

1 CORINTHIANS 7:23–24

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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. And he began by giving a general rule that applied to the specific situation that he just talked about. He said that we should live our life in the situation the Lord assigned when God called us. So God is in complete control of our lives, and the point in context is that 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. Now Paul certainly wasn’t saying that we can’t get married if we’re single when we get saved. I think his point was 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 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. He said that if a man was already circumcised when he was called to salvation, he shouldn’t undo his circumcision. And if a man was uncircumcised when he was called to salvation, then he shouldn’t get circumcised. But we know that Paul was just giving a general rule here, because he 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. So just like there was an exception that allowed for divorce with mixed marriages, there was also an exception that allowed for circumcision after salvation.

Then in verse 20 Paul basically restated the general rule that he just gave in verse 17. He said that we should remain in the situation in which we were called. And in verse 21 he gave us a second illustration of this principle: slavery. Now most people today think very negatively about this issue. 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 in verse 21 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. But this doesn't mean that God didn't allow a slave to become free from slavery. Paul ended verse 21 by telling Christian slaves that if they could become free, they should by all means take the opportunity. So Paul was telling slaves to become free if they could.

And this statement 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's exactly what Paul talked about in verse 22. He said, "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." In this verse Paul was giving the reason that believing slaves shouldn't be concerned about their condition. And he started by saying that the person who was a slave at the time of salvation is the Lord's freed person. So Paul's point here is that God set us free from slavery to sin when he saved us. Now as Christians we don't have to sin anymore! We belong to the Lord Jesus, and he gives us the power to say no to sin. Paul told us later in this letter that God always provides a way for us 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: Jesus. And that's exactly what Paul talked about at the end of verse 22. He said that the one "who is called as a free man is Christ's slave." And he used the word "likewise" the two parts of this verse together. 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. 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 Jesus the Messiah. A Christian slave who has an earthly master should certainly become free if possible. But our spiritual status is much more important than our physical status. God is willing to save anyone regardless of earthly status. And when he saved us, he gave us a new status in which we're free from the power of sin and slaves under his gracious rule. The focus of our lives should be on pleasing him.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:23. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of people." In this verse Paul concluded his illustration about slavery by elaborating on what he said at the end of verse 22. He said there that the one who is called as a free person is Christ's slave. But in verse 23 Paul addressed free people directly using a second person pronoun. Now Paul also used second person pronouns back in verse 21. In that verse the pronouns were singular, and Paul used them to address Christian slaves individually. But in verse 23 he used a plural pronoun to address believing free people as a group. He said, "You were bought with a price."

The Greek word for bought is used 30 times in the New Testament, but Paul wrote only three of them, and all of them are found in this letter. We already saw the first one back in chapter 6 and verse 20. Paul said the same exact thing in that verse: "You were bought at a price." We're going to see this word again in chapter 7 and verse 30, where Paul said that Christians should be like "those who buy as though they didn't own anything." So in that verse Paul was using the word literally with the idea of acquiring things in exchange for money. And this meaning is very common in the Gospels. For example, in Mark 6 Jesus was teaching a large crowd of people. But in verse 36 the disciples asked Jesus to "send them away so that they can go into the surrounding countryside and villages to buy themselves something to eat." In Mark 16 after Jesus died and was buried, we see in verse 1 that "when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they could go and anoint him." So in both of these verses the Greek word for buy is being used literally.

And of course we're very familiar with the concept of buying something. The process has certainly changed over time, but the concept is still the same. Back in those days money was made out of metal, and we still use coins a little bit today. But we mostly use paper or plastic now. We either pay with cash or use a credit or debit card to buy things. And with credit and debit cards the payments are made electronically. But we're still acquiring something in exchange for money, whether it's food, gas, or clothes. However, when Paul talked about making a purchase in 1 Corinthians 7:23, he was talking about the purchase of people. He said, "You were bought at a price." He wasn't saying that these believers in Corinth were buying something. He said that they were bought. He used a verb in the passive voice, which just means that the subject is receiving the action instead of doing the action.

So Paul's point here is that someone else bought these Corinthian believers. Now he didn't clearly communicate who bought them in this verse. But in the previous verse Paul said that the one who was called as a free person is Christ's slave. So I think it's obvious in verse 23 that Jesus was the one who bought them. He purchased them as his slaves. But what is this price that Paul was talking about? The Greek word for price is used 41 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 18 of them. We're seeing the sec-

ond of four occurrences in this letter. Of course we already saw it back in chapter 6 and verse 20, where Paul made this same statement. But he also used it in chapter 12 and verses 23–24, where it's translated with the word "honor" in both verses. And normally this Greek word does have the nuance of honor or respect. But occasionally this word refers to the amount at which something is valued. And that's clearly how Paul was using the word here in chapter 7 and verse 23.

But what was the price that God paid to purchase us? Paul didn't address that question here because I think he expected his readers to know the answer already. And I think we already know the answer as well, but let's get confirmation by looking at some other passages. The same Greek verb for bought is used in Revelation 5:9, and in this verse we can see what the price was. John had a vision of what would happen in the future, and in this vision he heard a song that was directed to Jesus. Look at the words of this song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slaughtered, and you purchased people for God by your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation."

