

NOTE FROM PASTOR JONATHAN

The **last set of questions** will be for June 29 and resume in September. **Bridge Group** starts back up in October. I will be sending out video or email updates throughout the summer, with thought-provoking questions or my reflections on the sermons! Leaders, I would also love to connect with you!

UNITE College & Career Ministry will host a **Summer BBQ Grill & Chill** for our young adults, **aged 18-30+** on Saturday, July 5th @ 10:30 AM at Confederation Park! There will be great food, fun games, and lots of great people! Come hang out, meet new friends, and connect (or reconnect) with the UNITE community! **Event details and registration here:** <https://willingdon.org/events/unite-grill-chill>.

Also, are you or anyone from your Life Group looking for work? Come to the **Career Care Workshop** on Sunday, June 29th from 1:30 – 3:00 pm and find help to improve your resume and get an interview. This is for recent graduates or people wanting to find a new job. It'll be an interactive session to learn about God's design for work and help you with your job search. **Details and registration:** <https://willingdon.churchcenter.com/registrations/events/2988434>.

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

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.

¹⁸ Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. 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. 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.

Let's Warm Up: Questions to break the ice.

1. What status did you chase when you were a kid? Is it something you're still proud of?

Did you want to be the prettiest girl in your grade or the valedictorian? Was your mood based on how you played on the varsity basketball team or your chess ranking? What did you want your senior quote to tell the world?

When I was a teen, I wanted to be the funny guy in my friend group. I pumped out joke after joke. I've shared before that some of the easiest jokes were dirty/vulgar, often making fun of gay people. And it was the 90s, when gay jokes were everywhere. I got a lot of laughs from my friends, and it felt good.

I remember once a kid in class turned to me and asked, "Why do you make so many gay jokes? Are you gay or something?" No, I wasn't. I was just incredibly insecure and desperate for attention while lacking any understanding

or compassion for people struggling with sexual sin. Every few years, I'll message back and forth with a high school friend who later came out of the closet. Amazingly, we sometimes keep in touch after all my offensive jokes.

Later on in college, those jokes shifted to being more racist.

I think it should be pretty obvious I am *not* proud of trying to be the funny guy at all costs.

In this week's passage, Paul tells the church that their status in Jesus is the most important one.

2. What are some ways people try to express their social status in Canadian society or elsewhere?

People often try to express their social status through how they spend their money. If they want others to think they're in a wealthier caste, they'll buy luxury cars, designer clothing, and premium haircuts

(<https://youtube.com/shorts/TLUsiScwLKM>).

Maybe people want to be seen as belonging to a certain fandom or subculture. They'll take on a specific aesthetic. K-pop fans will wear accessories recognized by their fellow fans or dress like their favorite star. Sports fans wear clothing with their team's logos or players' names. People who hit the gym want to show off their gains and tell others, "Yes. I lift, bro."

Some immigrants want to share pride in their cultural backgrounds. They may wear traditional clothing in their day-to-day, or at least blend it into their wardrobe.

In this week's passage, Paul tells the church that social status doesn't offer any advantages to following God.

3. What do you think is the most important type of status for the people around you? (E.g., career, wealth, educational attainment, relationship, physical appearance, etc.)

Why do people value it so much?

If you're a young adult, perhaps it's about being in a relationship. That defines who you spend time with. Or it's the biggest thing people are trying to pursue.

For people working in a big company, it may be their pay grade or place on the org chart. If you're a bigwig, you get lots of respect, admiration, and money. If you're more junior or "lesser" at the company, people don't give you any attention, and you don't make much.

In this week's passage, Paul is teaching the church that their status in Christ is the most important.

Let's Get Started: Questions to start thinking about the main themes.

4. Does someone's earthly status or condition reflect their relationship with God?

I think this is an important question to consider, because it leads to a lot of faulty theology and action. Instead of looking at the person, their heart, and actions, we sometimes judge them on their external circumstances.

Circumcision and slavery aren't big concerns in the modern Canadian church, so I'll give some examples.

Wealth and Success. The Prosperity Gospel is huge, both in Canada and abroad. Although most of us wouldn't outright say that God blesses righteous people with more money, it's in the back of our minds. When we see someone who is materially more successful at church, we may assume that God loves them more than someone who's broke. Or that the wealthier person has more to offer the church than someone struggling to make ends meet. But Jesus doesn't see it that way (Mark 12:41-44).

I used to think that the size of one's ministry was a reflection of a pastor's godliness. The pastors of small churches aren't so godly, so their churches aren't so successful. On the other hand, God blesses the wiser, better, godlier pastors with bigger churches. But if you look at Jesus' earthly ministry, He must have been a terrible pastor! Only a handful of people stuck around. There are tons of false teachers with gigantic congregations that make Willingdon look tiny. And there are amazing, godly pastors who God uses to shepherd a handful of people.

Health and Safety. I've heard too many times people attributing natural disasters or health problems to a judgment from God. This earthquake/flood/tsunami is because they offended God. I was living in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005 to attend seminary. After the city was flooded, there were so many Christian leaders saying that it was God's judgment on the city. But the irony is that the French Quarter, the supposed naughtiest place in New Orleans, got through OK.

