

PREFACE

In my first few readings of Chapter Seven, I considered vv17-24 to be—while not off-topic, a bit of a sideways diatribe, a “sidebar,” as it were that seemed to interrupt the flow of Paul’s answers to the queries sent him by the church in Corinth. As such, I imagined we might swiftly dispense with this before getting back to things in v25.

As usual, however, my first reaction to the text was replaced by a realization that this passage is invaluable to Chapter Seven in illustrating and reinforcing Paul’s primary and overarching point: *Remain as you are*. This “illustrative interlude,” as I have termed it, accomplishes something that is not addressed in the same way anywhere else in the chapter.

In this passage we discover a critical “why” for the command to stay as one was when one was called—not just a practical, sociological why, but a deep, foundational, *theological* “why” related to every Christian’s salvation in Christ. Hence what we have here in this extended passage is biblical truth that should resound and reverberate in and through our lives.

The manner in which Paul addresses the two topics in this interlude—circumcision and slavery—reveal that these were not pressing issues in Corinth; he simply employs them to buttress the thesis of this chapter.

The thesis is both the bread and the meat in this rhetorical sandwich:

v17: “...as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.”

v20: “Each man must remain in that condition [lit., calling] in which he was called.”

v24: “...each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.”

It is easy to forget (especially when we have been in this letter for better than a year and a half already) that this has been on Paul’s mind since his amanuensis first dipped his stylus in the inkpot.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-2.

Read vv9, 24, 26.

This is an important point that the apostle wants to leave with the Corinthians—and us; our calling by God *to* Christ, *in* Christ, *through* Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:17-20. (not ESV)

Only...

Whether your v17 begins with “Only” (NASB, ESV), “Nevertheless” (NIV), or “But” (KJVs), this points back to the exception in v15.

Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases,

After stating that the believer is permitted to let the unbeliever depart the marriage (if that is their choice), yet the rule remains: It is best to remain in the social condition one was in when conversion took place.

as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.

Paul consistently means Christ Jesus when he uses the Greek *kyrios*, translated “Lord” (“**LORD**” [in small caps] in the OT translates the Hebrew YHWH: Yahweh, or Jehovah). Some manuscripts have “God” as the subject of both clauses, while the KJVs reverse the subjects (NKJV: **But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one...**). The preferred reading is found in the NASB and ESV; that is, we are *called* by God the Father into a life in God the Son—i.e., Christ Jesus—who is the one who *assigns* to each one the life in which we are to walk.

To gain full benefit from this verse and passage we must determine two things:

1. What does Paul mean by “called” (used eight times in this passage)? Does that refer to our vocation or job, our marital status, our personal “ministry”?
2. What does he mean by “let him walk”? Does that mean that we are to always remain in the calling we are when we are called by God?

This verse reveals that there are two parts to our “call.” [Go back to Chapter One](#). In Paul’s opening to this letter he breaks it down for us in the same reverse chronological order that we find in v7:17.

- Christ Jesus called Paul to the life of an apostle,
- but for this to happen he first had to be called *to Christ* by the will of God the Father.

God calls us to Himself *through* or *in* Christ Jesus. Then God the Son assigns us to the life, or task, through which we will serve and glorify them both. [Go back to Chapter Seven](#). While there are many opinions out there for what Paul means by “called,” in the context of Chapter Seven, he speaks primarily of *the individual believer’s life in Christ*. We could break it down into salvation followed by assigned task or situation, but all of that we can also combine under our “walk”—by which Paul always means the conduct of the believer’s life, his or her behavior as a Christian.

The ESV states it extremely well:

Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.

That's it! And what is that life? A life in Christ. We will see in the following verses that the particulars of that life—circumcised or not, slave or not, married, single, celibate, divorced—all are secondary to living a life under God, in Christ.

And so I direct in all the churches.

Paul finishes v17 by reminding the Corinthians that they are not alone, but part of an extended community. This also has the effect of pointing out to the believers in Corinth that it is *their* theology that is skewed.

v18

In v18 we see an example of change so that one might fit better into secular society, and an example of change so that one might fit better into religious society.

Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised.

