

1 CORINTHIANS 7:21B–22

February 5, 2023

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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. And in verses 10–16 he dealt more specifically with the issue of divorce. He said that if a believer is married to an unbeliever, the believer is not allowed to get a divorce if the unbeliever is willing to stay married. But Paul did mention one exception to this rule in verse 15. He said, “But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases.” So 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.

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.

Then in verse 20 Paul basically restated the general rule that he just gave in verse 17. He said, "Let each of you remain in the situation in which he was called." So once again Paul commanded believers to stay in the life situation that they were in when God saved them. He was talking primarily about our marital status, but then he referred to circumcision as an illustration. So his main point was that it doesn't matter whether we're single or married at the time of salvation. We can serve the Lord and please him in either situation. And it doesn't matter whether men are circumcised or uncircumcised at the time of salvation. That was important issue during Old Testament times, but not anymore. Men can be faithful followers of Jesus whether they're circumcised or uncircumcised.

Then in verse 21 Paul gave us a second illustration of the principle of remaining in the situation that we were in when God saved us. In the beginning of verse 21 Paul said, "Were you called while a slave? Don't let it concern you." Now most people today think very negatively about slavery. But in Exodus 21 God gave the Israelites permission to own slaves. So there's nothing inherently wrong with owning slaves. But this doesn't mean that all forms of slavery are acceptable. In Exodus 21:16 God prohibited the practice of kidnapping people and selling them as slaves. And he said that the penalty for breaking this command was death. So it was wrong to kidnap black people from Africa to serve as slaves in America. But there's nothing inherently wrong with owning slaves or being a slave.

And this is why Paul said that believers who were slaves when they got saved didn't need to be concerned about it. In other words, it didn't matter whether they were slaves or not. God was not displeased with

them just because they were slaves. They could live in full obedience to the Lord even though they were in that situation. So it wasn't essential for a slave to get out of that condition. Now this doesn't mean that God didn't allow a slave to become free from slavery. It's important to note here that Paul did not specifically command slaves to remain in that situation. In verses 17 and 20 he gave a general command to stay in the situation we were in when God saved us. And he applied that command directly to the issue of circumcision in verses 18–19. But he did not do that with the subject of slavery in verse 21. Instead he went in a different direction at the end of the verse.

Now we're ready to cover some new material and look at the second half of 1 Corinthians 7:21. In this verse Paul said, "Were you called while a slave? Don't let it concern you. But if you can become free, by all means take the opportunity." The statement in the second half of this verse starts with the word "but," and so it introduces a contrast between the two halves of this verse. There was nothing wrong with being a slave, but if a slave was able to become freed from slavery, then Paul said that the slave should take advantage of that opportunity. Now the Christian Standard Bible has a footnote here that presents an alternative translation. The footnote says, "But even though you can become free, make the most of your position as a slave." So this interpretation goes in the opposite direction. It basically says that if slaves can become free, they should remain as slaves and strive to please the Lord in that situation.

Now both of these views agree that Paul was talking about the possibility of becoming free from slavery. The Greek word for free is used 23 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote 16 of them, and in many cases he was clearly making a contrast between being a slave and being free. For example, in 1 Corinthians 12:13 he said that "we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free." In Galatians 3:28 Paul said that "there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus." In Ephesians 6:8 Paul said that "whatever good one does, slave or free, he will receive this back from the Lord." So the word "free" in these passages just refers to the opposite of being a slave, and that's clearly what Paul meant here in 1 Corinthians 7:21 as well.

So everyone agrees that Paul was talking about the possibility of becoming free from slavery at the end of this verse. But there's some disagreement on how to handle Paul's instructions in the last phrase. And that's because this phrase is a bit ambiguous. There actually is no Greek word here that means "opportunity." Instead we just have two Greek words here. The first one means "rather," and the second one means "use." The New King James Version has the most literal translation of this phrase. It says, "Rather use it," but the word "it" is in italics to show that it doesn't come from the Greek text. It's just been added for clarification since Paul didn't include a direct object for the verb that means "use."

