

1 CORINTHIANS 7:17

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In the first 24 verses of this chapter Paul was focused on the theme of marriage. First he talked about the need for a husband and wife to give sexual intimacy to each other. Then in verses 10–11 he commanded husbands and wives not to divorce each other. But if a divorce does take place, then they need to reverse course and get reconciled. And they need to remain unmarried while they pursue reconciliation. Marriage to anyone else is off limits. Now Paul didn't mention any exceptions to this rule here, but we know from Matthew 19:9 that sexual immorality was an exception. If either spouse was sexually unfaithful and didn't repent, then Jesus allowed for divorce and remarriage. Paul didn't need to mention this exception because everyone in that culture would have understood that it was implied.

Then in verse 12 Paul switched his focus from Christian marriages to mixed marriages. He addressed the situation of a believer being married to an unbeliever. And he commanded a Christian husband not to get divorced from his unbelieving wife if she was willing to live with him. Then in verse 13 he said the same thing to a Christian wife. She is not to get divorced from her husband if he's willing to live with her. The idea is that the unbeliever wants to stay married. So Paul was basically saying that the continuation of the marriage should be left up to the unbelieving spouse. Any Christian who is married to an unbeliever is forbidden from pursuing a divorce.

And in verse 14 Paul gave two reasons that a believer should stay in a mixed marriage. First he said that the unbelieving spouse is made holy by the believing spouse, and then he said that the children are also holy when a mixed marriage continues. Now in this verse the Greek word for holy doesn't have its normal meaning of being separate from sin. Instead it just has the broader sense of being set apart for a special purpose. And in this verse Paul was talking about being set apart to receive a special Christian witness and influence. So the point here is that the believer in a mixed marriage has a unique opportunity to have a powerful Christian testimony to the unbelieving spouse and the children. The evidence of God's work in the believer can be seen on a daily basis. But if the believer gets divorced from the unbeliever, then that special Christian witness and influence is diminished. And so this is a very powerful motivation for a believer to stay married to an unbeliever.

But in verse 15 Paul gave an exception to this rule. He said, "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases. God has called you to live in peace." So Paul didn't want the believer in a mixed marriage to initiate a divorce. But if the unbeliever wanted to leave the marriage, that was a different story. Paul said that the believer should let the unbeliever leave. So if an unbeliever in a

mixed marriage initiates a divorce, the believer should not resist it or fight against it. Instead the believer should tolerate the divorce and go along with it. Now certainly the believer should not provoke the divorce in any way, outside of simply living like a Christian. But there is no need for the believer to offer any resistance if the unbeliever pursues a divorce.

And once the divorce is finalized, the believer is no longer bound in marriage to the unbeliever. So the believer doesn't have any marital obligations to the unbeliever anymore. In other words, Paul was basically saying that God recognized and approved the divorce. And what this means is that the believer has God's permission to get remarried to someone else. There's nothing in Scripture to indicate that someone who has God's approval to get divorced does not have God's approval to get remarried. Instead there's an assumption that a biblically sanctioned divorce entailed the right to remarry. In fact, that's exactly what was indicated on a Jewish divorce certificate. It stated that the divorced person was free to get remarried.

Now Paul was not commanding the Christian brother or sister in verse 15 to get remarried. If an unbeliever gets divorced from a believer, there's no obligation for the believer to remarry anyone. But there's also no need to wait around and hope that the unbeliever has a change of heart. In fact, as long as the ex-spouse remains an unbeliever, the believer can't remarry that person, because a believer is only supposed to marry a fellow Christian. The divorce terminates that marriage for good unless the unbeliever gets saved, and God doesn't require the believer to wait for that remote possibility to happen. Instead he allows the believer to get remarried to someone else.

But as long as the unbeliever is willing to remain married to a believer, the believer must stay in the marriage. That's what Paul meant when he said that God has called us to live in peace. Many people think of peace as an inner feeling, but that's not how Scripture refers to peace. Instead this word is used to describe an absence of conflict. And Hebrews 12:14 says that we need to "pursue peace with everyone." So all our relationships should be characterized by an absence of conflict. But of course it's not always possible to live at peace with everyone. In Romans 12:18 Paul said, "If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." So we can't force other people to live at peace with us. A peaceful relationship requires the cooperation of both parties, and that's true in marriage as well. So pursuing peace in a mixed marriage just means that we should do everything possible to keep the marriage going. The believer should not initiate a divorce from the unbeliever.

