

Making Love Bloom Again – Part 5

Bloom Wherever God Plants You

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

June 4th, 2006

There's an ancient Persian story about a man named Ali Hafed who owned a very large farm with orchards, grain fields and gardens. He was a wealthy, contented man until one day a man came from the East and told Ali that he would be even richer if he owned a diamond mine. So Ali Hafed went to bed that night churning with discontentment and resentment. The next day he sold his farm and left his home to search for a diamond mine. He traveled the world over, finally becoming so poor and defeated that he committed suicide. A few years later the man who purchased Ali's farm led his camel into the garden to drink. As his camel put its nose into the brook, the man saw a flash of light from the sands of the stream. He pulled out a stone that reflected all the hues of the rainbow. The man had discovered the diamond mine of Golconda, one of the largest diamond mines in the world. Ali Hafed never knew that he had untold riches in his own backyard. He was already a rich man.

That is the message of this passage. Over and over again it tells us to find the riches of God's presence right where we live, in our present situation and in our less-than ideal circumstances. Bloom wherever God plants you. God is bigger than your circumstances. Christ is present in your circumstances. The power of the Holy Spirit is available in your circumstances. So bloom where you're planted. You may be single or married. You may be happily married or struggling in your marriage. You may be 16 or 80, but the message from God's word is the same: bloom wherever God plants you.

Now if that sounds easy or trite, remember that Paul is not writing these words from a safe, ivory tower, dispensing religious formulas to stress-free, smiley-faced Christians. These people are his friends. More than that, they are his "dear children" (see 4:14-15). But Corinth wasn't a Christian theme park – actually, the entire New Testament was written to followers of Jesus who were a minority who faced hostility and persecution. Corinth was a brutal place to live out your faith in Christ. It was a major port city with two large temples that employed prostitutes to help you get in touch with your spiritual side. So throughout this letter Paul is addressing friends who are living in a pressure-cooker of temptation and distorted spirituality.

So Paul begins to address some of the concerns that his friends raised to him in a letter: "Now for the matters you wrote about" (see 7:1). What did they write? Well, to begin with apparently some of the believers in Corinth were saying, "It is good for a man not to marry." Or more accurately translated, "It's good to never to engage in sexual relations with your spouse." Apparently, some of them started saying, "Hey, if we want to be serious about following Jesus, we need to change the outward circumstances of our lives." So married people started acting like celibates. Some married people started leaving their spouses thinking that they could follow Christ better as single people. And some people who had come to know Christ but their spouses had not, decided to leave

their non-Christian spouses. It was getting very messy in Corinth. (By the way, you'll never be in a Christian community that isn't messy. We're all godly messes and sometimes our messiness is more on display than our godliness).

So Paul addresses this distorted spirituality in verse 17. The key word is retain, remain, stay put, don't split or don't run away. He thinks it's so important that he repeats it three times (see verse 17, 20 and 24). Or we could put it this way: bloom wherever God plants you. And Paul tells us in verse 17 that "this is the rule I lay down in all the churches." In other words, this applies to every Christian. Bloom where God plants you. Don't bail on your situation and what God wants to teach you and how God wants to use your gifts to help others. As we work our way through this passage, we'll hear a theological rationale and concrete applications for this principle.

We could state the theological rationale like this: God is bigger than your circumstances. Christ is present in your circumstances. The power of the Holy Spirit is available in your circumstances. Notice the word "called" in verse 17 – a word which appears nine times in this short portion of the Bible. What does it mean to be called by God? We usually think of our job as our calling, but in 8 out of the 9 times the word call is used to refer to God's call into a relationship with Him through Christ. Look at the very beginning of this letter in chapter 1:9 – "God is faithful by whom you were called ..." Into what? "...into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." Look at verse 23 of chapter 7 – "You were bought at a price." That's referring to the price that Jesus paid when he died on the cross so we could be released from our bondage to sin. In other words, God wants you. God pursues you. You were so valuable to God the Father that he paid an incredible price to set you free and to buy you back. So before God calls us to do anything or be anybody or get a degree or find a marriage partner or choose a career, God calls us to know Him through faith in Christ. And then God calls you to know Him better. The greatest passion and the greatest treasure and the greatest satisfaction of your life will not come from your job or your hobbies or from your marriage or from your singleness – it comes from knowing Christ and making Him known. That is your first and primary calling.

Let me give you a personal illustration of this: as many of you know, our daughter was married last weekend. It was a weekend filled with highlights – friends, family, good food, parties, pictures, flowers, beautiful weather, great music – but the ultimate highlight for me occurred at about 10:00 pm on Friday night. I got to dance alone with my daughter. And not only that, but we danced to a song we used to sing together every year since she was seven years old. Afterwards I told my wife, "That was one of the best moments of my whole life. It was truly priceless. I would not trade that one moment for millions of dollars and all the worldly success I could achieve in my lifetime." But according to this passage there's something even better than that – and it's available to every follower of Jesus, young and old, single and married, parents and non-parents, men and women: it's the joy of being called into fellowship with the Living God, the One who is the greatest Source of love and power and strength and forgiveness on this planet. That relationship is available anywhere and anytime and in any circumstances of your life.