The Greek verb for purchased in this verse is the same one that's translated with the word "bought" in our passage. But here we can see what the purchase price is: the blood of Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross and shed his blood, he paid the price for us to be set free from slavery to sin and become his slaves. This truth is called the doctrine of redemption. We see that language used in 1 Peter 1. Look at what Peter said in verses 18–19: "For you know that you were redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of an unblemished and spotless lamb." So God redeemed us or set us free from bondage to sin with the precious blood of Jesus that he shed when he died on the cross. And when he did that, he fulfilled the Old Testament image of the Passover lamb. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5:7, "Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed."

So Jesus paid the ultimate price to purchase our freedom. He died in our place and took the punishment that we deserved because of our sin. But then he rose again, and now we're his slaves. So when he bought us, he transferred our slavery from sin to himself. And on that basis Paul gave the Corinthian believers a command in 1 Corinthians 7:23. At the end of the verse he said, "Do not become slaves of people." So in verse 21 Paul said that Christian slaves should become free if possible. And now in verse 23 he looked at that situation in the opposite direction. He said that Christians who are free should not become slaves of people. We should do everything we can to avoid becoming someone's slave, because it's not an ideal situation to be in.

But sadly there are times when people are forced into slavery. Unfortunately the history of our country is tainted by this problem. For years many Africans were kidnapped and forced into slavery here. And even today people continue to be kidnapped around the world and forced to be slaves. Perhaps the most common form of this hideous practice is sex trafficking. So there are certainly times when Christians might end up becoming slaves through no fault of their own. And they're not sinning if they're forced against their will to disobey God. But Paul wasn't addressing that issue here in verse 23. He was telling us not to become someone's slave voluntarily. If we have a choice, we should remain free instead of becoming a slave.

Now we might wonder why someone would voluntarily choose to be a slave. But in Roman society not all slaves were viewed as lowly and treated poorly. Some slaves were very skilled and highly respected. And some people could actually improve their social standing if they sold themselves as a slave to a wealthy and powerful person. They could gain prestige and have a lot of privileges in the right situation. And I think this is what Paul was talking about in verse 23. He did not want believers to sell themselves as slaves to gain a higher status in society. Ultimately we shouldn't care about what others think of us. What matters is how God views us, and he doesn't care about our earthly status. It doesn't even matter to him if we're slaves when he saves us. If we can't get out of slavery, we don't need to be concerned about it. God doesn't look down on us or consider us to be inferior.

But God also doesn't want us to become slaves if we can avoid it. After all, we're slaves of Christ, and so why would we want to have another master as well? What would we do if our human master commands us to disobey the Lord? Peter said in Acts 5:29 that "we must obey God rather than people." So when push comes to shove, we have to disobey our human master in order to obey Jesus. And that would probably put us in a very difficult situation. We could very easily end up being punished and mistreated. Now Jesus said in Matthew 5:10 that we're blessed if we're persecuted because of righteousness. So Christian slaves can still please the Lord in this situation. But they shouldn't stay in that situation if they can avoid it without sinning. This is one of the reasons that Paul told Christian slaves to become free if possible. And if we're not a slave, we shouldn't become one.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:24. Look at what Paul said in this verse: "Brothers and sisters, each person is to remain with God in the situation in which he was called." Paul started this verse by addressing his readers as brothers and sisters. We've already seen this phrase seven times in 1 Corinthians, and five of them are at the beginning of a new paragraph. But now we're seeing it for the first time at the end of a paragraph. That's more unusual, but it does happen from time to time. We're going to see it again when we reach the last verse of chapter 15. So occasionally Paul liked to end a section or a paragraph by addressing his readers directly and using a phrase that described his relationship with them. And one of his favorites was the phrase "brothers and sisters."

This phrase actually comes from just one word in the original Greek. Sometimes this term can be translated simply with the word "brothers." For example, in 1 Timothy 5:1 Paul told Timothy to exhort "younger men as brothers." Paul was clearly talking only about males there. But when this Greek word is in the plural, like it is here in 1 Corinthians 7:24, it usually refers to a mixed group that includes both men and women. And I think that's what Paul intended here. It seems pretty obvious that he expected women as well as men to hear what he wrote in this letter. After all, in this chapter he was giving instructions to both men and women about marriage. And in chapter 11 he talked about the need for women to wear head coverings.

And so I believe the phrase "brothers and sisters" is a helpful and appropriate translation here. The English Standard Version and the Legacy Standard Bible just have the word "brothers," which I think is misleading. Now thankfully the English Standard Version has a footnote with the phrase "brothers and sisters" as an alternate translation, but unfortunately most readers don't look at the footnotes. The older edi-

tions of the New American Standard Bible have the word “brethren,” which is just an archaic word that means “brothers.” But the 2020 revision of the New American Standard Bible has the phrase “brothers and sisters” just like the Christian Standard Bible. I don’t like everything about this revision, but I do like this change.

