

Counsel on Marriage, part 3: Live godly in whatever your circumstance!

(1 Corinthians 7:17-24)

This passage is a continuation of Paul's argument in vv 10-16, commanding by way of general principle with illustrations to support his instructions to those believers with unbelieving spouses. The situations of circumcision vs uncircumcision and slavery vs freedom did not affect one's spiritual condition. The believer was called to live godly in both these and every other life situation.

I. Statement of the general command (7:17; cf. vv 20, 24)

1. *Life with Jesus is the primary focus.*

The literal translation, "walk", ties this command with other NT references concerning our manner of life and specifically our life in Christ (e.g., Rom 8:5; 2 Cor 5:7; Eph 4:1).

2. *Outward social status is sovereignly given to us.*

Our social status when we got saved was divinely arranged. Be content with God's plan even if we can take advantage of opportunities to better ourselves.

3. *Outward status is inconsequential to salvation.*

Paul uses the term "call" frequently if not primarily in reference to our salvation. "Each, as God called" means that each, in the social standing which they had when God saved them, should follow Christ. The social standing did not affect one's relation to Christ.

4. *Conformity to this command is universally expected.*

II. Applied and illustrated in the question of circumcision (7:18-20)

Circumcision divided Jews and Gentiles, the former seeing the uncircumcised as outcasts from the community of God and the latter scorned circumcision as a mark of not being enlightened.

1. *Circumcision was an important issue in the early church.*

Historically it was a sign to Jews of God's covenant with them, religiously a mark of being right with God, socially a stress point between Gentiles and Jews. The NT reports the continuing conflict in Acts 15 and the letters to the Galatians, Philippians, Colossians as well as elsewhere.

2. *Circumcision was in reality a non-issue.*

There was no need to change because both accounted for nothing.

3. *Circumcision of the heart was the significant issue.*

Outward ritual is insignificant compared to the heart. Cf. Rom. 2:25-29. What counts is obedience to God's moral law, not rituals.

Paul's conclusion for the Corinthians was to remain in the situation in which God had saved them. Circumcised or uncircumcised made no difference, just follow Christ whole-heartedly.

III. Applied and illustrated in the question of slavery (7:21-24)

Slavery was widespread and slaves may have been a significant number in the churches. Some may have felt that being a slave was incompatible with being a follower of Jesus Christ.

1. *Being a slave was not a reason to question one's spiritual well-being.*

Slavery did not affect one's relation to Christ. God's grace was sufficient to save and would continue to be sufficient to live godly as a slave.

2. *Being a slave when saved was not a reason to remain a slave.*

Unlike circumcision, Paul did not command that a slave remain a slave: "if you can get free, use it (the opportunity to get free)" Though debated among interpreters of Scripture this is the most probable understanding of verse 21 because of the tense used and Paul's subsequent statement about not being in bondage to men.

3. *The physical realities of slavery and freedom are balanced by opposing spiritual realities.*

The slave – and the free man – became spiritually free when saved and the recipient of all spiritual blessings in Christ. The free man – and the slave – became a slave of Christ when they were called. The paradoxical language plays back and forth between the physical and spiritual worlds. Freedom and slavery in this world do not accurately mirror the spiritual world. The servant of Christ is freed from sin.

4. *Our full allegiance belongs to Christ who bought us.*

The death of Christ bought us free from slavery to sin and death. It freed us to serve Christ. Such a price makes it unthinkable that we should willingly enter bondage again. It is improbable that Paul is thinking merely of physical slavery but spiritual slavery through sinful patterns of living.

The NIV interprets well the phrase "with God" or "before God" as "responsible to God." Staying in one's situation had moral obligations and slaves particularly were to remember that they served Christ.

John the Baptist preached a similar message, not calling people to leave their professions but for soldiers to be content and tax collectors to be honest (Luke 3:13-14). No matter what situation we are in when we get saved, unless it is in itself immoral, we can live a godly life, worthy of the calling with which we were called.

Social justice often gets wrongly emphasized because God's priority of His glory and our relationship to Him becomes lost. Salvation is necessary, first and foremost, because we are sinners, separated from God and under His wrath. Salvation has as its ultimate purpose the glory of God and not the betterment of our current physical circumstances.

Even in situations of marriage and divorce, the correct response is to confess any sin and then to carry on with living a godly life.