Then in verse 16 Paul said, "Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife." In this verse Paul was giving another reason for a believer to stay in a mixed marriage. There's a possibility that the believer in a mixed marriage will save the unbeliever. But isn't God the one who saves people? The answer is obviously yes, and Paul even said so back in chapter 1 and verse 21. But he was not contradicting himself here. God is ultimately the one who saves people, but he's chosen to use us! Unbelievers can't be saved unless they hear or read the gospel message that someone has proclaimed or written down.

So when Paul said here in chapter 7 and verse 16 that the believer in a mixed marriage might save his or her spouse, he was just saying that God might use the believer's gospel witness to save the unbeliever.

God often chooses to use a close friend or relative to save people and draw them to repentance and faith. So whether you're in a mixed marriage or not, you need to be ready at all times to give a reason for the hope that's in you. We all need to be ready to tell people the good news of what Jesus has done for them when he died and rose again. He took our place on the cross and paid the penalty for our sins so that we can have eternal life! And when we live in consistent obedience to the Lord, unbelievers around us can see the change in our lives. They can see that God has saved us and is transforming us to be more and more holy. And God can use that reality to draw unbelievers to himself.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:17. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Let each one live his life in the situation the Lord assigned when God called him. This is what I command in all the churches." Now the Christian Standard Bible is missing a word at the beginning of this verse. In the original Greek there are actually two words here that go together, and we can translate them with one word in English. Now normally these two Greek words are translated with the word "except." They've already appeared together four times in this letter, and that's how the Christian Standard Bible translates them in each case. For example, in chapter 2 and verse 2 Paul said, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

But here in chapter 7 and verse 17 the word "except" doesn't work very well. So we need to find another way to translate the two Greek words at the beginning of this verse. And thankfully we can find some help later in this letter. These two Greek words appear together again in chapter 8 and verse 4. Look at what Paul wrote in that verse: "About eating food sacrificed to idols, then, we know that 'an idol is nothing in the world,' and that 'there is no God but one.'" The word "but" near the end of the verse comes from the same two Greek words that we have in chapter 7 and verse 17. And that translation works pretty well in this verse as well. Paul was giving us a slight contrast here. In the previous verses he was talking about a specific situation regarding divorce in a mixed marriage. But here in verse 17 he was giving a general rule that applied to this situation and other situations as well.

So let's take a closer look at this general rule that Paul gave us. But to do that we need to consult a different translation, because the Christian Standard Bible is not very literal in the first half of this verse. So I'm going to read the New American Standard Bible for you: "Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this way let him walk." So there are three phrases in the first sentence in this verse. The third and final phrase is where we find the heart of the sentence: "In this way let him walk." But the first two phrases prepare the way for this third phrase. And these two phrases are parallel to each other, because they both start with the word "as." Paul said, "As the Lord has assigned to each one," and then he said, "As God has called each."

But there's another word that we find in both of these phrases, and it's the word "each." In fact, the Greek word for each actually comes first in both of these phrases. We can't put it first in our translation because it wouldn't make sense. But in Greek the word order is very flexible, and words would often be put first for emphasis. So Paul was stressing that what he said here applied to each person. But the word "each" doesn't necessarily refer to all people in general. It can be limited to all the people in a specific group based on the context. And in this letter Paul was clearly writing to believers. He was teaching and in-

structing people who made a profession of faith in Jesus. And so when Paul used the word “each” here, he was talking about each believer.

So let’s look at what Paul said about each believer in these two phrases. In the first phrase he said, “As the Lord has assigned to each one.” The Greek word for Lord is a title that’s used over 700 times in the New Testament. We’ve already seen it 25 times in this letter, and in most of those cases it’s clearly referring to Jesus. For example, in chapter 1 and verse 3 Paul wrote, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” But even when this word is used by itself, we’ve seen that it normally refers to Jesus. In chapter 2 and verse 8 Paul said, “None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, because if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” That verse is clearly referring to the crucifixion of Jesus. In chapter 6 and verse 14 Paul said, “God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.” That verse is clearly referring to the resurrection of Jesus.

