

Challenges Christians Face

Live As You Are Called

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

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August 28, 2011

Live As You Are Called

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of marriage. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Live As You Are Called."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 7:17-24:

¹⁷ Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. ¹⁸ Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. ¹⁹ For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. ²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. ²¹ Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. ²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. (1 Corinthians 7:17-24)

Introduction

A woman was once asked why she wanted to divorce her husband. She said, "When I got married I was looking for the ideal. Instead it became an ordeal. So now I want a new deal!"¹

Sadly, too many married people feel like that after a while.

¹ Tony Evans, *Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations: Stories, Quotes, and Anecdotes from More Than 30 Years of Preaching and Public Speaking* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009), 82.

When Sylvester Stallone was making one of his *Rocky* movies, right after one of his fight scenes, he said, “You know, boxing is a great sport as long as you can yell, ‘Cut!’” Many people feel that way about marriage—it’s a lot of fun as long as you can yell “Cut!” and can get out of it when it’s beating you up too badly.²

Many people, including Christians, struggle with marriages that end up in divorce. According to Richard Fowler of the Minirth-Meier Counseling Clinic, the divorce rate for Christians is only ten percent below that for non-Christians.³

The Christians in Corinth wrote to Paul about singleness, marriage and divorce. Apparently, some of them who were married wanted to get out of their marriages, supposedly because they thought that they could be more holy as single people rather than as married people. Some of them thought that their marriages were a hindrance now that they had reached a higher level of spirituality.

And so the apostle Paul wrote instructions to them about singleness, marriage, and divorce. And although it appears that the apostle Paul was digressing from the topic in today’s text, he was in fact continuing with the same topic. He was instructing Christians to retain the place in life assigned to them by the Lord.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today, Paul teaches that Christians should retain the place in life assigned to them by the Lord. Let’s notice how Paul developed his teaching outline:

1. The rule stated (7:17a, 20, 24).
2. The universality of this rule (7:17b).
3. The illustrations of this rule (7:18-24).
4. The meaning of this rule (7:19, 21).
5. The application of this rule.

² Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations: Stories, Quotes, and Anecdotes from More Than 30 Years of Preaching and Public Speaking* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009), 82.

³ Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 237.

I. The Rule Stated (7:17a, 20, 24)

First, let's look at the rule stated.

Paul in fact stated the rule three times. Notice:

- Verse 17a: **“Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.”**
- Verse 20: **“Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.”**
- Verse 24: **“So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.”**

Now, we may ask the question: “What ‘call’ of God is being referred to?” Most Bible commentators indicate that the “call” here refers to the call to *salvation* rather than the call to *vocation*.

So, what Paul was saying is that when God called a person to himself in salvation, he **should remain in the condition in which he was** when God **called** him to salvation.

Therefore, the rule is simply this: Christians should retain the place in life assigned to them by the Lord.

Some of the Corinthians were trying to get out of their marriages, and Paul was saying that now that they are saved they should remain in their marriages. They should not try to get out of their marriages just because they had now become Christians.

Now, you remember that Paul had previously said (in verse 15) that if the non-Christian spouse no longer wanted to be married that the Christian should let the non-Christian spouse leave the marriage.

However, Paul's point here is that Christians were not to seek to get divorced upon the grounds that they were now Christians.

Paul's rule is simply this: Christians should retain the place in life assigned to them by the Lord.

II. The Universality of This Rule (7:17b)

Second, notice the universality of this rule.

Paul said in verse 17b: **“This is my rule in all the churches.”**

This was not a **rule** that Paul gave only to the Corinthian church. No. **This** was his rule for **all the churches**. He was stressing the importance of this rule.

Further, Paul never made this statement in any of his other letters. Paul’s point in highlighting that this was his **rule in all the churches** emphasizes that it was the theology of the Corinthians—and not his theology—that was in error.

Paul was not giving the Corinthians pious advice. He was not giving them helpful tips. He was not suggesting useful recommendations. No. He was giving them a sound, solid, biblical rule that was to guide them in the way in which they conducted their marriages before God and the world.

Many years ago I remember hearing Dr. Al Martin preach a sermon. During the sermon he said at one point something like this, “Now, what I am about to give you are some helpful suggestions. These suggestions come out of my many years of pastoral experience, and I believe that they may be of help to some of you.”

A little while later in that same sermon he said something like this, “Now, what I am about to give you is a rule from God’s Word. I aim to bind your consciences to the Word of God.”

