

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

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[0 : 00] Then he continues and says, a religion is a system of worship. Revolution is complete change. And in one sense, that is true. Christianity changes everything. I don't know anyone who's ever become a Christian that hasn't found their entire life turned upside down or right side up.

In fact, when the Christian gospel began to go forward under the preaching of the apostles, one of the early phrases that was appended to it were that these men had turned the world upside down.

Christianity. Revolutionary. In one sense, true. In another sense, though, and this is the surprising thing, that we're noticing in this moment in Paul's letter, in one sense, very little changes.

Coming to Christ doesn't alter much at all. And so this other side of the coin is where we find ourselves.

In other words, there is a surprising status quo-ness to Christianity. The more things have changed, what's the saying? The more they stay the same. Take a look at the surrounding context.

[1 : 38] When it comes to covenantal relationships, beginning in chapter 7, verse 1, Paul is arguing for a sameness, even in the light of having become a Christian.

You can see it most clearly in a verse like chapter 7, verse 8. To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.

Or verse 10. To the married, I give the charge, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband. Verse 12.

To the rest I say, I, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him, she should not divorce her. This remaining is the word leading into our very text.

In fact, it's on the back side as well. Take a look at verses 25 and 26. Now concerning to the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

[2 : 48] I think that in view of the present distress, it is good for a person to remain as he is. No change! You actually see chapter 7 close on that very theme.

Verse 40. Yet in my judgment, she is happier if she remains as she is. This isn't a surprising thing about Christian life. Much of it doesn't change at all.

And the emphasis here surrounding our text is the emphasis that the structure of our text reveals.

Look at our own text now. The principle is stated in verse 17. Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him and to which the Lord has called him.

This is my rule in all the churches. In other words, the phrase there, lead the life, is almost just keep on walking as you had been walking.

- [3 : 49] You'll see it again in verse 20. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. And then the final summary of our text, verse 24.
- So brothers, in whatever condition each one was called, there let him remain with God. What a surprise. This revolutionary message that unites us to God through faith.
- Brings us into a new family. Overturns everything we knew before we began walking with him. In some respects, change is nothing.
- I want to explore that from our text in two ways. First of all, what this sameness means in regard to your calling in life.
- And secondly, the condition in which you were converted to Christian life. It's certainly true that many people think that coming to Christ creates a crisis in calling.
- [5 : 06] Now that I know Jesus, what do I do with my life? I remember growing up under a definite framework that one who became a Christian was almost elevated in how seriously they took it if they entered into a calling that vocationally thrusts them forth into gospel work.
- So the question in churches was perennially asked in missions conference and elsewhere. Are you willing to go anywhere for Jesus? Do anything for Jesus?
- And what emerged was this separation of calling. That to go to the mission field, those were the truly spiritual ones.
- The rest of us, send them, we're supporters, but not called in that way. Think of it in regard to pastoral ministry. Now that I'm a Christian, shouldn't I be called into Christian ministry?
- In fact, we have a whole theology of receiving a call. It's a great massive change. And that very word is in our text no fewer than eight times.
- [6 : 23] This crisis of calling is being addressed with in a surprising way to help you remain in the condition you are.
- Let me just show it to you, this repetitive use of that term. Eight times. First verse 17. Lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him and to each God has called him.
- To which God has called him. What about verse 18? You'll see it two times. Was anyone at the time of his call circumcised? Or again, was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised?
- That's our term, isn't it? You'll see it again in verse 20. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Verse 21. Were you a bondservant when called?
- Verse 22. On two occasions. For he who was called in the Lord is a bondservant. And then the next sentence, likewise, he who was free when called.
- [7 : 35] Finally, the eighth occasion, verse 24. So, brothers, in whatever condition each one was called, there let him remain with God. What does this word calling mean if it doesn't change a thing?
- What does it mean to be called? Paul's answered it for us, at least in this letter. He has a particular meaning in mind. Flip back to the opening chapter.
- What does this term mean? Verse 2 of chapter 1. To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.
- In that instance, the one who is called is called to be a Christian in relationship with others who likewise are Christians.
- Look at the way it carries forward in verse 9. God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.
- [8 : 47] To be called is to become a Christian. The one who is called enters into a fellowship with others that is actually centered in his Son.

Take a look at verse 24 of chapter 1. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

In other words, they are called to the gospel, to salvation. And then finally, in chapter 1, verses 26 and following, For consider your calling, brothers, not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many powerful, not many of noble birth, but God chose what is foolish.

Or verse 28. God chose. Verse 30. And because of him, you are in Christ. To be called is to be in Christ. That's the main thing.

What condition were you when you were called? In other words, what were you doing when God made you a Christian? What were you doing when you entered into the fellowship of the saints?

[9 : 59] What were you doing when you were united to Christ? What was your place in life? In some sense, Paul says, just keep walking. No crisis of calling.

Now, that doesn't mean that your life never changes or that vocations don't move. But what Paul's saying is there is no crisis of calling.

Keep walking. God will make things clear as you continue to go. And what a refreshing word this is. Don't connect calling to career choice.

It's not so much a field of study in which you can be productive as it is a fellowship in which you are a participant. This is the important thing.

The sameness about Christianity and calling. I want to look, secondly, though, at the condition. This sameness concerning condition.

[11 : 11] Now, our text gives us two conditions in regard to this principle of remaining. The first is there in verses 18 and 19.