You might be wondering just how a circumcised man could become *uncircumcised*—and why. Well you might ask. As to the “Why,” in a cosmopolitan city such as Corinth in the first century, there were at least two venues at which this might become an issue. First there were athletic events, such as the Isthmian Games, held in Corinth every two years. At certain events of the games one competed in the nude (if memory serves, women were not present). Second, one would bathe not in one's own bathtub, but at the community baths down the street. In both of these settings it would be obvious to all whether one was circumcised or not.

As to the “how,” to the Romans and Greeks circumcision was considered a barbaric practice that, of course, revealed that one was a Jew. I'll not go into details, but there was, at the time, a surgical procedure that could make one *appear* to be uncircumcised. So a Jew might have this procedure performed so that he would be more accepted in the Greco-Roman society of the time.

Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised.

We are reminded of the Galatian church, under the assault of the legalistic “Judaizers,” who saw “The Way” as simply a sect of Judaism. That is, to be a good Christian one must first be a good Jew: obedient to the Law and being circumcised. Paul's answer to the Galatians is similar to what he writes to the Corinthians (v19).

Read Galatians 5:6.

v19

Again, there is no evidence that this was an issue in the Corinth church, and his manner of presenting it gives evidence that Paul is simply using this to illustrate his point.

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing,

Just imagine the power of the gospel in Paul's life that this former member of the Jewish council could say such a thing! The circumcision of every male predated the Mosaic Law, going back to the covenant between God and Abraham.

Read Genesis 17:10-11.

God went on to say that any uncircumcised male would be "cut off from his people" because "he has broken My covenant." Paul is saying that now, in Christ, circumcision is immaterial to one's relationship with God.

Read Romans 3:27-30.

but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

Now this same individual, who is writing to the churches in Corinth, Rome, and Galatia that circumcision is nothing, would certainly not end his sentence with *but what is really important is keeping the Mosaic Law*. That does not track at all.

In Chapter Fourteen Paul will use the same word to refer to his (Paul's) commands to the Corinthians as coming from the Lord.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:37.

By this term (*entole*) in this context, is meant, as Fee puts it, "the ethical imperatives of the Christian faith." That is, not proving ourselves to God through the mechanical liturgy and works of the Law—foremost among them, circumcision!—but being obedient to a life that glorifies Christ.

v20

In v20 Paul restates his principle.

Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.

The NASB and ESV translate this "condition"—I assume based on the context of the immediate passage: circumcision, which is a physical "condition." But the word is just the noun form (*klesis*) of the verb he has been using here and since Chapter One: "called" (*kaleo*). So literally the verse would be, "Each one, in the calling in which they were called, in this let them remain."

The emphasis here is not on *forbidding* change, but that the change has no effect on one's relationship to God. Or, as David Garland puts it, "The point is that one *does not have to change* one's life situation as a Christian, not that one *may not change* one's life situation" (italics in original).

The Corinthians were making—or at least considering making—drastic changes to their lifestyle for the misguided purpose of becoming more "spiritual," with the implication that this would make them more pleasing, more acceptable to God. But they were forgetting who and what they were when He first "called" them to Himself in Christ Jesus.

Garland: The offer of salvation came to them without requiring them to alter their ethnic, social, or domestic status. Any attempt to make changes *for religious reasons*, in effect, controverts God's grace, especially if they think that these changes—such as changing marriage for celibacy—boost them to a higher spiritual plateau. Such a move substitutes the call to salvation that rests upon God's grace for one that hinges on works.

Even as far back as the writing of the Pentateuch, the Lord God (*Yahweh*) made it clear to Israel that the *external* sign of circumcision was not nearly as important as the *internal* circumcision of the heart.

Read Deuteronomy 30:6.

Through the prophet Ezekiel the Lord restated this.

Read Ezekiel 11:19-20.

Circumcision and uncircumcision are nothing; what matters is that we love the Lord our God and obey Him. We were as filthy rags when He saved us; no earthly, fleshly, societal or marital change will cause Him to love us more than He did when we still hated Him.

It is all of Him, and has nothing to do with us. It's called grace.