I have always found those statements so interesting. Sometimes preachers can say things that are merely suggestions or pious advice in such a way that they come across as biblical commands. That approach leads to legalism.

However, where God has given us rules, we must follow them.

So, the rule that Paul gave was not merely pious advice or a helpful suggestion. It was in fact a rule given to us by Paul from God.

III. The Illustrations of This Rule (7:18-24)

Third, observe the illustrations of this rule.

Paul gave two illustrations of this rule.

A. *The Illustration of Circumcision and Uncircumcision (7:18-20)*

The first illustration is of circumcision and uncircumcision.

Paul asked a question in verse 18a, **“Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised?”** In other words, **“Was anyone at the time of his call [to salvation] already circumcised?”**

And the answer Paul gave is in verse 18b, **“Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision.”**

Again Paul asked a question in verse 18c, **“Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised?”** That is, **“Was anyone at the time of his call [to salvation] uncircumcised?”**

And the answer Paul gave is in verse 18d, **“Let him not seek circumcision.”**

New Testament scholar D. A. Carson notes that “young Jews attempted to escape their Jewishness by undergoing a surgical operation to conceal their circumcision. They did this in order to progress in their education both in the gymnasium and as citizens. But Jewish Christians were prohibited from renouncing their Jewishness in order to climb the social ladder. . . . The Gentile Christian was not free to undergo circumcision—the reasons for wanting to do this are outlined in the Galatian letter.”⁴

As far as God was concerned, Paul said in verse 19, **“For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.”**

Salvation did not change one’s racial status. Before salvation a person was either a Jew (circumcised) or a Gentile (uncircumcised). Having come to faith in Jesus Christ did not change one’s status. And a person should not try to change that status either, was Paul’s point.

What was most important was **keeping the commandments**

⁴ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1 Co 7:17–24.

of God. In other words, a new obedience was a mark of salvation.

Then Paul restated the rule in verse 20: **“Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called [to salvation].”**

B. The Illustration of Slave and Freedman (21-24)

The second illustration is of slave and freedman.

Paul asked a question in verse 21a, **“Were you a slave when called?”** In other words, **“Were you a slave when you were called [to salvation]?”**

And the answer Paul gave was in verse 21b, **“Do not be concerned about it.”** And then Paul added, **“But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity”** (v. 22c).

Slaves in the first century were not like slaves in the nineteenth century. Slavery in the centuries leading up to and including the nineteenth century was unspeakably brutal. D. A. Carson notes that “while it may seem extraordinary, in the first century, Greek freeborn men did sell themselves into the household of Roman citizens, often holding the lucrative post of steward of a household. They could invest their owner’s funds and run his business, legitimately accruing wealth. It was possible for them to buy their own way out of their voluntary slavery, and thereby gain Roman citizenship as freedmen, and for their offspring to secure Roman citizenship as freeborn children. It was not only wealth that counted in the Roman empire, especially in a Roman colony such as Corinth, but calling *i.e.* class or status.”⁵

Paul noted that when a slave became a Christian he gained a new status with God. This is how he put it in verse 22a, **“For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord.”** Paul uses paradoxical language, a slave is a freedman, to emphasize that one’s freedom in Christ so far outweighs his slavery that he can consider himself Christ’s free man. In one’s secular condition he is still a slave, but in his spiritual condition he is

⁵ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1 Co 7:17–24.

now free.⁶

And then Paul noted paradoxically again, in verse 22b, **“Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ.”** A Christian has submitted himself to Christ. He is Christ’s slave now. He now obeys the Lord. He owes Christ both loyalty and service.

Then Paul said in verse 23, **“You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.”** One commentator noted that this verse “applies to both the slave and free person. . . . The slave has been freed and the free man has been made a slave because both have been purchased by Christ. All should be content with their external condition because all are equally subjects of redemption.”⁷

Then Paul restated the rule in verse 24, **“So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.”**

IV. The Meaning of This Rule (7:19, 21)

Fourth, note the meaning of this rule.

Let’s look at the negative and positive meaning of this rule.

A. The Negative Meaning of This Rule (7:21)

First, the negative meaning of this rule.

It does not mean that Christians should never change their place in life if the opportunity to do so is properly and providentially provided.