Sure, sometimes there are clear actions that negatively impact our health (e.g., drug use, excessive drinking, living recklessly), but God gives rain and sunshine to the good and bad (Matthew 5:43-47).

Identity in Christ. One commentator wrote:

What do uncircumcision and circumcision, slavery and freedom, have to do with marriage, divorce, and celibacy? They illustrate the divine principle that no earthly status, such as one's racial heritage or social standing, is incompatible with the Christian's calling by God. Those who were circumcised when God called them do not advance their spiritual condition by undergoing an operation to restore their foreskin, nor do those who were uncircumcised when God called them enhance their standing with God by undergoing circumcision. Slaves are no less accepted by God than are free persons. Both belong to Christ, and their social status has no spiritual significance. Whether a Christian is circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, married or single, is inconsequential to God. One condition is not bad and the other good, nor is one condition less good and the other better. No condition presents an obstacle to living the Christian life, since a Christian is now defined by God's call (1:9) and nothing else. (Garland, *1 Corinthians*)

5. How does knowing our circumstances are appointed by God affect how we see them?

Each person is living the life that "the Lord has assigned to Him". God also called them while they were in that condition.

Does this help you to find peace, knowing that God knows where you're at? Sometimes we're worried because we don't know why we are where we are, but God knows.

Does this help you to seek God's direction? If God has brought us to this place in our lives, He knows where to take us next.

Does this help you to be content? If God is calling you to be where you're at, you can trust Him to provide for you.

Let's Dig In: Questions to discuss the passage and how we can respond.

6. Why was circumcision or uncircumcision such a big deal?

Although ancient Roman slavery was different from North American slavery in the past few hundred years, I think we can get an overall idea of why slaves wanted to be free. (Check out this article from the British Museum for more info: www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/nero-man-behind-myth/slavery-ancient-rome).

Circumcision may be a bit more confusing. As of 2015 (the latest stats I could find), around a third of male babies are circumcised in Canada (<https://cps.ca/en/documents/position/circumcision>), and the Canadian Paediatric Society doesn't generally recommend it. But it was a big deal in Paul's day.

Background. Around 2,000 years before Paul wrote this letter, God chooses a guy named Abram (whose name was changed to Abraham) to be the father of God's people. God tells him that Abram and his male descendants must be circumcised, while any male who isn't will be cut off (Genesis 17:9-14).

To the Jewish people, this was a top-tier command. Normally, you were forbidden from doing work on the Sabbath, but circumcision was an exception (John 7:23). Ancient Jewish teachers taught that Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) couldn't forgive disobedience to circumcision. "Yom Kippur atones, with the exception of rejecting the yoke of Torah and mitzvot; and denying the Holy One, Blessed be He; and interpreting the Torah falsely; and violating the covenant of the flesh, i.e., circumcision." (Yoma, 85b).

Being a Jewish male meant being circumcised. Perhaps the modern Canadian equivalent is eating poutine during a hockey game while wearing a Canadian tuxedo and saying sorry.

Early Christians. Jesus didn't start a new religion apart from Judaism. Rather, Jesus was the fulfillment of it (Matthew 5:17-18). The earliest Christians were Jews who had already undergone circumcision. When Gentiles started becoming Christians, there was a debate. Do Gentiles have to become Jews first to be Christian (Acts 15)? They settled on circumcision not being a requirement to follow Jesus.

Unpopularity. Being circumcised isn't an issue when everyone around you is also circumcised. But when Jewish people began living within a dominant culture that didn't practice circumcision, they stood out. Not only that, the Greco-Roman world looked down on short or missing foreskins.

You're probably wondering how anyone would know whether you're circumcised. In ancient Greek and Roman culture, public baths were a big deal. It wasn't just a place to get clean. It was also a social hub where you rubbed shoulders with your neighbors, made business deals, and more. Hanging out with a bunch of naked guys makes it pretty obvious who's circumcised. Check out this video explaining Roman bathhouses (<https://youtu.be/iBoQL72dfpc&t=168>). Athletic competitions, performed naked, were a means of social advancement.

Around 30-40 years after Paul wrote his letter, Emperor Domitian put a heavy tax on Jews. Seutonius, a Roman historian, remembers a vivid scene of publicly examining a 90-year-old man to see if he was circumcised.

Besides other taxes, that on the Jews was levied with the utmost rigour, and those were prosecuted who without publicly acknowledging that faith yet lived as Jews, as well as those who concealed their origin and did not pay the tribute levied upon their people. I recall being present in my youth when the person of a man ninety years old was examined before the procurator and a very crowded court, to see whether he was circumcised.

Many Jewish people felt pressured to fit into Greco-Roman society. The book of 1 Maccabees records some “renegades” who “misled many”. They “made foreskins for themselves, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the nations and sold themselves to do evil.” (1 Maccabees 1:11-15). A 2nd-century Greek philosopher explains a type of surgery to restore the foreskin

(<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0142%3Abook%3D7%3Achapter%3D25>).

