

1 CORINTHIANS 7:18–19

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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 verses 12–16 Paul switched his focus from Christian marriages to mixed marriages. He addressed the situation of a believer being married to an unbeliever. And in verses 12–13 he commanded the believing spouse not to get divorced from the unbelieving spouse if the unbeliever was willing to stay married. 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. But here the Greek word for holy has the idea of being set apart for a special purpose. Paul was talking about being set apart to receive a special Christian witness and influence. The believer should be motivated to stay in the marriage because of the unique opportunity to have a powerful Christian testimony to the rest of the family.

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 wants to leave the marriage, then the believer should not offer any resistance. Instead the believer should tolerate the divorce and go along with it. And once the divorce is finalized, the believer is no longer bound but has God's permission to get remarried to someone else. The assumption throughout Scripture is that a biblically sanctioned divorce entails 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.

But as long as an 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. To pursue peace in a mixed marriage just means that we should do everything possible to keep the marriage going. And in verse 16 Paul gave another reason for a believer to stay in a mixed marriage. He said that there's a possi-

bility the believer will save the unbeliever. Now obviously God is ultimately the one who saves people, but he's chosen to use us to share the gospel message! God often uses a close friend or relative to save people and draw them to repentance and faith. So whether we're in a mixed marriage or not, we should all be ready to give a reason for the hope that's in us.

Then in verse 17 Paul started a new paragraph that runs through the end of this section in verse 24. In verse 17 Paul said, "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." So in the previous verses Paul 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. And what he was saying is that God has assigned a unique life situation for each Christian. He's in complete control of our lives. But the focus in this context is on our marital status. God has assigned a marital status to each person in his sovereignty. Everyone is either single or married, and every single person is either widowed, divorced, or never married.

And whatever marital status we had when God called us to salvation, Paul said that we should live our life in that situation. Now 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. Marriage is a good gift from God that we can enjoy. So I think Paul's point here in context is simply that believers in mixed marriages should not try to become single. 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. They should serve the Lord faithfully in their marriage and strive to be a good testimony to their spouse.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:18. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Was anyone already circumcised when he was called? He should not undo his circumcision. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? He should not get circumcised." In this verse Paul took the general principle that he gave in verse 17 and applied it in a different way. He used the subject of circumcision as an illustration of the situation with mixed marriages. Circumcision is a theme that is quite prevalent in Paul's letters. He used some form of this word 42 times, and most of them are in Romans and Galatians. The reason Paul addressed this topic so much was that it was very important to the Jews. We can trace it all way back to the very first book in the Bible.

In Genesis 12 God spoke to Abraham and told him to leave his family and go to the land of Canaan. And God promised to bless him and make him into a great nation. This promise was unconditional and did not depend on anything that Abraham or his descendants did. But God did ask Abraham to do something as a sign of their covenant. Look at Genesis 17:10–14: "This is my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you, which you are to keep: Every one of your males must be circumcised. You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations, every male among you is to be circumcised at eight days old—every male born in your household or purchased from any foreigner and not your offspring. Whether born in your household or purchased, he must be circumcised. My covenant will be marked in your flesh as a perma-

nent covenant. If any male is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that man will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

So God required all males in the nation of Israel to be circumcised. This was not optional; it was a command from God. It was repeated for the Israelites on Mount Sinai in Leviticus 12:3. Anyone who disobeyed this command would be excluded from the blessings of the covenant. And so it's no surprise that when we come to the New Testament, we see in Luke 1:59 that John the Baptist was circumcised on the eighth day, just like God commanded. We can also see in Luke 2:21 that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day as well. So in general the Jews were careful to follow God's command about circumcision. Jewish parents would make sure that they circumcised their sons about a week after they were born.

But shortly after God started the church in Acts 2, something interesting happened. In Acts 10 God sent Peter to Cornelius, and through his preaching God saved a number of Gentiles. Listen to verses 44–45: “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.” So God didn't just save Jews and add them to the church. He also saved Gentiles, even though the men would not have been circumcised. So God did not require these men to get circumcised first before he saved them. He forgave them of their sins while they were still circumcised.

But not everyone was happy with this situation. Acts 15:1 says that “some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.’” And this teaching quickly led to a big debate in the early church. The apostles and elders in Jerusalem met to discuss this issue, and they concluded that the Gentiles did not need to get circumcised. They agreed that salvation is by God's grace through faith. And Paul had a big role in helping them reach this conclusion. He had just gone on a missionary journey with Barnabas and had seen God save many Gentiles. So he shared what God had done during this journey. And he argued strongly against those who thought that circumcision should be required.