Paul specifically referred to the opportunity that a slave had to gain his freedom. Paul said in verse 21b, **“But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.”** A slave was sometimes in a position to buy himself out slavery. And in some instances, slaves were permitted to go free after 7 years. In situations where it is not contrary to biblical law and culturally acceptable, Paul allowed for changes in circumstances.

⁶ Ronald Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Corinthians 1-9* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 282.

⁷ Ronald Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Corinthians 1-9* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 283.

B. The Positive Meaning of This Rule (7:19)

And second, the positive meaning of this rule.

Christians are to keep the commandments of God, as Paul said in verse 19b. Christians are called to keep the commandments of God in every situation in which they find themselves. Sometimes Christians find themselves in very difficult situations, and they may be tempted to disobey God's commandments.

I recall reading Joseph Fletcher's book titled *Situation Ethics* in which he argues that love should guide all our ethical decisions. As I recall it, he told the story of a woman who was in a German concentration camp. She was separated from her husband and children. Her condition was utterly miserable. It appeared that she was going to be a prisoner for many years to come. Eventually, one of the prison guards said that he would let her go free to join her husband and children if she would make love with him. What was she to do? If she committed adultery, she could be free to join her husband and children. But if she remained chaste, she did not think that she would ever see her husband and children again.

Joseph Fletcher says that love should guide her, and that love for her husband and children justifies the means to acquire her freedom.

Paul, however, says that we are to keep the commandments of God. It may be difficult to do, but it is possible to do so.

Now, I must admit that there are sometimes very difficult ethical dilemmas. This is especially so when there two biblical commandments that seem to be in conflict with each other. For cases like that there are other principles to guide our decisions. But that is a sermon for another time.

V. The Application of This Rule

Finally, let's notice is the application of this rule.

Paul's rule is that Christians should retain the place in life as-

signed to them by the Lord.

Paul's rule has specific application to the various marital or non-marital states in the previous part of this chapter. Remember that some of the Corinthian Christians wanted to divorce their spouses. They thought that now that they were Christians they could serve Christ better by being single. And so they wanted to be single again. Others wanted to get out of their marriages to non-Christians.

In each of these cases Paul was teaching that Christians should retain the place in life assigned to them by the Lord. In other words, Paul is saying the same thing to each of the following groups:

- In verses 1-7: to the married: stay married with full conjugal rights.
- In verses 8-9: to the divorced and widowed (that is, the formerly married): it is good to remain unmarried.
- In verses 10-11: to the married where both spouses are Christians: remain married.
- In verses 12-16: to those married with a non-Christian spouse: remain married.
- In verses 25-38: to “betrothed” (virgins): it is good to remain unmarried.
- In verses 39-40: to married women (and widows): the married are bound to the marriage; when widowed it is good to remain that way.⁸

Please note that when Paul said to the formerly married and virgins that it is “good to remain unmarried,” he was not forbidding marriage. He was simply saying that being unmarried is a good thing, and it should not be viewed as either an inferior or superior state to marriage.

So, Paul's rule is that Christians should retain the place in life assigned to them by the Lord. His specific application was to the

⁸ See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* in *The International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 268.

various marital or non-marital states in which Christians find themselves.

Conclusion

Occasionally I will meet with a Christian who is not satisfied with his or her marital or non-marital status.

Sometimes a person is in a very difficult marriage. There are no grounds for divorce, such as sexual immorality or desertion by a non-Christian. The marriage is just filled with difficulty of one kind or another.

Sometimes a person is single, perhaps never having been married or perhaps having been previously married. And the person desperately wants to get married.

Basically Paul says that those who are single are encouraged to remain single, although it would not be wrong to get married should God bring the right person into your life.

And Paul says that those who are married must remain married. It is entirely possible to keep God's commandments, even in a very difficult marriage. It certainly won't be easy, but it can be done, with the help of God.

Sometimes a person in a very difficult marriage may want to yell, "Cut!" They may really be struggling with all kinds of issues that make the marriage unhappy. While there are biblical grounds for divorce, as a general rule, Christians should retain the place in life assigned to them by the Lord.

It is at times like these that Christians need to be involved with other Christians who can encourage and support during this time. And it is at times like these that Christians especially need to cry out to God for his supporting grace. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Challenges Christians Face

PRAAYER:

Our God, we live in a day in which marriage is attacked on every side. Some people struggle with their marital or non-marital status. Help all of us to learn to retain the place in life that you have assigned to us.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go into the world and affirm God's pattern and plan for marriage.