

1Corinthians 7:17-24 "Be A Christian Where You Are"

When Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers one of his concerns was that these people be able to represent Christ in the real world. It's not enough to say we believe in Christ and then act as though we don't.

If we are new creatures in Christ then the world ought to be able to see that. They should be able to see it in our job performance, they should be able to see it in the way we treat our wives, in the way we treat our children, in the way we treat each other.

And yet, there are times in our lives where the circumstances we are going through make it difficult to make the godly choices to represent the Lord. Not impossible, but difficult.

And one of the things Paul has been conveying here in this chapter is that the circumstances some of these Corinthian believers were in, which included marriage and divorce, were real life situations where they could still glorify Christ if they were willing.

And so, as we continue in our text we're going to see Paul encouraging these people to consider where they are right now, and understand that God has them where they are for a reason, and in that situation they must reserve themselves to the fact that they can still be used by God.

1CO 7:17 "Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches."

The NASB puts it this way.

"Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches."

This is a very interesting portion in that it shows us the sovereignty of our God even in the everyday affairs of our lives.

In the context, Paul is saying that wherever we are in life, God is there and has actually allowed us to experience that aspect of life in a way others would not. As we get further in the context Paul distinguishes between those who are Jews, those who are Gentiles, those who are slaves and those who are free.

In other words, every person has been called by God to serve Him where they are. William Barclay puts it very succinctly with six words. "Be a Christian where you are."

That's Paul's message. In fact, we could take the rest of this letter and sum it up in these six words, "Be a Christian where you are." But then I would be twiddling my thumbs for the next half hour or so.

And besides, we'd miss out on some of the particulars of how that works itself out in the lives of these Corinthians as well as what it means for us today.

And so, we'll dig in to some of the meat here and see what we can find. Paul speaks of God assigning to us an aspect of life that He may not have assigned to some other Christian.

1CO 7:17 "Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches."

The word assigned in the Greek is *merizo* and it means to divide or to separate into parts, cut into pieces. And the idea here is that each person in the body of Christ is an important part of the whole when it comes to the plan of God. No one person is unimportant because God is the one who is assigning to each their part in representing Him in this world.

There were those in Corinth who felt that their lives were of such insignificance that there was no way they could be used by God. And yet, Paul makes it clear that if God has assigned you to represent Him with your life, in your particular circumstances, then who are we to question how God can use us?

The NIV says to "retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to [you] and to which God has called [you]."

The idea of retaining here means to keep possession of whatever you've got as you continue to use what you've got. This is why the NASB and the NKJV uses the verb to walk. "Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him *walk*." In other words, keep moving forward in life with whatever you have been assigned with by God.

There's a tendency for all of us at times to think that we've been dealt a bad hand by life, and that we have to muddle through it

until we come to that point where we can get past it to better pastures and then we can be used effectively by God.

What Paul is saying is that God Himself has assigned to us the mission to serve Him right where we are today. We don't have the luxury to wait until life gets to our "ideal" situation before we start to serve and represent Him faithfully in this world.

But along with that truth we don't ever want to think that God is just handing out assignments and then sending us out into the world defenseless. If He assigns us to an aspect of life then He also accompanies us through it and empowers us for works of service in that assignment.

If assignments were being handed out by God and we were able to make our own choice, I dare say that none of us would have chosen Paul's assignment which ultimately led to his martyrdom.

But never do we see Paul taking the attitude that he wished he had someone else's assignment. He was grateful that God called him from darkness to light and out of his love for Christ he was willing to take any assignment for the glory of God. But he also knew he could never accomplish that assignment if it weren't for God's presence and power in his life.

2CO 4:6-7 "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. 7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

Paul knew that anything he accomplished for Christ was precisely because God's power and personal involvement was there for him. And because he knew and understood this he was able to be a Christian right where he was.

Paul had a very hard life and it could have been very easy for him to look at other servants for Christ and wonder why they didn't have to suffer like he did. Even Peter was tempted to think this way when Jesus explained how another disciple by the name of John would not have to suffer in the same way Peter would.

JOH 21:18-20 "I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." 19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then

he said to him, "Follow me!" 20 Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?")

And then Peter asked the question you and I might have been tempted to ask.

JOH 21:21-22 "When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" 22 Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

Peter's assignment was not the exact same assignment that God gave to John. Did it mean that God was picking on Peter or that his assignment was harsher because God was a vindictive God who just wanted to see Peter squirm?