It relates to circumcision as the issue. And the second is going to be in verses 21 through 23 when he talks about being freed or slaves.

So if the principle, verse 17, is clear, each one continue walking in the way in which you were called. And that principle, verse 17, is universal.

It's not circumstantial to what's going on in Corinth, but rather it's his rule in all the churches, all the way back from the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, that when you become a Christian, things don't have to change.

He says then, concerning ethnicity, don't worry about it, which is what I take circumcision to be. He's applying the principle in terms of ethnicity, not race.

[12 : 17] No one can change their race, but you can change or adopt cultural, traditional aspects of life.

And what he's saying is, listen, if you were circumcised, a Jew, and you followed traditions and all that, well, don't try to change that. But if you weren't in that tradition, don't change that.

It's very liberating. I find it very liberating as someone who's born in a suburban household, in an athletic family.

I don't have to adopt, now that I'm a Christian, all the cultural conventions of being a South Sider. I just need to keep walking, keep learning, keep going.

I don't change my culture. Now, this is the beautiful thing. When we stay the same, in a sense, what happens in the church? It blossoms into this very diverse cultural expression.

[13 : 24] If we're all trying to become the same thing culturally, it flattens the whole thing out. So the revolutionary notion of sameness is that it creates a family of incredible, diverse, particular ethnic distinctions.

The church ought to be the place where particular cultures are guarded, protected, and remain. And no one should feel that they've got to find their way in so that we all live and act and sing and dance the same.

Well, that'd be revolutionary, wouldn't it? I wouldn't have to adopt my African-American South Side voice to speak to my African-American brother.

Because you know when I do it. And you can tell he's trying. He's trying. He's trying. Hey, in whatever condition you were called, keep walking.

It will promote a body of great fullness and multivarigated force. The one thing you do need to do there at the end of verse 19 is keep the commandments of God, for neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision.

[15 : 03] Well, what are the commandments of God? Paul uses this exact phrase in Galatians 5, 6. Circumcision nor uncircumcision counts as anything, but he says faith working its way out in love.

That's what's required. That's what changes. So when it says here, keep the commandments of God, he's not reinstituting some new rules by which we walk other than faith evidenced in love.

So that as we are growing in the body of Christ with all of our distinctions, what is at work is love. Isn't that beautiful?

That's revolutionary. The second condition is in verse 21 and 23. It's not a cultural distinction regarding ethnicity.

It's a condition of status or standing, and it relates to things socioeconomic. Look at the terms here.

[16 : 07] Bondservant, freedom, freed man, you have to remember that in Rome, social status had three at least distinct layers.

There were citizens of Rome. There was another layer of freedmen, but didn't have all the protections of law. And then there was a doulos, or the servant, who actually was owned by citizens.

And what he says is, when you come to Christ, that socioeconomic standing in status is not something you're to be worried about.

That's what he actually says there in verse 21. Do not be concerned about it. I love that. Now, he does go on and say, better yourself if you're able.

I mean, if you're able to become a freedman, my goodness, take advantage of it. But that's not the main thing. Christianity doesn't change a thing regarding socioeconomic status.

[17 : 16] This is great news on two fronts. For the preachers who preach health and wealth are indicating that God's intention for you is that all of that changes, and it becomes the main thing.

So socioeconomic force within the church is the revolutionary idea. Paul says, no, not at all. Nothing changes. And don't worry about it.

And it's true for both sides. Not only does the poor or socially person on the status in Roman culture not need to worry about where he is in Christ, but it's also true for the rich.

Likewise, he says in verse 22, he who was free when he is called does not become a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price. Do not become a bondservant of men.

He says, look, if you were really wealthy when you were called, that doesn't mean you sell yourself into servitude to demonstrate that Christ has changed everything. And that is a crisis in condition that takes place.

[18 : 22] It leads to asceticism. It leads to people being anti-wealth or work. It leads to all kinds of terrible things within the church.

I've been reading a wonderful work by Peter Brown. The preeminent emeritus professor at Princeton now in history.

He's got a book on wealth called *Through the Eye of a Needle*. And he's tracing the role of wealth in the fall of Rome and the making of Christianity. And of course, you had those like Paulinus and others who when they became Christians, who were very wealthy people, felt that becoming a Christian created this incredible crisis that required them to abandon all money.

They actually became anti-money, not just a generosity and stewardship of money. And they were trying to work out this change. Paul says, look, if you were rich when you were called, keep moving.

If you were poor when you were called, keep walking. If you can better yourself, great. But it doesn't matter. Now think about that.

[19 : 40] If you struggle on the social scale or you struggle on the economic scale, this is liberating. Liberating news.

And so he finishes. He applies it to those two conditions and says, in whatever condition each is called, there let him remain with God.

I think of the Marine sense of as you were line that goes off to officers of a lower level.

It's really a great line that this whole text can conclude on. In the Marine dictionary, the Marine dictionary, this idea of as you were is an informal command to continue what you were doing.

So that when a leading officer walks in, everybody, of course, would alter their behavior and the officer would say, as you were. That's what Paul's saying here.

[20 : 45] You're a Christian now? As you were. As you were. How liberating for you, I trust, in regard to your calling and your condition.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for this letter and how revolutionary it is if we would but keep things the same.

In Christ's name, Amen.