

5. Some at Corinth believed that the advantages of a celibate life respecting Christian holiness justify divorcing one's spouse, especially if that spouse is not a believer. But Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that freedom, not celibacy, is the issue in believers living holy lives. Christ has delivered them from their bondage, and they must be careful to not allow themselves to again be subjected to any form of enslavement. And because any deviation from the truth is movement toward bondage, the Christian who would live as a free man must understand himself and what it means for him to live the life God has given him. He must conform to the truth of his person and his life, and this means embracing with settled contentment what actually *is* rather than longing or striving for what *is not*. Christ's people are to be content to remain as they are, and this applies not just to the marital question, but to every arena and aspect of their lives.

The Corinthians were concerned in their letter with the issue of celibacy, and Paul knew they'd tend to read his response through that grid. He *was* addressing their concern, but with an overarching principle that could not be limited to that one issue. Paul wanted to make sure they understood that his instruction pertained to the totality of their lives, and he penned the next section (7:17-24) with that goal in mind. This is clearly evident from the structure of the passage.

- Three times in the passage – at the outset, in the middle and again in closing – Paul reiterated his maxim that believers are to remain as they are (vv. 17, 20, 24).
- Between those three instances Paul provided two scenarios to illustrate how Christians are to understand and apply this principle (vv. 18-19, 21-23).

Those scenarios will be treated individually, but, by way of introducing and framing them, it's important to note a couple of things:

- 1) First, Paul chose real-life situations that actually existed in the Corinthian church (as most of the churches of that day): There were Jewish and Gentile believers within that body and also individuals who were slaves. (Corinth, like all Roman cities, was filled with slaves who constituted the majority of the workforce of the Roman Empire – skilled labor as well as unskilled. It's been estimated that slaves comprised 75 percent of Rome's population in the first century.)
- 2) Second, Paul was careful to choose illustrations that would most powerfully make his point. These particular ones do so in two ways. First, if there are any conditions which would seem to be exceptions to Paul's injunction for Christians to remain as they are, those related to circumcision and slavery are certainly among them (for personal, religious, cultural and socio-economic reasons).

The second way these two conditions are uniquely suited to Paul's point is that the distinctions of circumcision/uncircumcision and slave/free were profoundly important in the religious, cultural and social context of the Greco-Roman world. They were key issues in identifying one's social and religious class and status, but Paul recognized that Christ has erased all such distinctions (Colossians 3:9-11).

- a. Paul's intent in this passage was to demonstrate to the Corinthians that the principle of true freedom – expressed in the believer discerning his own person and condition and ordering himself accordingly – applies to every facet of one's life in Christ, not just one's marital situation. He drew upon two of the most defining and compelling life conditions to prove it, but he prefaced that discussion with an explicit statement of what he'd already implied to this point (7:17).

The first thing to observe about this statement is that Paul used two complementary descriptors in constructing it: “*as the Lord has assigned to each*” and “*as God has called each.*”

- The first speaks to the believer's individual endowments – the apportionments (*gifts*, v. 7) which God has uniquely given him and woven into his person and which fit him for the life the Lord assigned to him.
- The second expresses the same basic idea, but emphasizes that the Christian's gifts from God are reflected in and equip him for the condition and circumstances unique to his own life as a believer in this world.

Thus the *calling* Paul refers to is not the individual's ministerial “call” as a Christian – i.e., the particular ministerial work the Lord is calling him to do, but the condition and circumstances that characterized his life when God called him to faith in His Son. This is obvious from the balance of the passage (vv. 18ff). In a word, Paul was reminding the Corinthians that God had ordered their individual person and circumstance with a view to their salvation and life in Christ; therefore, they were not to despise or try to cast off those features and conditions.

Secondly, Paul affirmed that this principle is truly universal. It pertains to the totality of a given Christian's life, but also to every individual in Christ's Church. Paul was penning his instruction to the Corinthians because of specific questions and concerns they had raised in their letter to him, but he wanted them to know that his response wasn't uniquely tailored to them and their concerns; his instruction to them was his instruction to all the churches, irrespective of the particular situation a given person or church was facing. *Whatever the condition or circumstance or concern regarding it, Paul's answer was the same.*

- b. Christians are to remain as they are, and Paul first drew upon **circumcision** to make the case (7:18-19). This example highlights the issue of religious status and the distinction between Jew and Gentile in the Christian community. The Jew-Gentile question was front-and-center in the first century as the early Jewish Christians wrestled with the growing number of Gentiles coming into the Church. They were fine with Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus, but most believed the way into God's covenant household continued to be through Israel, as had been the case since Abraham. Thus the Gentiles needed to be circumcised and bind themselves to Torah in order to become part of Messiah's people; in the early Church, circumcision was of utmost importance as a distinguishing mark.

Yet here was Paul insisting that there was no reason for Gentile Christians to be circumcised – any more than there was for circumcised believers to become uncircumcised. Obviously Paul recognized that it's physically impossible to reverse one's circumcision; he wasn't talking about that, but about Christians who came to faith as circumcised individuals (Jews or Gentile proselytes) forsaking their Jewishness (for either ecclesiastical or social benefit). Gentiles are not to become Jewish, but neither are Jewish Christians to renounce their Jewishness.

