



## Live as a Christian Whatever Your Circumstances (1 Cor. 7:17-24; 29-31)

At first reading, it appears that verses 17-24 have been placed right in the middle of a discussion about marriage and divorce and that these verses are totally unrelated. The truth is that these verses are here as further confirmation that Christians can live for Christ whatever their circumstances. If you are single, don't marry unless necessary. If you are married, don't divorce. If you are circumcised, don't try to remove the marks of circumcision. If you are a slave, don't let it bother you, but take the opportunity for freedom if available.

The key word in these verses is “*called*.” God has called Christians from the world to him. When people come to Christ, they have all sorts of entanglements in this world. Though Christians are forgiven of their sins, many of the old entanglements remain and in the first century these included marital status, whether a man was circumcised or not, and whether one was a slave or free.

1. How many times is the word “call” or the word “called” used in 1 Cor. 7:17-24?
2. Who are the called? (See also 1:2, 9, 24)
3. Why wouldn't God want Christians to remove themselves from all their entanglements when they came to Christ?

### I. Lead the Life the Lord Has Assigned

The word “*assigned*” in verse 17 indicates that God is involved in daily life. The Greek word translated as “*assigned*” means “given, imparted, apportioned” and “speaks of assignment of circumstances and talents by Christ.”<sup>1</sup> This does not remove freewill from man, but says each person is gifted with certain talents and abilities by God and each person is born in a specific place, in a specific family, at a specific time. We do not choose where and when we will be born and what talents we possess. We do not choose some of our circumstances, but we do choose how to live within our circumstances. In **Acts 17:26** we read, “*And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.*”



4. Is the Scripture teaching that we should never try to improve our lives or change any circumstances? What does it mean to “lead the life the Lord has assigned to him?”

<sup>1</sup>Reese, Gareth L. *New Testament Epistles: 1 Corinthians*. Moberly, Missouri: Scripture Exposition Books, 2004. p. 246.

Paul's teaching was universally true. He didn't teach one rule in one church and another rule in another church (vs. 17).

Now Paul moves to an example to show that one should remain in the circumstances he is in when he becomes a Christian. In verse 18 if one is already circumcised when he is called (becomes a Christian), then he should not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. On the other hand if he is not circumcised then he should remain uncircumcised.

There are two possible ways to understand this teaching on circumcision. It is possible that Paul is saying not to leave your community; if you are Jewish Christian don't relocate away from your family and friends or if you are Gentile do not move into a Jewish community. More likely Paul is teaching not to be ashamed of whether or not you were circumcised because it had no bearing on matters of faith.

There was a surgical procedure that restored the looks of of uncircumcision. The Apocrypha mentions this in 1 Maccabees 1:14-15, *"So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil."* (RSV)

A Jewish Christian in a gymnasium might wish to hide his heritage or some Gentiles might desire to look Jewish. Paul teaches the Corinthian Christians to live the life they have been assigned. He goes on to teach in verse 19 that it is unimportant whether or not a man is circumcised, but whether or not a man keeps the commandments of God.

#### 5. Why does Paul keep stressing what he does in verse 20: *"Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called?"*

Next Paul moves to slaves. If one was a *"bondservant"* when called, he should not be concerned. The high number of slaves in the Roman world of the first century means that many who came to Christ would have come as slaves. In fact there were far more slaves in the first century Roman Empire than free men. Some slaves did menial labour but others had good educations and responsible jobs such as doctors, writers, government officials, midwives, teachers, artists, and other skilled occupations.<sup>2</sup>



Most slaves were not walking around in chains, but were legally bound to serve another. Some people who could not pay debts were sold into slavery while others were captured during a Roman conquest. It was often possible to legally gain freedom after set periods of service or by purchasing freedom. The act of gaining freedom as a slave is known as *manumission*.



#### 6. Why does Paul tell slaves not to be concerned if they remained in slavery? (vss. 21-22)

#### 7. If one should remain in the condition he was in when called, why does Paul say in verse 21 to gain your freedom if the opportunity arises?

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 250.

**8. What circumstances or entanglements do people today face that causes them to believe it will be difficult for them to live as a Christian?**

## **II. The Lord's Bondservant**

If one was a slave when they came to Christ, they gain true freedom. Conversely if one was a free man, when he comes to Christ he becomes the Lord's bondservant. All people find freedom from sin, Satan, fear, and eternal punishment in Christ and all Christians belong to the Lord. This demonstrates the equality of all men in Christ, for all belong to him and are his servant no matter what their other circumstances in life.



**9. What does it mean to be the Lord's bondservant?**

In verse 23, Paul writes that Christians have been bought with a price. For this reason they should not *"become bondservants of men."* There are two possible ways of interpreting what Paul is saying. It was possible in first century Corinth to sell oneself into slavery. Perhaps Paul is teaching not to engage in this practice, but to stay in the condition you are now in. The second possibility is that Paul is talking of spiritual slavery. The one who belongs to Christ will live for him and not engage in the lifestyle of those around him.

**10. Why was it necessary for Paul to repeat the same teaching in 6:20 and 7:23 (*you were bought with a price*)?**

Verse 24 again teaches the idea of a man remaining in the condition he is in when called to the Lord. This is the same instruction given in verses 17 and 20 and clearly encourages each Christian to realise that what is important is that he or she remains faithful to the Lord and that the problems and entanglements of this life do not have to separate a person from the Lord.

In verse 29-31 Paul stresses the shortness of time remaining, meaning that life is short and the Christian's primary view is on how to serve the Lord in this life. The present world is passing away and the Christian lives with eternity in view.

Living as if one had no wife is not meant to contradict what Paul has written earlier in the chapter. He simply is stressing that the life of the Christian must to be totally consumed with thoughts of marriage, or mourning or rejoicing, or enterprise.

These verses stand in the middle of a section on marriage. God can use man in whatever condition he is in when he comes to Christ whether he be single, married, or divorced. While there may be some circumstances that prevent us from filling certain roles in the church, every person can serve the Lord.