So I think it’s pretty obvious that Paul was referring to Jesus when he used the word “Lord” in chapter 7 and verse 17. The Greek word here is pronounced “kurios,” and it usually just means “master.” It normally stresses the idea of authority, and so it shows here that Jesus is in charge and that we must submit to him. Now some Christians think that we don’t need to trust in Jesus as our Lord to be saved. We just need to trust in him as our Savior, and then maybe down the road we can submit ourselves to him as our Lord. But that’s not what Scripture teaches. Acts 16:31 tells us that we must believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved. Romans 10:13 says that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” So we can’t receive Jesus as our Savior without also recognizing him as our Lord. We can’t be saved without submitting to his lordship over our lives.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:17 I think it’s pretty clear that Paul was talking about Jesus when he said, “As the Lord has assigned to each one.” Now let’s talk about the Greek word for assigned. It’s used 14 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote five of them. Three of those five occurrences are right here in our letter, and in the other two places this term is translated with the word “divided” in the Christian Standard Bible. The first one is in chapter 1 and verse 13, and the other one is in chapter 7 and verse 34. But here in chapter 7 and verse 17 there’s no Bible translation that has the word “divided” as far as I can tell. That’s because this Greek word can have different nuances. The normal meaning of this word has to do with dividing something or separating it into parts. But this word can also have the nuance of assigning something to someone. And most Bible translations have the word “assigned” here in this verse.

We can also see this nuance in Paul’s other letter to the Corinthians that’s been preserved in Scripture. Look at what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10:13: “We, however, will not boast beyond measure but according to the measure of the area of ministry that God has assigned to us, which reaches even to you.” So in this verse Paul said that God had assigned an area of ministry to him, and it included the city of Corinth. Now we’re pretty familiar with the concept of assignments. When we were in school, we got assignments all the time. Our teachers would give us homework to do between classes, and they would hold us accountable to do that work. In the Bible institute that I oversee here at the church, I teach several courses and give assignments to my students every week. I even give them quizzes to motivate them to complete the assignments.

But assignments don't go away once we're finished with school. We also get assignments in our jobs as well. We have a boss who assigns us work to do. But in many jobs people have different assignments than their coworkers do. For example, I'm in charge of Christian education and assimilation at the church, but my coworkers focus on other areas of ministry. Jason's in charge of youth ministry, and Clint's in charge of children's ministry. So we have different assignments, and I think that Paul was talking about something similar in 1 Corinthians 7:17. Now it's true that God has given each Christian the assignment of sharing the gospel with unbelievers. But God has also assigned a unique life situation for each Christian. It's not something that he's commanded us to do, but it is something that he's planned for us to do.

So I don't think that Paul was stressing the moral will of God when he used the word "assigned" in verse 17. Instead he was emphasizing God's sovereign will. He was focused on the fact that the Lord Jesus is in complete control of our lives. He has planned every step that we take and every decision that we make. He's even sovereign over all our wicked deeds and the bad things that happen to us. And he works all those things together for our good as his children. But in this context the focus is on our marital status. God has assigned a marital status to each person in his sovereignty. Every Christian is either single or married, and every single person is either widowed, divorced, or never married. So when Paul said, "As the Lord has assigned to each one," I believe that he was focused primarily on the marital status that Jesus has assigned to each Christian at any given point in time.

Now let's look at the second phrase in verse 17, which is parallel to the first phrase. In the New American Standard Bible Paul said, "As God has called each." So in this phrase Paul switched from something the Lord did for each believer to something God did for each believer. In the first phrase he was talking about the Lord Jesus, but in the second phrase he was probably talking about God the Father. Both of them are God and members of the Trinity, but they have different roles. And one of the Father's roles was to call each believer. The Greek word for called is the same one that we saw in verse 15 last week. Paul used it 12 times in this letter, and nine of them are found in chapter 7. In fact, all nine of them are right here in verses 15–24.

Now when the word "called" is connected to salvation, it can have two different nuances. The first one is the external call of the gospel that goes out to people in general. When we share the gospel with people, we're inviting them or calling them to turn from their sins and trust in Jesus to save them. But the word "called" can also refer to the internal call by which God draws certain people to himself and enables them to put their faith in Jesus. Listen to what Jesus himself said in John 6:44: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day." Then a little later in verse 65 Jesus said something very similar: "No one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the Father."

Now Jesus didn't use the word "called" in these two verses, but he was clearly talking about the concept of the internal call. We can also see this call taught in Romans 8, and in that chapter the word "called" is used. Listen to what Paul said about God in verse 30: "Those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified." So in this verse Paul was clearly talking about believers. Christians are the only ones who are predestined and justified. But Paul said that those who have been predestined and justified are the same people who have been called. So Paul could not

have been talking about the external call of the gospel, because that's directed to anyone, including people who reject it. Instead Paul must have been talking about the internal call that is directed only to those God has chosen to save.