The reason is that “*circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing*” (7:19a). Circumcision has become irrelevant, not because it's been abrogated, but because it's realized its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Circumcision was preparatory and prophetic, and has now attained its ordained destiny in its spiritual antitype (cf. Deuteronomy 30:1-6 with Romans 2:28-29 and Colossians 2:8-12). This is key in understanding Paul's enigmatic statement that circumcision means nothing; what matters is “*keeping the commandments of God*” (v. 19b). Wasn't circumcision a foundational commandment, such that all other obedience was effectively negated by non-compliance with that obligation (cf. Genesis 17:10-14; Exodus 4:24-26, 12:40-51; Joshua 5:1-9)? The Jewish believers at Corinth certainly understood this, and Paul's words must have shocked them.

Whatever matters of indifference may exist for Christians, few Jewish believers regarded circumcision as one of them. While some might allow that Gentile believers didn't *have* to be circumcised, probably none would agree that circumcision (and so Jewishness) is not preferable. Even the great apostle Peter – who embraced and promoted the truth that Gentiles are fellow sharers in God's grace in Christ (Acts 10-11) – struggled with the notion that Jewish and Gentile Christians have equal status in God's covenant household (Galatians 2:11-21).

Peter – like most of his Jewish brethren – had to learn the truth that “circumcision is nothing.” The early Jewish Christians understood from the Scriptures that the Gentiles were to share in Israel's Messiah; what wasn't evident to them is God's design to make one “new man” in Him: to remove all partitions between Jew and Gentile so as to make Gentiles – *as Gentiles* – equal members in the Abrahamic household; full covenant sons though “disobedient” to God's covenant command.

Now here was Paul – himself a circumcised Jew – making circumcision of no account while insisting upon the necessity of keeping God's commandments. Again, the reason he could do so was that Paul recognized the all-encompassing reality of *christological fulfillment*: All the Scriptures testified of Jesus; now that He has come, all scriptural content has been “christified” in the sense of finding its true meaning and import in Him. Circumcision served its purpose as a “shadow” in the preparatory salvation history and has now yielded to the substance it signified. In Jesus Christ, circumcision has become nothing; *by implication, so has the distinction between Jew and Gentile*. Both have found their destiny in the True Israel – the One in whom Israel, along with the nations, is becoming the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15-16; cf. 3:26-29; Colossians 3:1-11).

Paul's summary assertion in his Galatian epistle thus provides interpretive insight for his present statement: Keeping God's commandments means upholding the truth as it is in Christ; it means conducting oneself according to the reality of new creation in Him. *The truth of new creation is the "rule" imposed upon the sons of the kingdom, and conformity to this truth is compliance with the law of freedom.*

- c. The new creation in Jesus Christ has abolished the millennia-old distinction between Jew and Gentile and the religious status and privilege afforded to those who bear the mark of circumcision. Since the circumcision/uncircumcision distinction no longer exists, every Christian needs to conform to the truth by remaining in the condition in which he was called. And as it is for circumcision and its religious status and privilege, so it is for the class and socio-economic distinctions associated with **slavery** (7:21-23). If circumcision seemed to certain Christians to be preferable to uncircumcision, the superiority of freedom over slavery would have been affirmed by all. If Paul couldn't exclude the issue of circumcision from his injunction to remain as one is, surely he'd never make that claim for slavery. Although some slaves in the ancient Roman world enjoyed privileged and even somewhat distinguished lives as servants of powerful and wealthy masters, what man wouldn't prefer his freedom if given the opportunity?

Yet, just as with circumcision, Paul regarded the Christian's status as a slave or free man to be a matter of indifference: "*Were you called while a slave? Stop letting it be a concern to you.*" Paul was neither foolish nor callous, but perceived all circumstance through the lens of overarching truth: A Christian may be a slave in this life – even the lowest and most oppressed of slaves, but in reality he is free; whatever his earthly circumstance, he is Christ's freedman. The Christian slave is defined and determined by his union with Jesus Christ, and the same is true of the free man: He may be free of earthly masters, but he is Christ's slave.

Paul wanted the Corinthians (as all believers) to be free of all subjugation, and this is achieved by living into the truth – not the truth of what meets the eye and experience, but the truth of new creation in Christ. Being a partaker in Christ's life and renewing power means that earthly conditions are indifferent. Not only are they temporal, they cannot touch the truth of what a person has become in Christ. Present life conditions and circumstances have no mastery or ultimacy; they are neither defining nor determinative. *Instead, in God's hands they are servants of the truth of the believer's new life and destiny in Christ.* Therefore, what matters is that the Christian is Christ's freedman and bondslave; he's been liberated from what truly enslaved him to serve a new master. As to his earthly status, he can be content to remain as he is, *for he is with God* (7:24).

Thus Paul: If a Christian slave is offered his freedom, he may take advantage of it, but so as to employ his new-found freedom as Christ's bondslave. And if that opportunity never presents itself, he is still absolutely free in Christ. And *that* freedom he must never compromise or relinquish. The Christian who is a slave belongs to Christ and the truth as it is in Him, as does his brother who has no earthly master. *Both* are equally bound as free men; *both* must honor and preserve their true freedom and not become slaves of men.