Never. Peter's assignment was Peter's assignment, not John's. In fact, it would be very easy to miss but you'll notice in Joh.21:19 it says this; "Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death **by which Peter would glorify God.**"

You mean Peter's assignment was meant to glorify God, even in his death? Yes, even in his death; how much more in his life? The same was true of Paul. The same was true of these Corinthians and the same is true of you and me.

You mean that wherever we are in life, at any given moment, it is meant to glorify God? Absolutely! But we might say, I don't feel like serving or glorifying God under the circumstances I find myself. Well, let me tell you something, either do I at times.

And yet, what part of me is saying that? We know the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. If the spirit is willing then it must be my flesh which wants to bow out and seek its own assignment or no assignment at all.

Paul says, we have been given the privilege to serve God where He has placed us. And if He has assigned us to an area of life then He must feel we can handle it and glorify Him in the process as we rely on Him.

When it comes to life in general, each of us have been given a unique assignment by God. For example, no one here has the exact same job that the person next to you has. Some of you do office work, some do outside work, some do hard sweaty work, others may be retired.

And so, in that sense none of us shares the same assignment and yet there is a sense in which we all share the same goal, because all of us are still responsible to glorify God wherever we are in life.

That was true of these Corinthians. And yet, like these Corinthians, who were part of the same local body of Christ, they were to take their unique assignments and use them in that local setting to serve one another, as well as taking their assignments out into the world.

In other words, they were to glorify God no matter where they were and no matter what circumstance of life they happened to be in. But as Paul says at the end of verse 17, this was not limited to Corinth, as though they were being singled out.

He says to them, "This is the rule I lay down in all the churches." Every church in every place must understand that they as a church have an assignment from God. And that individuals in that church have an assignment to glorify God in their church and in their community.

And if that means glorifying God in life where there are struggles involved or even where everything seems to be going great, we must still glorify God with the assignment He has given us at any particular time in life.

And then Paul goes on to explain to these Corinthian believers how all of this applies to their lives in a practical way.

1CO 7:18-19 "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. 19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts."

In a nutshell, Paul is saying, 'if you're a Jew don't try and be like a Gentile; if you're a Gentile, don't try and be like a Jew from a cultural standpoint.'

The grass always seems to be greener on someone else's side of the fence. Paul is saying, stay on your side of the fence and glorify God there. You don't need to pretend to be like someone else to be useful for God.

Let's look at the text. 1CO 7:18 "Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised....."

In the context, the man who was already circumcised was the Jew. But notice that he was called by God while a Jew. The word call in the Greek implies a couple of things. It implies to call aloud, or utter in a loud voice so as to invite. But it also implies to call by name or to give a name to.

In other words, it's a unique personal call. Every believer who has ever come to Christ was personally called by the Lord. And in that call they were personally invited to come into a relationship with the living God as their names were checked off, if you will, against that list which is eternal, where the name of every believer has been placed from before creation.

REV 13:8-9 "All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast - all whose names have not been written from the creation of the world in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain 9 He who has an ear, let him hear."

And so, Paul says that every believer who has ever been called, whether Jew or Gentile, must serve God in that state and be thankful in that state.

If you were circumcised don't try and change your state by becoming uncircumcised. Now, we might wonder at such a statement. How in the world does someone become uncircumcised? And why would you want to do that?

Interestingly enough, there were those Jews who felt circumcision was an embarrassment. John MacArthur writes: "According to the Maccabees, some Jewish men "made themselves uncircumcised."....

..... Josephus tells us that during the Greek rule of the eastern Mediterranean several centuries before Christ, some Jewish men who wanted to be accepted into Greek society had surgery performed to make themselves appear uncircumcised when they bathed or exercised at the gymnasiums.....

..... They literally became uncircumcised surgically. The Roman encyclopedist Celsus, in the first century AD, wrote a detailed description of the surgical procedure for decircumcision. (De Medicina VII. 25)"

Now, whether Paul meant this literally or not, the teaching is still the same. You don't need to try and change your outward appearance, or become someone you're not to serve the Lord with your heart.

The same would be true for those Gentiles who were not circumcised and felt that to be a more effective witness for Christ that they had to get circumcised.

Remember, that this same Paul who is writing to these Corinthians is the same Paul who wrote to the church in Galatia on this issue of adding the law, in particular circumcision, to make oneself a true Christian, at the insistence of other Jews.

GAL 3:3-6 "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? 4 Have you suffered so much for nothing - if it really was for nothing? 5 Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? 6 Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Paul goes so far as to say to these Galatians that if they try and add the law as a means to their salvation, that they are actually promoting a false gospel.