Theologians refer to this concept as the effectual call because it's always effective. When God calls people in this way and draws them to himself, he overcomes their natural inclination to rebel against him. And he enables them to turn from their sins and trust in Jesus to save them. Now sometimes the doctrine of effectual calling is referred to as irresistible grace. This phrase just looks at the situation from the opposite perspective. If the internal call is always effective, then people can't resist it. They can certainly resist the external call of the gospel, but they can't resist the internal call to salvation. In fact, God changes their heart so that they don't want to resist anymore! Once our eyes have been opened to understand the value of God's free gift of salvation, we would never want to refuse that gift.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:15 we concluded that Paul was talking about the effectual call to salvation because he was referring to Christians. And I believe that he was talking about the same thing here in verse 17. After all, in both places the Greek verb for called is in the perfect tense. This tense refers to a completed action with ongoing results. As Christians we've already been called by God to salvation, but that call has an impact on how we live the rest of our lives. And of course Paul's focus in this passage is on singleness and marriage. So I think his point here is that we all had a marital status when God called us to salvation. We were either single or married, and that status was assigned to us by our Lord Jesus as part of his sovereign plan for our lives.

But whatever our marital status was when God called us to salvation, Paul gave the same instructions for us here. They're found in the third phrase in verse 17. In the New American Standard Bible Paul said, "In this way let him walk." The phrase "in this way" is just pointing back to the first two phrases in the verse. Whatever marital status we had when we were saved, Paul said that we should walk in that status. The Greek verb for walk is used 94 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 32 of them. But he used the word only twice in this letter, and we already saw the first one back in chapter 3 and verse 3. In that verse Paul said that the Corinthian believers were behaving like mere humans. Our term is translated with the word "behaving" in that verse.

So there are times when the Greek word for walk is used metaphorically to describe our behavior. And that makes sense because walking is a regular part of life, even in our modern culture. Walking is also a good metaphor to describe our behavior because it involves taking many steps, just like we have to make many decisions every day that affect our behavior. So in chapter 7 and verse 17 I think Paul was using the Greek word for walk metaphorically, just like he did in chapter 3. And that's why the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "live his life" in this verse. Paul was saying that he wanted all of us as believers to live the Christian life in the marital status that had when we were saved.

But Paul wasn't just giving his personal desire here in verse 17. He gave us a third person command. Usually commands are second person and given directly to the listener or reader. But this one is in the third person, and we've already seen a few of them in this chapter. They're not super common in Greek, but in

English they're even more rare. So it's actually not very easy to think of a good example. The only one that I could come up with is this statement: "Somebody help me!" So this command is not directed to a specific person. Instead it's given more indirectly to people in general. Now I don't like the way that most Bible translations usually handle third person commands, because they tend to be too weak. Both the Christian Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have the word "let" here. But this word makes it sound like Paul was just giving permission. It would be better to use the word "must" to make it clear that Paul was giving a command. He was saying that we must live in the marital status we had when God called us to salvation.

And Paul stressed that at the end of the verse that this command was not just for the Corinthian believers. In the Christian Standard Bible he said, "This is what I command in all the churches." So Paul was not treating the Corinthian church any different than other local churches. He wasn't just picking on them because they were struggling spiritually. He was very consistent in this area. So Paul's teaching in this verse has direct application for all Christians at all times during church history. But we need to make sure that we don't misunderstand what he was saying here. He certainly wasn't saying that no one who is single at the time of salvation can get married. Otherwise what he said earlier in this chapter makes no sense. In verse 8 he didn't command widows and widowers to remain single. He just said that it's good for them to remain single. And in verse 9 he actually commanded them to get married if they don't have the self-control to avoid sexual immorality.

But even single people who don't struggle with sexual temptation have the freedom to get married. After all, marriage is God's idea; he's the one who invented it. It's a good gift from him that we can enjoy. But single people who don't struggle with sexual temptation shouldn't think that they have to get married. Singleness is also a good gift from God that gives us more opportunities to serve the Lord. And I think Paul's main point here is that believers in mixed marriages should not think that they're in an inferior position. God doesn't view them as less holy just because they're married to an unbeliever. God wants them to stay married if the unbeliever is willing. They should not be trying to change their marital status after they get saved. Even single people shouldn't be looking to rush into marriage. We need to serve the Lord faithfully no matter what our marital status is. Let's close in prayer and thank God for the gifts of marriage and singleness.