That's the point Paul is trying to make in this passage. You see, the new followers of Jesus in the city of Corinth were saying, "If only I could change my circumstances, if only I could get married, or if only I could stay married and we could live like single people, or if only I could ditch my spouse and get a new and improved Christian-model of a spouse, or if only ...". And as their spiritual father and as one inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit to write these words, Paul says, "No, *generally speaking*, remain where you are. Stay put. Don't rush to ditch your circumstances." The call to know God through Christ is so great, so awesome, such a wonderful reality that it overshadows and supersedes any other circumstance in your life. That does not mean that you are forever locked into every situation of your life and that you can never change jobs or try to improve your life – not at all! It means that things like jobs and marital status are secondary issues. And it also means that God can work through those circumstances to help you grow and to use you to serve other people. Where you are is not an accident. God has put you there for a reason. So ask yourself: How can God change me in these circumstances? What is God trying to teach me? How can I touch others through my circumstances?

That's the theological rationale. Then Paul goes on to apply this to a number of concrete situations. First of all, consider the issue of religion and ethnicity and culture, Paul says. See verse 18 – "Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised." Obviously, this may seem strange to us. But remember that for a Jewish person of Paul's day circumcision was everything. Religiously, culturally, socially – if you were circumcised, you were in. If you were uncircumcised, you were out. If that sounds remote, think of it this way: what are the marks that you belong in your social group? Is it money? Is it a certain background or ethnic group? Is it a certain view of culture or the arts? Is it a certain level of intellect? Is it expertise in sports or music? For Paul and his social group circumcision was the social boundary marker. But notice how Paul stuns his fellow Jewish people by saying, "Circumcision isn't a big deal. What does God want? He wants you; God wants your heart. And God already paid for your heart when Jesus died on the cross. So for goodness sakes, don't fret about circumcision." What really matters is not religious rituals or belonging to the right social group. "Keeping God's commands is what counts." Notice Paul did not say, "The only thing that matters is praying a prayer and inviting Jesus into your heart." No, what matters is trusting Christ for your salvation and thus entering into fellowship with God and that means doing what God tells you to do.

Then Paul gives another illustration in verses 21-23. Now when you read about slavery in the New Testament don't think about slavery in our country or slavery as it's practiced in some parts of the world today. In Paul's day slaves had considerable freedom. It certainly wasn't a perfectly just system, but slaves received steady employment, food and housing. Keep in mind that God's word is not saying, "Never better your life." Notice in verse 21 it says "if you can gain your freedom, do so." If you can go to school and get a better job, do it. You don't have to stay stuck in the same place forever. But notice verse 21 – "Don't let it trouble you." Ultimately, your job or your social status or your marital status or your age or your "usefulness" do not define you as a person. So don't let these

things take control of your life and your attitude or your ultimate happiness and contentment in Christ. See verse 23 – “You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.” That’s exactly what happens when you give someone or some thing the power to make you happy or unhappy. If your joy and contentment are tied to what your boss thinks of you or to how many degrees you have or to your marriage partner or to lack of a marriage partner, then you have become a slave to that person or that state.

That’s the point this whole passage is driving home to our hearts: Bloom where God plants you. God can meet you there.¹ Next week we’ll explore only one example of this principle: how to bloom as a single person. But for now notice how this whole passage begins with a concrete example in verse 5 - “Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time so that you may devote yourself to prayer. Then come together again...” (Now please: if you use this as a weapon against your spouse, you’ve missed the point). What’s he talking about? He’s talking about married couples who thought it might be more “spiritual” to live like single people, specifically by not having sexual relations. Paul says, “Give yourself to one another in every way, including sexually. Don’t use sex as a weapon. Don’t punish your spouse by withholding sex. Maybe, you can abstain from sex for a short time, but then ‘come together again.’” It even says in verse 3 that we have an obligation to meet each other’s sexual needs. I love the Bible! It’s so earthy and blunt and real and nitty-gritty and non-Gnostic.

Or as another concrete application of “bloom where God plants you” look at verses 12-16. Apparently, some of these new believers wanted out of their marriages because their spouses weren’t excited about Jesus like they were. So they wrote Paul and asked, “What should we do? Don’t you think God would want us to leave our marriage and find a Christian partner?” And Paul says, “No, stay put. Remain where God has planted you.” He gives an exception in verse 15: If the unbelieving spouse wants to leave you, don’t manipulate the situation. Let him or her go. But on your end, do everything you can to stay.