GAL 1:6 "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!"

Does this sound like we have the liberty to mess with the life giving message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, according to the Scriptures, by adding to it or taking away from it?

No. And so, whether one is a Jew who was circumcised or a Gentile who was not, we can and must serve God where we are to His glory. "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts." (Verse 19)

We do not have the prerogative to live out our lives in a way that seeks to demand from God that He give us another assignment to our liking. Following and obeying the Lord in whatever state we find ourselves is what pleases Him.

In fact, isn't that exactly what Jesus told his disciples when He said, "if you love Me keep my commandments"; not with the idea of earning our salvation, but in demonstrating that we appreciate

the salvation from Him which was freely given to us. We love and obey Him because He first loved us.

1CO 7:20-24 "Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. 21 Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you -although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22 For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to."

Here Paul takes an aspect of life which was very familiar among the people of his day. Slavery was a normal part of life in the Roman world. It has been suggested by a number of historians that up to 50% of the population in the entire Roman world were slaves.

"But unlike most slaves throughout history, the slave of that day was better educated, more skilled, and more literate and cultured than the average free person. A large percentage of the doctors, teachers, accountants, and other professionals were slaves. Many of them lived in relative ease and were treated with respect. Others, of course, lived in constant poverty and humiliation under cruel and merciless owners." (John MacArthur)

But Paul isn't going to make a distinction. He's saying that if you are a slave of any type, and you were called to Christ while a slave, you need to be willing to stay a slave if that's what God is doing in your life. And in that state you have an obligation, as well as the privilege, of faithfully representing God in that state.

Of course if God opens the door to become a free man with a different assignment then that's okay too. This also tells us that though we may have been called to Christ while we were in a particular situation in life, we must remain in that situation, assuming it's biblical, until God decides to change it or open another door for us.

I mean if you were a plumber when you came to Christ that doesn't mean you can't change careers, only that we need to be careful not to be jumping around in life to where we spend so much time looking for the perfect job that we don't have time to effectively serve Christ.



Remember, life is meant to be used by God's people to glorify Him. And interestingly enough, even a slave was able to accomplish that. And if a slave didn't get the opportunity to become a free man or woman, they should never think that God only sees them as slaves. The opposite is actually true. For the slave of Paul's day the Lord makes it clear that, though you may not have certain freedoms while a slave, God views you as one who is ultimately free in Christ.

1CO 7:22 "For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave."

Whether free or a slave we belong to the Lord. This means freedom for the slave as they are free from the penalty of sin and free from the bondage of this world when it comes to knowing where they will spend eternity, since this world is not our home.

For the free man this is not an excuse to think that we are free from the responsibility to love and serve the Lord where He has us at any point in life. The mindset is that we are Christ's slave.

Now, being a "free person" in our text is not meant to be taken in a negative way any more than being Christ's freedman while a slave is to be more desirable than a person who is free from slavery. The point Paul is making is that we all belong to Christ and that He is aware of our situation because He has given each of us our assignment in life to bring glory to His name.

But it's only when we have an appreciation of this life in Christ, and what it cost our Lord, that we will begin to count the cost of loving and serving Him in whatever state we are in.

1CO 7:23-24 "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to."

We don't belong to ourselves if we have been given life in Christ. We were redeemed, we were purchased from this world, which only produces death, and we have been given a gift which is eternal in nature. But it is a gift which cost Jesus Christ His life for ours.

1PE 1:18-19 "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."

This is the same message Paul had already given these Corinthians earlier in this letter.

1CO 6:19-20 "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; 20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

If we have been purchased out of death to serve in life, then we must consider how we can serve the one we belong to, who has purchased us for Himself to that end.

Can we serve God as slaves? Yes. Can we serve God as free men and women? Yes. Can we serve God today where He has placed us and has assigned us to glorify Him in our present situation? I hope so.

There is no reason not to. This doesn't mean God is some tyrant whipping us to go forward when we seem to already be down. Rather, as a loving Father He's right there to give us His hand and His love and strength to go forward as He continues to show us the nail prints in His Son's hands and the scar in His side as the payment for our fellowship with Him forever.

1CO 7:24 "Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to."

If God chooses to change that situation we want changed, then praise God. If He chooses to allow us to remain where we are then we should remain and serve Him in that state, never losing sight of the fact that we still belong to the Lord and nothing can separate us from His love.

But we still have a responsibility to love and serve each other, and always point others to Christ, using those gifts God gave us in the assignment he has given us.

1PE 4:10-11 "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. 11 If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen."