

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:20–21A

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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 doing 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 possibility the be-

liever 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.

Then in verse 18–19 Paul took the general principle that he gave in verse 17, and he applied it in a different way. He used the subject of circumcision as an illustration of the situation with mixed marriages. During Old Testament times God required all males in the nation of Israel to be circumcised. But in the book of Acts we see that God began to save uncircumcised Gentiles and add them to the church. So the early church leaders concluded that circumcision was not necessary for believers. And Paul confirmed that conclusion here in verses 18–19. He said that if a man was already circumcised when he was called to salvation, he shouldn't get a medical procedure done to undo his circumcision. And if a man was uncircumcised when he was called to salvation, then he shouldn't get circumcised.

But we know from Acts 16 that Paul had Timothy get circumcised before he joined Paul's missionary team. That's because Paul didn't want Timothy to hinder their evangelistic ministry to the Jews. He didn't want anything to keep Jews from getting saved. So in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul was just giving a general rule that had exceptions. Just like there was an exception that allowed for divorce with mixed marriages, there was also an exception that allowed for circumcision after salvation. But the general rule was for male believers not to change their status with regard to circumcision. As Paul said in verse 19, "Circumcision does not matter and uncircumcision does not matter. Keeping God's commands is what matters."

Now this statement is pretty confusing at first glance, because in the Old Testament God commanded

males in Israel to get circumcised. But Paul used this Greek word for commands only one other time in this letter. It's found in chapter 14 and verse 37, and in that verse he was talking about a command of the Lord Jesus. So Paul was not talking about Old Testament commands here in chapter 7. Instead he was talking about the commands of Jesus in the New Testament. And by extension Paul was including his own commands and the commands of the other apostles, because they were the official representatives of Jesus and carried his authority. But Jesus and the apostles never commanded men to get circumcised. Instead Paul taught in Romans 2 that circumcision of the heart is what really matters. We need to have our hearts cleansed of sin, and that's what happened when God saved us.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:20. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul said in this verse: "Let each of you remain in the situation in which he was called." In this verse Paul basically restated the general rule that he just gave us in verse 17. But the wording is a bit different this time, and so let's make sure that we don't rush past this verse. Now right away we can see that both of these verses have the word "each" near the beginning of the verse. The Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "each one" in verse 17 and the phrase "each of you" in verse 20. But in the original Greek there is no second person pronoun in verse 20. And so the phrase "each one" should actually be used in both verses.

But as we talked about when we covered verse 17, the word "each" does not necessarily refer to every single person. It can be limited by the context to refer to each person in a group. And in these two verses it's clear that Paul was talking about Christians. He was writing to a church, and so his comments were directed to believers. That's why the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "each of you." It's not very literal, but it does indicate that Paul was talking about Christians. So what did Paul say about each believer? He said, "Let each of you remain." Now it sounds like Paul was just giving us permission to remain. But the Greek verb for remain is actually a command in the third person. Third person commands aren't super common, but we've already seen quite a few of them in this chapter. And the best way to translate most of them is with the word "must." Paul was not talking about something that's option. He said that each believer must remain.

The Greek word for remain is pretty common in the New Testament. It's used about 120 times, and Paul wrote 17 of them. But eight of them are found in this letter, and five of those eight are right here in this chapter. We've already seen it in verses 8 and 11. Look at what Paul said about widows and widowers in verse 8: "It is good for them to remain as I am." In other words, it's a good idea for them to stay single and not get remarried. Then in verse 11 Paul said that if a wife divorces her husband, "she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband." So divorced women and by extension divorced men must stay single while they try to get reconciled to their spouse. In other words, they're not allowed to get remarried to someone else. The only exception according to Jesus is if their spouse committed unrepentant sexual immorality. Then they could get remarried to someone else.

So in verses 8 and 11 the Greek word for remain was talking about staying single. But in verse 20 the focus is a little different. Paul said that each believer must "remain in the situation in which he was called." The Greek word for called is the same one that we've already seen in verses 15, 17, and 18. And what we've seen is that this word can have two different nuances when it's connected to salvation. 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."