Why? Because God has a mission, a ministry and a calling on your life right in that marriage (see verse 14). That is an astounding verse. Let’s say we have George who has become a new follower of Jesus and Kathy who is still an agnostic and perhaps even hostile towards George’s newfound enthusiasm for what she calls “all this Jesus junk.” This verse does not say that Kathy will automatically believe in Jesus merely because she’s married to George. It does mean that God’s grace and blessing are being made available to Kathy just because she’s married to George. Kathy belongs to a family upon which God has his claim and upon which God is now blessing. Even the children get in

¹ For instance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was living comfortable as a Professor of theology at the University of Berlin in Germany in 1930’s. But when Hitler came to power, Bonhoeffer’s life dramatically changed. After establishing an underground church to resist Hitler’s vision of Germany, Bonhoeffer fled to London. But against the advice of some of his colleagues, he returned to Nazi Germany. He was arrested by Gestapo, thrown into prison and was scheduled for execution on April 9th, 1945. While he awaited his death, Bonhoeffer led worship services for fellow prisoners. In the final days of his life, languishing in a Nazi concentration camp waiting for execution, he wrote the following lines in his last letter: “*What is happiness and unhappiness? It depends so little on circumstances; it really depends on what happens inside a person.*”

on the blessing that comes from living with George. So what should George do? Leave his family? Find a Christian woman? No, God has him planted there for a reason. See verse 16. They all may come to know Jesus just because he blooms where he's there.

Did you notice that God also wants us to reach others in our circumstances. Did you ever think that maybe God has placed in your circumstances – your family, your marriage or singleness, your neighborhood, your workplace, your school and this church - so you can serve him and reach out to others? Bloom where God plants you or you'll miss the joy of serving him and impacting others for God's glory.

In my files I have a story that I clipped and saved nearly 25 years ago. It's a true story about a pastor in the Soviet Union who was arrested and thrown into jail because he was telling other people about Jesus. It's called "Cell 44."

When I was arrested, I immediately lost heart. I was put in a cell with approximately one hundred other people after my first interrogation. Suddenly I understood why I was in prison. Before going to bed I prayed, "Lord, it used to be so difficult for me to gather people together in order to share the Gospel. But now I have no need to gather them. They are already here. Make me a blessing to them..."

The Lord heard my prayer. In a short time forty people believed in Christ. We sang so loud that the guards often banged on the door and ordered us to be silent. The authorities finally found out what was happening and transferred me to the cell for hardened criminals. Precisely at that time, I received from my family a parcel containing bread, sugar, and clothing. When I entered the new cell, the criminals' eyes searched me. I took a few steps, set my bag on the floor, and looked around at them. "Men, today I received a parcel. Maybe there are some needy among you. Divide it..."

A tall, sullen fellow, probably their leader, approached me, silently took my parcel, and divided it equally among all of us. "Here, this is your part," he said giving me a portion and returning my empty bag. As a newcomer, I had to take the worst place in the cell, but the leader said, "For good people we have a good place. Now tell us why they transferred you to this cell."

"Well, in cell 44 I taught people how to pray to God. The authorities did not like it, so they threw me in here."

The leader smiled for the first time. "Very good! Now you will teach us."

Blooming where you're planted begins with God's call. God chooses us; we don't choose God. God calls us to fellowship with Him through faith in Jesus. A new door gets opened and we – those who stand under God's just judgment – we the condemned and the accused can come into God's presence and know that he is a loving Father who is 100% for us. But blooming where you're planted continues with knowing that God is bigger than our circumstances. God can reach us and teach us and fill us with contentment where we are – right now, no matter what your circumstances.

Now notice this isn't just good advice. This isn't just a matter of trying harder to have a good attitude and put on a happy face. This is Gospel, this is Good News. You don't have to turn your life towards Jesus to get more advice about trying harder. What Jesus

offers is power. He offers His Spirit. He offers a new connection with God the Father. He offers redemption. He says, “You don’t have to live like spiritual orphans anymore, men and women who are just thrown back on their own resources again. When you trust in me you can know that you’ve been bought with a price. You are the beloved of God the Father. You don’t have to live as an enemy of God, a stranger to God. When I died on the cross and rose again the debt of your sin and rebellion against a holy God was removed. So come home to God.” Now if you’ve never done that before, if you’ve never opened your heart to Christ, if you’ve never reached out in faith to Him, let me lead you in a simple prayer that you can pray right now so you can begin a journey with Christ.

And then Jesus says, “Not only are you the beloved of God, I will fill you with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the presence and power of God for us to live for Christ. The Spirit is available. So the Bible tells us “Do not be drunk with wine but be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). In other words, if anything has been filling your life – it could be alcohol or another addiction, or anger, or resentment, or worry, or fear, or bitterness, or obsessive thoughts about food or sex – if anything has been filling your life, it’s time to empty it out. Let the presence of Jesus turn you upside down, empty you out and cleanse you. And then call on His presence – His refreshing, cleansing, renewing presence – to fill you afresh.

Is that the desire of your heart this morning? Then come. Come to the Lord’s Table. Come to the back of the sanctuary to receive prayer. Come with your heart wide open.