So it's no surprise that Paul talked so much about circumcision in his letters. And he was very consistent in his teaching about this issue. In Galatians 5:6 he said, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplishes anything; what matters is faith working through love.” In Galatians 6:15 Paul said, “For both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; what matters instead is a new creation.” In Romans 3:30 Paul said that “there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.” In Romans 4:11 Paul said that Abraham “received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while still uncircumcised. This was to make him the father of all who believe but are not circumcised, so that righteousness may be credited to them also.”

So Paul consistently taught that circumcision was not necessary for believers. There's certainly nothing wrong with being circumcised, but it's not required to be a Christian. So circumcision was the perfect illustration for what Paul was teaching about mixed marriages in 1 Corinthians 7. In verse 18 Paul asked two questions about circumcision, and after each question he gave a short response. In the first question

he asked, “Was anyone already circumcised when he was called?” Now the Gentile men in the Corinthian church probably would have answered this question by saying “no.” But I think there were some Jewish men in the church as well, and Paul knew that most of them would have answered by saying “yes.”

Now let’s talk about the two verbs in this question. The first one is the word “circumcised,” and it’s in the perfect tense and the passive voice. The passive voice just means that the subject receives the action of the verb. The point here is that normally males don’t circumcise themselves; someone else does it to them at a young age. But this verb is also in the perfect tense, which indicates a completed action in the past with ongoing results in the present. So there are certainly results of circumcision that continue indefinitely. But Paul’s main focus here was on the action of circumcision. To circumcise is simply to cut the foreskin of the male genital organ. And Paul was talking about men who were circumcised before the time they were called.

The Greek word for called is the other verb in this question, and it’s the same one that we’ve already seen in verses 15 and 17. 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 7:15–17 we concluded that Paul was talking about the effectual call to salvation because he was referring to Christians. And I think it's pretty clear that he was talking about the same thing here in verse 18. He was talking about the time of salvation and addressing people who had already been circumcised when they were called internally. So what did Paul say to those people in verse 18? Look at what he wrote after he asked his first question: "He should not undo his circumcision." But there's actually a third person command in this verse, and so the word "must" would be a better translation than the word "should." The man who has been circumcised must not become uncircumcised.

The Greek word for undoing circumcision or becoming uncircumcised is used only here in the New Testament. And at first glance this idea sounds crazy. How can a man who is circumcised undo his circumcision? Well, apparently the Jews had developed an operation between Old and New Testament times to do exactly that. We see it mentioned in one of the books of the Apocrypha. Listen to 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." This gymnasium would have been used for competitions similar to the Olympic Games, and during that time men participated in the nude. So Jewish men who competed in these games would have been ridiculed for being different. And they would have been motivated to get an operation done to look like they were uncircumcised and to improve their status in society.

So a Jewish man who got this operation was basically caving in to the pressure of the world. He was giving in to peer pressure and trying to fit in with the Gentiles. But of course this was not a good motivation for Jewish men to get uncircumcised. In fact, there was no good motivation for them to disobey God's command to them. We face similar temptations today. As Christians we're different from the unbelievers around us in many ways. We dress differently, we talk differently, and we act differently. And we often face ridicule and persecution because we're different. But we need to endure that suffering and continue to live in obedience to the Lord. This is why Paul told us in Romans 12:2 not to be conformed to this age. Instead we need to be transformed by the renewing of our mind so that we can understand God's will and live according to it.

So Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:18 that a man who was already circumcised at the time of salvation must not undo his circumcision. Then he asked a second question: "Was anyone called while uncircumcised?" This question is similar to the first one. Once again Paul was talking about the effectual call to salvation. But this time he was talking about men who were uncircumcised when they got saved. And look at what Paul said to these men right after he asked his second question: "He should not get circumcised." Once again Paul used a third person command here, and so the word "must" would be a better translation. Paul was saying that an uncircumcised man must not get circumcised.

Now this command raises an interesting problem when we consider it in light of another passage. Look at Acts 16:1–3: "Paul went on to Derbe and Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a believing Jewish woman, but his father was a Greek. The brothers and sisters at Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him. Paul wanted Timothy to go with him; so he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, since they all knew that his father was a Greek." So it seems like Paul

caused Timothy to disobey his own command here! Now of course Paul didn't give this command until a few years later. But why did he tell uncircumcised men not to get circumcised if that's exactly what Timothy had done recently?

I think the best way to solve this problem is to observe that Paul was just giving a general rule that had some exceptions. Timothy was not an average uncircumcised man. Paul wanted Timothy to serve on his missionary team, and they were going to be evangelizing Jews. So Paul didn't want Timothy's uncircumcised status to be a distraction and a stumbling block. This is what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 9:20. Listen to what he wrote there: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win those under the law." What did Paul mean when he talked about winning people? Listen to what he said a little later in verse 22: "To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some."