This Greek verb for use is found only 11 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote nine of those occurrences, and four of them are in this letter. There are two of them here in chapter 7 and two of them in chapter 9. In chapter 9 Paul was talking about his right to receive financial support from the believers he ministered to. In verse 12 he said, "If others have this right to receive benefits from you, don't we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right; instead, we endure everything so that we will not hinder the gospel of Christ." Then in verse 15 Paul said, "For my part I have used none of these rights, nor have I written these things that they may be applied in my case." So in both of those verses Paul said

that he didn't use his right to receive financial support. In other words, he didn't take advantage of a benefit that was available to him.

Paul also used this Greek verb in 1 Timothy 5:23. In that verse he told Timothy, "Don't continue drinking only water, but use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses." I can identify with Timothy here. I pretty much drink only water almost all the time. Occasionally I'll have some apple juice or some orange juice. But I never drink wine or beer, and I hardly ever drink soda. I like water because it's good for you and it's very cheap. Now of course Paul was telling Timothy to drink wine for medicinal purposes. But I don't even like to take medicine. I usually take medicine only if I'm desperate. But unless I'm feeling terrible, I like to let my body take care of itself. We keep a variety of medicines in our home. But as a general rule I don't use them. I don't take advantage of this benefit that's available to me, just like Paul didn't take advantage of the financial support that was available to him.

But in 1 Timothy 5:23 Paul commanded Timothy to use a little wine for medicinal purposes because of his stomach problems. And in 1 Corinthians 7:21 we have the same Greek word for use, and it's also in the form of a command. Paul commanded believing slaves who could become free to use something. He didn't say what they were to use. He just said, "Rather use." So what was Paul talking about using? We can only answer that question by looking carefully at the context. And there are really only two choices here. Was Paul talking about believing slaves using their position as a slave? That's what he was focused on at the beginning of the verse. So perhaps he was telling believing slaves who could become free to remain as slaves and continue using their slavery in the Lord's service.

But I think it's more likely that Paul was talking about believing slaves using their ability to become free from slavery. The reason this view makes more sense is that the word "use" is just pointing back to the previous phrase and not the beginning of the verse. In general we should rely on the part of the context that's closest to the word or phrase that we're trying to understand. The farther away we have to go in the context to find support, the weaker the argument is. So the word "use" is probably building on the statement that comes right before it: "If you can become free." Paul was telling believing slaves who could become free to use that ability. The verb is in the second person singular, so Paul was directing his command to each individual slave. And the Greek word for rather is probably adding emphasis here. I think the Christian Standard Bible gives us the right idea with the phrase "by all means."

So I like the way the Christian Standard Bible translates the end of verse 21. It's not super literal, but it communicates what Paul was saying pretty well. And all the other major conservative translations give us something similar here. None of them takes the interpretation that we saw in the footnote for the Christian Standard Bible. Now that view used to be more popular, especially among more liberal Bible commentators. But most of the recent conservative commentators on this passage take the view that we see in all the best translations like the Christian Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. Paul was telling slaves to become free if they could.

And this view makes sense, because even though slavery is not inherently evil, it's also not ideal. I think we can safely conclude that there wouldn't be any slavery on the earth if the human race hadn't fallen into

sin. That's because there wouldn't be any poverty without sin in the world, and poverty is the main reason that people end up being slaves. Or they're simply forced to be slaves by wicked people. But the beautiful thing about this situation is that God works all things together for our good and his glory. God wasn't surprised when the human race fell into sin, because it was part of his plan from the beginning. And slavery has existed throughout human history because God allowed it in his sovereignty. He's used it for good, because it's a picture of his relationship with us!

And that leads us to verse 22. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "For he who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called as a free man is Christ's slave." This verse starts with the word "for," which introduces an explanation for what Paul said in verse 21. But he wasn't building on what he said at the end of verse 21. That's just a parenthetical comment about what believing slaves should do if they can become free. Instead Paul was pointing back to the beginning of verse 21, where he said that believing slaves shouldn't be concerned if they were called while a slave.