Now let’s talk about the meaning of the Greek word translated “brothers and sisters.” Obviously Paul wasn’t talking about a physical relationship here. He wasn’t saying that he was related to his readers by blood. Instead he was talking about a spiritual relationship. He was emphasizing the fact that as Christians we’re brothers and sisters in God’s family. This is a point that Jesus stressed during his earthly ministry. Listen to what we read about Jesus in Mark 3:31–35: “His mother and brothers came, and standing outside, they sent word to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him and told him, ‘Look, your mother, your brothers, and your sisters are outside asking for you.’ He replied to them, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ Looking at those sitting in a circle around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”

So what Jesus was saying here is that his followers make up his true family. In other words, our heavenly family takes priority over our earthly family. It’s a wonderful blessing when our earthly family members are part of our heavenly family as well. But that is often not the case. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 10:34–37: “Don’t assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household. The one who loves a father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” So the point here is that whether our earthly family members are believers or not, we must ultimately be loyal to Jesus. No one should be more important to us than him.

Now Jesus wasn’t implying in these passages that we don’t have any responsibilities to our blood relatives. As we’ve seen recently, Paul taught us earlier in 1 Corinthians 7 that a Christian should not pursue a divorce from an unbelieving spouse. And in 1 Timothy 5:8 Paul said that a Christian man must provide for the members of his family. That even includes his parents if they need support. This is part of what it means to honor our parents, as Jesus taught clearly in Matthew 15:4–6. But life can be difficult when we have family members who aren’t saved. The closeness that we have with them is limited, because our bond is only physical and not spiritual. But as Christians we have the common bond of being adopted into God’s family. We share a heavenly Father and an eternal destiny. We submit to the same Lord and read the same Scripture.

This is why it’s so important for us to be part of a good church. If we’re going to be together forever, then we should get started during this life! We should enjoy regular fellowship with our Christian brothers and sisters. We should pray together about our needs and concerns. And we should study God’s Word together and encourage each other to obey it. Those are all things that we do in this class! And they’re just some of the reasons that gathering together for church is essential. We need to stay connected, especially as we face increasing opposition in this world. Paul told us in 2 Timothy 3:1 that “hard times will come in the last days.” We need to keep encouraging each other to stand firm on God’s Word.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:24 Paul referred to his readers as his brothers and sisters. In other words, he wasn't just writing to them as an apostle with authority over them. He also wanted them to understand that ultimately he was a fellow Christian. They were not his personal slaves but his spiritual siblings. Many of them were immature spiritually, but he expressed confidence that they were part of God's family. They had been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. And in verse 24 Paul told his Christian brothers and sisters in Corinth that "each person is to remain with God in the situation in which he was called." Paul finished this paragraph and this section by repeating the general principle that he gave at the beginning of this paragraph in verse 17. He was returning full circle to how he started this paragraph. He was basically putting bookends around this paragraph.

But Paul also stated this general principle in the middle of the paragraph. In verse 20 he gave this principle to separate the two illustrations that he gave on circumcision and slavery. And our statement here in verse 24 is almost exactly what Paul said in verse 20. Once again we can see that Paul used the word "each," and as before he was talking only about Christians. And he commanded each Christian to remain in the situation in which he was called. Paul used the same Greek words for remain and called that he used in verse 20. We've now seen the Greek word for called nine times in verses 15–24. And once again Paul used this word to refer to the internal call or the effectual call to salvation, just like he did in the other eight occurrences.

So when God drew us to himself and saved us, we were in a certain life situation. And Paul said that as a general rule, we should stay in that situation. Paul used a command here in the third person, and so it's given only indirectly to the readers. But it's still a command that needs to be obeyed! Now this general rule does have exceptions, as we've already seen. Most single believers can get married if they'd like to. Christian men who are uncircumcised can get circumcised in certain situations like Timothy did. And Christian slaves should certainly become free if possible. But believers who are free should not become slaves. And Christians who are in a mixed marriage should not pursue a divorce. That last point was really Paul's main focus here.

So Paul ended this paragraph in verse 24 by reminding us about this general principle. But this time he added a short but very important phrase. He said that we should remain "with God" in the situation in which we were called. We need to understand that we're accountable to God for the way that we live in whatever situation he's put us in. He's always watching us, and he even knows our hearts and our motives. Now this fact is a bit scary, but it should also be very comforting. It's a reminder that God is always with us. He's here to help and sustain us because he loves us. We can call out to him anytime, and we know that he will always hear us. We can be confident that he cares about our needs and that he will always do what's best for us.

So God will help us to follow the general principle that Paul gave us in verse 24. It's not easy to be a slave when you want to be free and can't be. But God will sustain that person and grant endurance. It's not easy to be in a mixed marriage when your spouse is wicked and hates God. But God will give the strength that we need to glorify him in that situation. Our focus should not be on changing our earthly status. There's nothing wrong with trying to improve our life situation in certain areas. But we shouldn't get consumed

with it. Ultimately it doesn't matter whether we're free or a slave. And it doesn't matter whether we're single or married. We can serve the Lord faithfully in any of those situations. We need to stay focused on pleasing the Lord and living in obedience to him. Let's close in prayer and ask for his help to do that.