I Corinthians 7:17-24

Resting Where You Are

17 Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches. 18 Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. 20 Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called. 21 Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. 22 For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

# Introduction

When this letter arrived in Corinth imagine yourself in the midst of the body as someone is reading this letter out loud to those gathered. You’ve identified others in the body, possibly even yourself, that the doctrines Paul has been addressing are written to. Each person has been wrestling with various things that have caused division about all sorts of things. In this section we’ve moved from marriage and singleness onto the division of those who think godliness comes in the form of righteousness through physical obedience to a cultural norm and self-doubt because of slavery.

*What cultural norms might believers acquiesce to, but cause them doubt?*

# Assignment

Paul transitions between the previous section about marriage into this next section about circumcision and slavery with this reference to assignment in singleness or marriage. Since some believers in either ignorant zeal or through deviant leadership (see chapter 3:17) might be persuaded to see righteousness through works or extreme behaviors Paul cautions that believers rest and grow where they are rather than make radical changes to their marital state, and as we see, other parts of their lives. The believer was to walk (an Old Testament term used predominantly by the Jews to indicate their lifestyle) where the Lord called them. This call to stay where they were in regards to relationships was not to condone other types of sin. For example, living in adultery, sexual sin or other moral sins was not condoned.

Paul also emphasizes that this is his recommendation to other churches. This serves the purpose of letting the church know that it’s not just their culture [a common ‘out’ for slippery theology] as well as a clear articulation of the importance of resting in God’s provision no matter where we are.

*When you became a believer what were some of the changes that you were told you needed to make? Were they biblical?*

# Uncircumcision and Circumcision

## The Biblical History of Circumcision

In the Old Testament the first mention of Circumcision is for Abraham in Genesis 17:10-11, it is the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham and is to be done by all of Abraham’s household and for all of his male descendants. This does several things:

1. It is a physical reminder of God’s promise for the land, the seed and the blessing
2. It removes the likelihood that one would accuse Abraham as not having faith.

This sort of physical discomfort would have several weeks impact for recovery as well. In the Mosaic covenant between God and Israel not only are 99% of the people there descendants of Abraham (so circumcision is part of the covenant Leviticus 12:2-3), but there is an allowance for those who were previously gentile to convert to Judaism (Ex. 12:48). The Mosaic covenant’s token was circumcision (the sign was the Sabbath), which differentiates the purpose of circumcision between the two, though they are related.

## The Biblical Use of “Circumcised“ and “Uncircumcised” Terminology

Throughout the new Testament Circumcision, because of its legal and critical relationship with Israel, was a euphemism for an Israelite or Jew. Acts 10:45 records believers who were of Jewish ethnicity coming with Peter and being amazed at the gift of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the gentiles [the uncircumcision]. Other places in the Bible use the term Uncircumcision [or the uncircumcised] to refer to those who are gentiles such as Samson’s wife in Judges 14:2-3, David’s Lament over Saul in 2 Samuel 1:20 and of course Romans 3:30 where God unifies the circumcised and the uncircumcised.

## Staying Circumcised or Uncircumcised

In this passage we see the Jewish (circumcised) and gentile (uncircumcised) believers were not to change their physical condition. This is rooted in several truths that are revealed in the scripture:

1. The purpose of circumcision for the Old Testament saint was a sign or token based on covenants that the New Testament saint is not under
2. Conforming to the conditions of the Law only in part would not fulfill the law [Galatians 5:2-3]
3. Staying in the conditional state prevents the concept of works from entering into the equation. Reversal of the circumcision, while possible through several means, would not have gained a former Jew anything

*Does it matter if we circumcise our children today?*

## Circumcision and Uncircumcision Are Nothing

Since salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone the outer form of circumcision or uncircumcision wrought no benefit[[1]](#footnote-1). As Paul articulates in Galatians 5:6 we see that, “circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing, but faith working through love.” The nature of the outer parts of man cannot reflect a true relationship rooted in faith. If genetics and circumcision have no impact on salvation, then the Jew who converts to Christianity will not benefit from a restored foreskin. If having no circumcision doesn’t reflect a lack of faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ then adding an extra, and painful, step to the process of salvation would only be a hindrance to the gospel.

