confounded interpreters.

And **fourth**, remember, Paul is not trying to make a point here about whether slavery is right or wrong, but rather, he is using it as an illustration for his conversation about what defines our identity, to a particular people in a particular place at a particular time.

Now, in light of the context let's read this again.

Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it.

- I think Paul is saying the same thing he said earlier.
- Your slavery is not what defines you,
- and thus, is not where your identity is found.

But, I don't think he's condoning slavery because he goes on, But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.

And I think that Paul's encouragement to make use of their opportunity for freedom means this:

- God defining who you are
- does not freeze you forever
- in your present condition.

Ok? Paul is saying:

- *“Hey, in the life you've been given right now...*
- *you can find your identity in him.*
- *It's God who defines you,*
- *because Jesus has called you!*
- *Of course you should try to better yourself!*
- *Especially if you're oppressed!*
- *But don't think that your identity can be found*
  - *in even throwing off the shackles of slavery.*
- *True identity is found in Christ and nothing else.”*

### POINT 3: SUFFERING

And that's my third point for the morning: **SLIDE SUFFERING DOESN'T DEFINE YOU.**

- the hardest things,
- the sufferings in your life,
- not even the oppression of others...
- those are not what define you.

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### ILLUSTRATION: CANCER

I heard the story of a young man named Daniel.

- He's was young man who loved the Lord,
- was doing well in business
- but who came down with a very rare bone cancer.

So, the doctors sit Daniel down and are brutally honest with him. They say,

- *"Anything we do for this will be the first time we've done it.*
- *This is going to be really, really painful.*
- *We don't think that we can extend your life for very long,*
- *but we'll fight, if you want to fight."*

So, Daniel says, *"I'll fight. Let's do this."*

So, they moved him to the Mayo clinic, and began the treatment. And here's what happened: the way the doctors thought it would play out, is exactly how it played out.

- That disease just crushed his body.
- It wasn't long before he couldn't walk.
- It wasn't long before he couldn't move his arms anymore.
- His bones were just wasting away from the inside.

And in one of the last conversations he had with his pastor, just a few days before he died, his pastor noted something.

- The more that the cancer crushed his body,
- the more He loved and worshiped Jesus.

In fact, in that conversation he said,

- *"I think I understand what Paul meant*
- *when he talked about sharing in Christ's suffering.*
- *Because all I can think about*
- *is what Jesus did FOR me*
- *and BECAUSE OF me.*
- *And I know I'm dying,*
- *but I'm grateful for what Christ has done,*
- *how He has worked in my life*
- *and how He has rescued me."*

How is it that a man being crushed in his body, losing everything that the world would deem necessary for contentment, come to have that posture?

**His identity wasn't in his cancer. His identity was in his savior.**

## CONCLUSION

- Church, you are not defined by your circumstances.
- You are not defined by your sufferings.
- God defines who you are.

God is the only one who gets to tell you who you are.

- Single or married.
- Circumcised or uncircumcised.
- Slave or free.
- Rich or poor.
- Educated or uneducated.
- Blue collar or white collar.
- Black or white or Asian or Hispanic or any ethnicity.

Those things are all a part of you, but only God defines you.

And my hope is you would find your identity in Him...that you would pay attention to yourself today.

## LOOKS

Some of you, your entire identity is built up in your physical body.

- You live at the gym,
- you measure your food
  - and I'm not saying that health is wrong,
  - you have a responsibility to be healthy;
- but I'm saying that some of you have taken it
- to this obsessive level,
- where your identity is built out in how you look physically.

You just need to be careful.

- Be responsible,
- be a good steward with what He has given you and your body,
- but if your worth is how you are looked at by other people –
- you're being deceived.
- That does not define you.

## **LIFE**

Some of you,

- your identity is in your home,
- it's in your job,
- it's in your kids' athletic careers,
- it's in your parenting,
- it's in those things.

Listen, you've been kidnapped! Those things are going to betray you.

- You fearfully cling to them
- as if you were clinging to life
- because you don't know who you would be
- outside of those things.
- But those things are not what define you!

Others it's in your political affiliation.

Others it's in your ethnic identity.

Others it's in something you've done,  
or something that been done to you.

And none of those things are unimportant...but none of them is of ultimate importance.

- God is the only one who gets to tell you who you are.
- God's the only one in whom true identity is found.
- And listen to me, you were bought with a price.
- Don't become slaves of any person...even yourself.

Lead the life to which God has called you.

Let's pray.

## RESPONSES:

Well, every week at Fathom we respond in 4 ways:

- COMMUNION – THE LORD’S SUPPER
- GIVING TITHES & OFFERINGS – [fathomchurch.org/give](http://fathomchurch.org/give)
- PRAYER - [fathomchurch.org/prayer](http://fathomchurch.org/prayer)
- SINGING

So, I’m going to read the Words of Institution from the Apostle Paul, we’ll take communion, and then we’ll sing:

### 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23–26 – WORDS OF INSTITUTION

[23] For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, [24] and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” **TAKE**

[25] In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” **TAKE**

[26] For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Love you church, let’s sing together.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.baylorisr.org/scholars/r/robert-c-roberts/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Your-Money-Life-Transforming-Relationship/dp/0143115766/>

<sup>iii</sup> Garland, David E. *1 Corinthians*.