7. **Pastor Ray said, “From our earliest years, he is forming and preparing us for his purposes: the family we were born into, our ethnic background and its history, our life experiences, education, professional training. God redeems all of this for his purposes.” How has God used your past to shape you to be who you are today?**

I’m sure all of us will have very different answers.

Perhaps your religious upbringing has been leading you on a straight trajectory to where you’re at now. Or maybe it always made you feel off, so when you heard the Gospel, everything clicked.

Have past sins made you compassionate to others struggling with the same sin? Or maybe you’ve experienced trauma, so you can help those going through the same thing.

Have you learned various skills and talents that you can use to minister to others, from musical ability to cooking to hospitality? Have you learned things in your workplace that have helped you to serve the church, like how to manage a group, understand people’s struggles, or practice healthy leadership?

8. **How can obedience to God in any circumstance bring glory to God and be a witness to non-believers?**

I’ll share two potential answers.

Bigger and Better. A big testimony is showing God’s love transcends our earthly situation. Just as a marriage’s strength is displayed when a couple stays together “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish” (or some variation of that).

For example, Paul writes in Philippians that he’s able to find contentment in Jesus, no matter his situation (Philippians 4:11-13). The author of Hebrews tells us to be content with what we have, because Jesus will never abandon us (Hebrews 13:5-6).

When we’re able to joyfully obey and love God, no matter the circumstance, we tell the world that God is so much bigger and better than anything else.

Love for All Types. In Paul’s day, by obeying God as a circumcised Jew or an uncircumcised Gentile, a slave or a freedman, the message was clear: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Galatians 3:28-29).

In our modern day, God loves people with PhDs just as much as He loves people who never completed high school. He loves the executives in the C-suite as well as the unemployed. He loves Canadian citizens and immigrants, those with clean criminal records and those in prison. All of these people can be loved by God and, in turn, follow Him.

9. **Pastor Ray said, “When we give more importance to status in life, based on worldly criteria, we effectively deny the worth of God’s calling to salvation based on grace alone!”**
How does focusing on status deny God’s grace?

Placing too much importance on status isn’t a small error. It’s not like singing a worship song out of tune, or getting tongue-twisted while praying, or fist-bumping someone who’s trying to shake your hand. It’s a big deal.

Here are some sub-questions to help you process:

What does it say about grace if we ...

- ... treat people based on their worldly status (e.g., success in career, physical beauty, title)?
- ... wait until we achieve a certain status (e.g., get in a relationship, finish a degree, find a job) to serve God?
- ... only welcome people who are similar to us into our church, friend circle, etc.?

10. **What is our status in Christ? How does remembering it help us prioritize it over worldly status?**

Pastor Ray listed out a few important truths about who we are in Jesus. Does any stick out?

We are ...

... **owned by God (1 Corinthians 7:23)**. We used to belong to sin and death. We used to give ourselves over to wealth, popularity, or something else that’s shallow. But now we are God’s, so He decides what our lives are for.

We’re also (usually) careful with things that cost a lot, like our cars, TVs, and Faberge eggs (https://www.westlandlondon.com/articles/view,what-is-the-worlds-most-expensive-faberg-egg_118.asp). We’re also God’s most expensive purchase, because Jesus paid for us with His life.

... **sons and daughters of God (John 1:12-13)**. We are God’s children, and He is our Father. Just as human parents love and take care of their kids, God takes care of us. We also get to enjoy our Father’s abundance. If earthly dads know how to take care of their kids, how much more will the heavenly Father (Matthew 7:7-11)?

... **one with Jesus (John 17:11)**. We are united with Jesus. We share the same purpose in life. We share in His death and resurrection (Romans 6:5). Nothing can separate us from Him (Romans 8:38-39).

... **filled with the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 6:19)**. God’s Spirit convicts us of our sin and points to Jesus (John 16:8-11). He enables us to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25) and prays when we don’t know how to pray (Romans 8:26). He reminds us that we are God’s children (Romans 8:16). He empowers us with gifts to serve the church (1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

... **given full access to God (Hebrews 4:14-16)**. Most of us don’t have access to the Prime Minister in the House of Commons or King Charles’ throne. But we can approach God on His throne whenever we need mercy, grace, and help. As Paul elegantly puts it, “If God is for us, who can be against us? Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:31-32). God didn’t sacrifice His Son so we could sit outside His castle walls. He saved us so He could pour out His love on us.

11. Pastor Ray said, "Whatever your condition in life, remain grounded in your core identity as His disciple. Make that your primary passion in life, not changing your life circumstances. Rather than being driven by human aspirations, direct your ambitions and passions toward Jesus and his purposes."

What is your life situation (e.g., relationship status, career, immigration status)?

How can your condition in life be used to pursue Jesus' purposes?

So, where are you at in life? It can help when people share commonalities because they can brainstorm together. And people who have been there in the past can also give suggestions.

Does your life situation give opportunities for evangelism or connection? Are difficulties a reminder to rely on God or to enjoy Him above all else?