Now Jesus didn't use the word "called" in this verse, 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 Paul actually used the word "called." Listen to what he 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 7:15–18 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 20. He was talking about the time when God saved them. He was telling believers to remain in the situation that they were in when they were called internally to salvation. Now the Greek word for situation actually comes from a noun that has the same root as the verb for called. That's why the King James Version and the New King James Version have the word "calling" here. The New King James Version says, "Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called."

But all the other major conservative translations have a different word here. The Christian Standard Bible, the NET Bible, and the New International Version have the word "situation," and the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible have the word "condition." And the reason all these translations don't have the word "calling" is that the Greek noun here has a different nuance than the verb. It doesn't make much sense for both words to refer to the effectual call to salvation. Paul would basically be saying that we should remain in the same salvation in which we were saved. It's more likely that Paul was using the noun to refer to our life situation at the time of salvation.

This Greek noun is used only one other time in this letter, and we already saw it back in chapter 1 and

verse 26. Look at what Paul wrote in that verse: “Brothers and sisters, consider your calling: Not many were wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth.” So in that verse Paul was talking about the condition of the Corinthian believers when God called them to salvation. Most of them didn’t have worldly wisdom, power, and wealth. They were basically nobodies in the world’s eyes. And Paul was talking about something similar in chapter 7 and verse 20. He was talking primarily about our marital status at the time of salvation, but then he referred to circumcision as an illustration. He was saying that it doesn’t matter whether we’re single or married at the time of salvation or whether men are circumcised or uncircumcised. As a general rule we should remain in the condition we were in when we got saved.

Now let’s move on to 1 Corinthians 7:21. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: “Were you called while a slave? Don’t let it concern you. But if you can become free, by all means take the opportunity.” So in this verse Paul gave us a second illustration of the principle of remaining in the situation we were in at the time of salvation. The first one was circumcision, and the second one was slavery. Now the subject of slavery is a very controversial theme in Scripture. We see it all over Scripture, going back to the very first book of the Bible. Genesis 12:16 says that Abraham acquired male and female slaves while he was in Egypt. One of those slaves was Hagar, who was the mother of Abraham’s son Ishmael. Then Genesis 26:14 says that Abraham’s son Isaac had many slaves. And Isaac’s son Jacob had two wives named Leah and Rachel, and each of them had a female slave who ended up giving birth to some of Jacob’s children.

Then many years later when Jacob’s descendants were on Mount Sinai to receive God’s laws, he gave them instructions about slaves in Exodus 21. He gave them permission to own slaves but gave them some pretty strict regulations about this practice. Basically the Israelites had to treat their slaves well and not mistreat them. But Exodus 21:21 clearly says that a slave is the property of his owner. And so a slave had to do whatever his master told him to do. He was under the complete authority of his master. Now most people think negatively about slavery because they connect it with the practice of kidnapping black people from Africa to serve as slaves in America. But this practice is clearly forbidden in Scripture. Exodus 21:16 says that “whoever kidnaps a person must be put to death, whether he sells him or the person is found in his possession.”

So some forms of slavery are clearly wrong according to Scripture. But slavery itself is not inherently wrong. Now some people would become slaves because of something sinful that they did. Perhaps they stole something and got caught, but they weren’t able to make restitution. And so they had to sell themselves into slavery to pay back their debt. But many people grew up as slaves because their parents were slaves when they were born. So there was nothing evil that they did to deserve being slaves. It was just the condition that they were born into. And if they had a good master who treated them well, they were would have been in pretty good shape. They probably would have been well educated and would have gained some valuable skills.