So Paul was willing to do just about anything possible to save unbelievers. He was even willing to live like a Jew and obey the law of Moses. Now of course in one sense Paul was a Jew because his parents were Jews. But in another sense he was not a Jew; he was a Christian. And so he was under the law of Christ and not the law of Moses. But at times he followed the law of Moses because he didn't want anything to stand in the way of Jews getting saved. And he wanted those who ministered with him like Timothy to live in the same way. But in another context Paul took a different approach. Listen to what he said in Galatians 2:3: "But not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek." So Paul didn't have Titus get circumcised because they were not evangelizing Jews at that point. Instead Paul was debating other leaders in the church about whether circumcision was required for believers. And he wanted them to see from the example of Titus that it wasn't necessary.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:18 Paul commanded circumcised Christian men not to undo their circumcision, and he commanded uncircumcised Christian men not to get circumcised. But he was just giving a general rule that had exceptions. And Timothy was one of those exceptions. So circumcision was the perfect illustration for what Paul was teaching about mixed marriages. The general rule is that a believer and an unbeliever should stay married. But the exception is that they can get divorced if the unbeliever wants to leave the marriage. A believer in a mixed marriage is not allowed to initiate a divorce. But if the unbeliever initiates a divorce, then the believer should go along with it and not offer any resistance.

Now let's move on to verse 19. Look at what Paul wrote here: "Circumcision does not matter and uncircumcision does not matter. Keeping God's commands is what matters." Now the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible are more literal here. Both of these translations say that "circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing." But the Christian Standard Bible is giving us the right interpretation here. Paul was just saying that ultimately it doesn't matter whether a Christian man is circumcised or uncircumcised. Then Paul ended this verse by saying that keeping God's commands is what matters. Paul was actually making a contrast here, because in the Greek text this statement starts with a conjunction that means "but." And we can see the word "but" in more literal translations like the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible.

But this contrast is pretty confusing at first glance. Wasn't it God's command for males in Israel to get circumcised? That's what we saw earlier when we looked at the Old Testament. So how could Paul conclude that it wasn't important for a man to be circumcised? The key here is to understand what Paul meant when he talked about keeping God's commands. The Greek word for keeping is used three times in the New Testament, and the other two are found in the book of Acts. And in both verses it's talking about the Jewish religious leaders keeping the apostles in jail. So we could say that Paul wanted us to keep God's commands locked up and not let them escape. The idea is that we need to know them and obey them.

Now let's talk about the Greek word for commands. It's used 67 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 14 of them. But he used it only one other time in this letter. In chapter 14 and verse 37 he said, "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, he should recognize that what I write to you is the Lord's command." So in that verse Paul was talking about the Lord's command, and it's very likely that he was referring to Jesus. But Paul said that one of the Lord's commands was what he was writing to them! You see, apostles like Paul were the official representatives of Jesus, and so they carried his authority. When they gave commands to believers, those commands were to be treated as though they were coming from Jesus himself!

So when Paul said in chapter 7 and verse 19 that keeping God's commands is what matters, I believe that he was talking about the commands given by the second person of the Trinity. And more specifically I think he was referring to his own commands in this letter. So Paul was not talking about Old Testament commands here. We already saw in chapter 9 and verse 20 that Paul was not under the law of Moses. In verse 21 Paul said, "I am not without God's law but under the law of Christ." When Jesus died on the cross and rose again, he finished fulfilling the law of Moses, and now God's people are no longer under the Old Testament law. In Romans 10:4 Paul said that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

So this is why it's not important for Christian men to get circumcised. Jesus never commanded circumcision, and neither did his apostles. Even during Old Testament times the circumcision of the heart is what really mattered. In Deuteronomy 10:16 Moses said, "Therefore, circumcise your hearts and don't be stiff-necked any longer." And Paul understood this point. In Romans 2:28–29 he said, "For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. That person's praise is not from people but from God."

So the kind of circumcision that really matters is heart circumcision. We need to have our hearts cleansed of sin. That's what happened when God called us to salvation. Whether we're circumcised in our flesh doesn't matter. Instead we need to focus on obeying the law of Christ. And ultimately Paul's point here was that it doesn't matter whether we're single or married. We can serve the Lord and please him in either state. But we do need to make sure that we're obeying the New Testament commands about sexuality. As Paul just taught us in 1 Corinthians 6:18, we need to flee sexual immorality. So if we're single, we need to abstain from sexual relations, and if we're married, we need to have regular sexual intimacy with our spouse and only our spouse. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to obey the law of Christ.