*Why do people encourage these sorts of extra steps within Christianity?*

## Keeping of the Commandments of God

The commandments of God in this case does *not* refer to the Law. We know this for several reasons contextually:

* The Law commanded circumcision and Paul is putting circumcision at odds with the 613 commandments of the Law
* 1 Corinthians 14:37 articulates that Paul was writing the Lord’s commandments
* Paul used the word νόμος in the Greek when he was referring to the Law as a whole in most cases [1 Corinthians 9:8-9, 9:20, 14:21, 14:34, 15:56]

*Given that Paul is not referring to the Law of Moses here what are the commandments?*

New Testament commandments were theological commandments like Galatians, moral commandments like Ephesians 4:28 and ecclesiological like 1 & 2 Timothy. The emphasis for empowering and fulfilling the will of God in the New Testament is through the direction of the permanently indwelling Holy Spirit. Through the outworking of the Holy Spirit God is able to move beyond the restrictions of a legal system that might need to to be updated due to technology, and the Holy Spirit empowers like the Law is unable to do except possibly through fear.

# Slavery

Slavery is a powerfully political subject in the United States, in part because of bad theologians using the the scriptures incorrectly to defend slavery here. We’re blessed as careful students of God’s word to have the ability to rightly divide the Word and sidestep the sticky topic’s more modern political stickiness and just look at the historical context. The facts for what were part of the institution of slavery then are our focus and we’ll leave modern slavery to a different discussion[[2]](#footnote-2).

Slaves in the New Testament may have become slaves due to a kidnapping or spoils of war, being born to parents who were slaves, and “voluntary” slavery [a bond-servant]. Slaves may be well educated and act as tutors in a household and it may not have been uncommon for a slave to be reading the letters Paul wrote out loud to the churches because they were better educated in those cases and could do so. Slaves may have been in charge of all household goods and financial transactions.

Slaves were expected to work and do their master’s bidding first before taking care of their own needs. It was not uncommon for slaves to be abused sexually and it was legal for a slave owner to give their slave as a sexual partner for guests as well. Being a slave would have been morally repugnant for a believer, difficult because of biblical commands about serving one another and sexual purity, and it lacked the liberties that would have made much of the New Testament easily possible if the Holy Spirit were to direct a church body in some action.

As a social construct Paul was not pro-slavery, but he was concerned with the legal ramifications of slaves running away [see also: the book of Philemon]. 2 Peter 2:18 repeats these same sentiments and we see Peter adding that Christ was an example of suffering in submission for those who were slaves.

## Becoming Free as a Slave

Paul encourages that slaves get out of the bondage of slavery (legally) for the reasons mentioned above. There is no benefit to the believer who may be forced to endure some sort of culturally acceptable wickedness. This would have required a financial transaction to free a slave, which would have been unlikely for them to achieve due to the fact that they were not making huge wages that would enable that. Within the New Testament church we can conceive of believers pooling their resources to help make this possible.

## A Freedman and a Slave in Christ

Paul emphasizes that the slave is now eternally free in Christ, but that the believer who is free is Christ’s slave. The slave is to walk in as much Christian liberty as is possible given their situation, and the believer is to walk in submission to Christ as is possible given their situation. Paul offers encouragement of a conditional application of positional truth.

## Bought with a Price

We see that Paul is encouraging the saints to avoid the bondage of slavery either by figuring out how to legally get out of slavery and certainly to avoid becoming a bond-servant.

# The Repetition of Remaining

Paul’s repetition of remaining in your condition (7:17, 20, 24) is used to emphasize this doctrine. Spiritual growth is a critical next step after salvation and changing your social situation may not be fruitful because it could change your focus. Paul is looking for the believers to be not trying to be more spiritual, but instead to be focused on the right thing: Christ. We can see that there is very little benefit to the gospel if knee jerk reactions are taking place in marriages, encouraging run-away slaves, and creating division outside of the church.

1. The singular exception, which was for political reasons, was Paul circumcision Timothy so that they could minister to the Jews in very specific ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Slavery is the result of the fall and is a consequence of sin. There is no biblical reason to condone slavery. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)