So there’s nothing inherently wrong with being a slave. And that’s why slavery is used frequently in the New Testament as a description of believers. Paul referred to himself as a slave of Jesus in several of his letters. That’s what we see in Romans 1:1, for example. Now most translations have the word “servant” in

that verse, but Paul used the same Greek word for slave that we have here in 1 Corinthians 7:21. He wasn't simply saying that he served Jesus but that he was owned by Jesus. And Paul basically said the same thing about all believers in Romans 6:18. He said that we used to be slaves of sin but that we became slaves of righteousness when God saved us. And to be slaves of righteousness just means that we're slaves of Jesus who has commanded us to live righteously. He purchased us when he died on the cross, and now we're obligated to obey him. In Romans 10:9 Paul said that we can't be saved unless we confess Jesus as our Lord. We must submit to him as our master.

But what about people who were owned by a human master when they got saved? This is the situation that Paul was addressing in 1 Corinthians 7:21. He asked the question, "Were you called as a slave?" He used the same Greek word for called that we just saw in verse 20. So once again he was talking about the effectual call to salvation. And he was talking to people who were slaves when they got saved. So Paul took the same approach here that he did in verse 18 when he used the illustration of circumcision. He started by asking a question. But in verse 18 he was not as direct, because his question was in the third person. He asked, "Was anyone already circumcised when he was called?" But here in verse 21 his question was in the second person. And it was actually in the second person singular. In English we can't tell whether a second person pronoun is singular or plural, but in Greek they could tell. And here Paul used a second person singular verb here. He was getting very personal and addressing the Corinthian believers as individuals.

Then Paul offered a response to those who would have answered his question by saying "yes." He said, "Don't let it concern you." The Greek word for concern is used 10 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote two of them. Both of them are in this letter, and the other one is found in chapter 9 and verse 9. Look at what Paul wrote there: "For it is written in the law of Moses, Do not muzzle an ox while it treads out grain. Is God really concerned about oxen?" So in this verse Paul was quoting Deuteronomy 25:4 to teach the principle that some people should be paid for their service to the Lord. He was basically arguing from the lesser to the greater. If oxen should be get to eat because of their work, then so should Christian leaders who teach God's Word. He correctly deduced that God is more concerned about people than about oxen.

We also see the Greek word for concern in John 10:13. Look at what Jesus said in verses 11–13: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and doesn't own the sheep, leaves them and runs away when he sees a wolf coming. The wolf then snatches and scatters them. This happens because he is a hired man and doesn't care about the sheep." The word "care" at the end of verse 13 comes from the same Greek word that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 7. Jesus called himself the good shepherd who died to save his spiritual sheep. And he compared himself to someone who is hired to watch the sheep but doesn't care about them. Now it's bad for a shepherd not to be concerned about the sheep. But in 1 Corinthians 7:21 Paul gave a command that people who were slaves when they were saved should not be concerned about it. In other words, it didn't matter whether they were slaves or not. God wasn't displeased with them just because they were slaves.

Now this doesn't mean that God didn't allow a slave to become free from slavery. Paul addressed that is-

sue at the end of verse 21, and we'll dive into that statement in more detail next week. But Paul's main point here was that it wasn't essential for a slave to get out of that condition. They could live in full obedience to the Lord as slaves. And that's why Paul could give instructions Christian slaves in several of his letters. Listen to what he wrote in Colossians 3:22–24: "Slaves, obey your human masters in everything. Don't work only while being watched, as people-pleasers, but work wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people, knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ."

So Christian slaves were to please God by obeying their human masters in everything, even when they weren't being watched. They needed to realize that ultimately they were serving God, and he's always watching. And Paul said that one day God would reward them for their faithful service. Now most Christians aren't slaves today, but many of us have a job. And when we're at work, we're sort of like slaves. Our boss doesn't own us, but he tells us what to do when we're on the clock. And so the instructions that Paul gave to slaves have some application for us. We should submit to our boss not because he deserves it but because we want to obey the Lord. Now this doesn't mean that we always need to do what our boss says. If he commands us to lie or commit some other sin, then we must obey God rather than people. But otherwise we need to do what our boss says and do it wholeheartedly for the Lord. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help in this area.