

## Study 11. 1 Cor 7:17-24

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**Big idea: Because of Jesus, old ways of defining and dividing people are rendered unimportant.**

This passage touches on the important and controversial issue of slavery. It is important to recognise that, though many of us may feel far from this issue personally, there are many slaves today, even in Australia. This is not an abstract, theoretical or merely interesting issue, but a 'live' one for many people - including Christians - in the world today. It is not Paul's intention to make a defence (or a criticism) of slavery here; his interest is in encouraging the Corinthians to consider their position before God as more significant than any other social category they might belong to.

However, because Paul touches on this topic in making his argument, we should be clear about what he is talking about.

It might be helpful to consider that slavery in Paul's day was quite different from modern slavery. People could sell themselves into slavery in order to pay off debts. Slaves could be integrated into families in a relationship akin to that of a live-in nanny nowadays. That said, redemption from slavery is a powerful metaphor for the gospel (Romans 6:14-23; Luke 4:18-19; Gal. 5:1). It is clear then that slavery was not considered a good in itself. Moreover, those who had slaves were told they must treat them well (Col. 4:1; Philemon 12-17; Eph. 6:9), and slave-traders are explicitly denounced in 1 Tim. 1:8-11. So, for Christians, there is no excuse for poor treatment of slaves.

However, it remains disturbing for some - Christians and sceptics alike - that the New Testament doesn't denounce or overthrow the institution of slavery completely. Why, as Paul does in our passage, encourage slaves to remain in their state?

I think in the New Testament we see that we see a different kind of slavery being highlighted, and a different kind of freedom being championed. A free person who is nonetheless a slave to sin is worse off than a slave who knows Jesus. A slave who knows Jesus is freed from their sin, and is given a new status as 'brother' (1 Tim. 6:2) and 'the Lord's freedman' (1 Cor. 7:22). A Christian who is not a slave to an earthly master is nonetheless a slave of Christ's (1 Cor. 7:24). So then, the contrast is not between slavery, which is bad, and freedom, which is good. Instead, the contrast is between *to whom* or *to what* we are slaves, and *for whom* and *for what* we are freed.

Paul's point is that, in a Christian community, our identity and status in Jesus is more important than any other category we might fall into. There is no category you might belong to which makes you better or worse spiritually.

## Getting familiar with the passage

When you read through the passage you'll notice there is a refrain, repeated three times: 'remain in the situation to which God has called you'.

This is applied to two different, but related, situations: circumcision and slavery.

Paul is making the point that, in Christ, our old identities and social markers (indeed, our social divisions) are done away with, or rendered unimportant. A Corinthian Christian should feel no pride or shame or spiritual hindrance because of his circumcised or uncircumcised state, and neither should a slave or free person. This is because their old ways of conceiving of identity and standing have been superseded by their new standing in Jesus.

If you think back to what we know about the Corinthian church's enthrallment with prestige and spiritual superiority, this would probably have been quite challenging for some (as well as encouraging for others). The social differences which they hold dear are unimportant to God.

Here is what some commentators have said about the passage:

- Thiselton says: 'In one sense, the new eschatological reality of the gospel abolishes "human" categorization; but in a deeper and more realistic sense it relativizes and redefines them.'
- Garland says: 'change of status is unnecessary as it relates to God's call, but that does not mean that change of status is prohibited.'
- Ciampa and Rosner say: 'God does not reckon one condition better than another in terms of serving him. In fact, God placed the Corinthians in these circumstances.' (Notice the repeated 'calling' language; it occurs 8 times in our passage)

See below for a passage breakdown:

*The refrain:*

V 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.'

*Example of circumcision:*

V 18 '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.'

*Why:*

V 19 'Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.'

*The refrain:*

V 20 '*Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.*'

*Example of slavery:*

V 21 'Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you - although if you can gain your freedom, do so.'

*Why:*

V 22 'For he who was a slave when we 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.'

V 23 'You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.'

*The refrain:*

V 24 '*Brothers, each man, responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.*'

## Observation and interpretation

What do you think it would have been like to be a Jewish Christian hearing Paul say (in verse 19) 'circumcision is nothing'?

What would it have been like for a Christian from a Gentile background hearing Paul say (in verse 19) 'uncircumcision is nothing'?

What values and assumptions is Paul challenging here?

If circumcision and uncircumcision are unimportant, what is important?

(Given that he has just dismissed circumcision as unimportant, is it contradictory for Paul to say 'Keeping God's commands is what counts'?)

Why does Paul shift focus from marriage (e.g. 7:15-16) to circumcision and then slavery?

What connects all of these topics? (Looking at Galatians 3:26-29 might help here).

It might also help to read through the passage and note any repeated words or phrases. What indication do these give you of where Paul's argument is going?

(It might also help to read ahead to 1 Cor. 7:29-31 to see where Paul is taking us).

How can Paul say that slaves should stay as they are? Should this be understood as an endorsement of slavery in general? If not, what in this passage leads you away from that conclusion?

Three times Paul encourages his readers to 'remain in the situation God called you to'. For what reasons do you think they might have wanted to change their situation?

- Consider that they may have wanted to improve their standing in society or the church.
- They may have spiritualised one state over another, thinking that they were able to serve or honour God better that way (remember Paul's critique of 'those mutilators of

the flesh' in Philippians 3:2-3, those who argued that Christians must be circumcised in order to be truly Christian).

- They may have looked down on those who were different from them.
- You may be able to think of other reasons why this issue was important.

Ciampa and Rosner say: 'Paul is not against making any change to one's circumstances, as v. 21b proves. Rather, he is responding to the opinion that such changes will enhance one's calling to live as a Christian.'

## **Application / Implications**

Circumcision and slavery might not feel like very significant issues for us as Christians today.

- What modern-day equivalents to these social dividers can you think of?
- What things might Christians think of as more or less spiritual?
- What divisions keep us from seeing one another as brothers and sisters?
- How can we (as a Growth Group, and as a church) ensure that we don't let other ways of categorising ourselves or others take priority over who we all are in Christ?
- Do you consider yourself Christ's slave? What challenges you about this?
- What do you need to reject in order to serve him wholeheartedly?

## **Prayer ideas**

Pray to thank God that, because of Jesus you are freed from sin, and enslaved to Christ.

Pray that God will help you to see any ways in which you are undermining the new status and identity in Christ that he makes available to you and others, and pray that instead you will seek to live as he has called you.

Further reading: Tess Holgate, "An us and them kind of world", at <http://www.biblesociety.org.au/news/an-us-and-them-kind-of-world>