So in verse 22 Paul was giving the reason that believing slaves shouldn't be concerned about their condition. And he started by saying that the person who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord's freed person. The Christian Standard Bible uses masculine language here, and so do most Bible translations, but the Greek text is generic and can refer to a man or a woman. He was talking about a person who is called. Now that word "called" should be very familiar to us by now. We've already seen it in verses 15, 17, 18, 20, and 21. In fact, we saw it twice in verse 18. So in the past seven verses this word is used a total of six times. And now we're seeing two more times here in verse 22. In each case this word comes from the Greek verb.

And what we've seen with this Greek word is that it 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 that 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.

Now we concluded that every time Paul used the Greek word for called in 1 Corinthians 7:15–21, he 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 concept here in verse 22. He was still talking about Christians, and so this call must be the effectual call to salvation. When Paul referred to the person who is called by the Lord as a slave, he was saying that this person was a slave at the time of salvation. It's the same thing that he was talking about in the beginning of verse 21. He was talking about the life situation we were in when we got saved, and more specifically he was focused on whether we were slaves or free.

Now the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase “called by the Lord” in verse 22. But the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible have the phrase “called in the Lord.” So which one is right? Well, the Greek preposition here is very flexible and can have a variety of nuances, including the two that we have here. But I'm inclined to think that the phrase “called in the Lord” is correct. That's because Scripture teaches that God the Father is the one who does the work of calling people internally to salvation. But the word “Lord” here is probably referring to God the Son, not God the Father, as we've already seen many times in this letter. So I think Paul was saying that we were called by God the Father in God the Son.

In fact, that's exactly what Paul said back in chapter 1 and verse 9. There he wrote, “God is faithful; you were called by him into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” So God the Father called us to salvation, and when he did that, he called us into fellowship with our Lord Jesus. I think that's what he was talking about in chapter 7 and verse 22 when he said that we were called in the Lord. The idea is that we have a special relationship with Jesus. And that's true even for people who were called as a slave. But Paul went even further and said that a Christian slave is actually the Lord's freed person. When God saved us, he set us free from slavery to sin. Now we don't have to sin anymore! We belong to the Lord Jesus, and he gives us the power to say no to sin. He always provides a way to escape from temptation!

But it's significant that Paul referred to Jesus as our Lord twice in the first half of verse 22. It's certainly true that Christians have been set free from slavery to sin. But this doesn't mean that we don't have any kind of master anymore. Now we have a new master, and that master is Jesus. In Romans 1:1 Paul referred to himself literally as a slave of Christ Jesus, and what he said about himself is true for all believers. And that's exactly what Paul talked about at the end of 1 Corinthians 7:22. He said, “Likewise he who is called as a free man is Christ's slave.” This sentence begins with the word “likewise,” which means that Paul was making a comparison with the first half of the verse. He was saying that the two situations he mentioned here are similar to each other. The person who is called as a slave is similar to the one who is called as a free person.

Now that seems like a strange comparison at first. After all, aren't slaves and free people in opposite situations? That may be the case on the surface, but ultimately it's not true if they're saved! First Paul said that a slave is actually free in the Lord, and then he said that a free person is actually Christ's slave! I just mentioned that Paul referred to himself as a slave of Christ Jesus, and he was certainly a free man. So the point here is that all believers are both free and slaves in a spiritual sense. We've been set free from sin, but we're slaves of Christ. The word "Christ" is a title that just means "anointed one," and it refers to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah who was promised in the Old Testament. And as the Messiah he fulfills the offices of prophet, priest, and king since all three of those offices involved being anointed.

So this is why it ultimately doesn't matter whether believers are slaves or free. A Christian slave should certainly become free if possible. But our spiritual status is much more important than our physical status. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. God is willing to save anyone regardless of earthly status. And he gives us a new status before him in which we're free from the power of sin and slaves under his gracious rule. So if we've been called to salvation, then it doesn't matter whether we're slaves or not. It doesn't matter whether we're circumcised or not. And it doesn't matter whether we're single or married. That's the main point in 1 Corinthians 7. We can serve the Lord faithfully if we're single, and we can serve the Lord faithfully if we're married. The main focus of our life should not be on trying to change our marital status. It should be on pleasing our Lord and master, Jesus Christ. Let's close in prayer and ask for his help to do that.