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1 Corinthians

But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. 1 Corinthians 7:17

The words now issued by Paul reach back to cover the preceding 6 verses (10-16) and at the same time they are an introduction to other concepts which Paul will comment on. In verses 10 and 11 came the Lord's command concerning marriage; that it should not be terminated through divorce. Then in 12 and 13, he noted that the believing spouse was not to depart from an unbelieving spouse and he gave the reason for it in verse 14. After this, he qualified the marriage arrangement by saying that the unbeliever, if he or she wishes to depart from the marriage, should be allowed to depart.

These are the thoughts which are included in the all-encompassing "But God has distributed to each one..." In other words, the position that one is found in when they became a believer was so chosen by God for that time in their lives; it was not unknown to Him and He understands the details and complexities of the situation. Because of this, what He has allowed should remain. Thus, "as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk."

This phrase means that we are to remain in whatever state we were in when we were "called." We cannot say, "Because I am now a Christian, God would want me to leave my unbelieving spouse." Nor can we find any other excuse to be disobedient to His word because we are now "in Christ." Rather, He selected the path we are on and we are to walk it, regardless of the weight of the load upon our shoulders, because it really is no true weight which we bear alone. Instead it

is one which Christ shares with us. From this stepping stone, Paul will continue with this line of reasoning in the verses ahead.

For now though, he shows that what he is telling the Corinthians is not arbitrary or suddenly enacted by him. Rather, the instructions he is giving are consistently applied elsewhere as well. As he says, "And so I ordain in all the churches." Since the writing of the epistle, and because it is included in the canon of Scripture, it is set and fixed. It is a part of God's word and thus we are to be obedient to it, just as obedience was expected on these matters from those in Corinth.

Life application: As believers, we can't use the past as an excuse to get out of our present situation. God has directed our steps which lead to the moment we called on Christ and He did so knowing the baggage that we brought along with us. In His wisdom, He has placed us where we are for His reasons. Let us accept our state with gratitude and work within it as faithful servants of Christ.

*I will love You, O Lord, my might
The Lord is my rock and my fortress too*

*He is my deliverer, through day and night
My God, my strength, Him I will trust all my days through*

My shield and the horn of my salvation

*My stronghold, it is He
I will call upon the Lord with elation*

He is worthy to be praised now and for all eternity

Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised.

1 Corinthians 7:18

In the previous verse, this was noted: "But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk." In addition to the verses which preceded this thought and which pertained to marriage, Paul now gives other real-life examples of what he means, beginning with circumcision.

To the Jews, circumcision was the sign of the covenant and a sign of being the covenant people. It was first given to Abraham and it was noted at that time that "...the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant." Genesis 17:14

Throughout the history of Israel, circumcision continued to be used as a standard by which the faithful were measured. To those Jews or proselytes to Judaism who came to Christ and who were already circumcised, Paul directs, "Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised."

It might be that some converts to Christ may have been anxious to do away with the badge of their previous life in Judaism and go to a surgeon in an attempt to change what had been previously been marked upon them in this way. Paul says that this shouldn't be considered. Rather, he is asked to remember that as the Lord called him while circumcised, so let him walk in that circumcision.

And the reciprocal is true as well. He next states, "Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised." For those gentiles who were coming into the faith, Paul now gives the amazing words of release from this ancient rite by stating that their condition, at the time of their calling, was of higher importance than that of the rite of circumcision.

To understand this, it needs to be remembered that we are saved by grace through faith. To attempt to earn God's favor through circumcision would be to set aside the grace of God in an attempt to be justified by the works of human hands. Paul spends much of the book of Galatians explaining this and calls such attempts out as heresy. And to those who require such things, he notes them as

heretics who proclaim "a different gospel, which is not another" (Galatians 1:6, 7). Rather it is something which is accursed.

Life application: Let us again consider Paul's words "as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk." Did you have a tattoo when you came to Christ? If so, don't let someone bully you into thinking that you must have it removed. Did you eat pork before you came to Christ? Don't let anyone tell you that you must now stop. There are things which should be changed, but they are explained in Scripture. Those things which are not mandated to be changed are things which we are at liberty to keep just as they are.

Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. 1 Corinthians 7:19

The confusion that reigns over this verse in the minds of some is immense. Paul could not be clearer in the first half of the thought - "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing." For the believer in Christ, it makes absolutely no difference whether one is circumcised or not. As seen in a previous verse, almost the entire book of Galatians deals with this one subject which is used as the premier example of the Law of Moses, circumcision. It was given by God to Abraham as a sign to the covenant people and the mandate is repeated in Exodus and Leviticus. However, it served its purpose and was fulfilled in Christ.

Now whether one is a Jew who is circumcised, or a Gentile who is not, there is no difference between the two. The circumcision has no bearing at all on their status before God because a believer in Christ is circumcised in the heart (Romans 2:29). The external rite is fulfilled and thus set aside in Christ. However, cults, aberrant teachers, and those who run ahead without knowledge still mandate this rite and thus promote a false gospel. As noted, it could not be clearer, and yet the waters get muddied.

And this leads to the second half of the verse which can likewise become muddied, both by those who mandate circumcision, or even by those who

understand circumcision is no longer required. Paul says that "keeping the commandments of God *is what matters*." The obvious connection of "the commandments of God" to "circumcision" should be made. When was circumcision mandated? Under the Law of Moses! Is circumcision still required? No! Therefore, "keeping the commandments of God" cannot be speaking of the Law of Moses or any part of it!

This is the force and intent of Paul's words now and is (as noted above) the meaning and purpose behind his words in Galatians. If circumcision is used as a benchmark of the law, and circumcision is set aside in Christ, then all of the precepts of the Law of Moses are set aside in Christ. This is stated explicitly in Hebrews 7, 8, and 10, and both explicitly and implicitly elsewhere. It is:

- 1) Annulled (Hebrews 7:18)
- 2) Obsolete (Hebrews 8:13)
- 3) Taken away (Hebrews 10:9)
- 4) Wiped out, taken out of the way, and nailed to the cross (Colossian 2:14)
- 5) Etc. elsewhere in multiple statements, explicitly and implicitly

So what are "the commandments of God" which Paul is speaking of? They are found in Jesus' words which are directed to believers after the cross, not those directed to Israel under the law. They are also found in the prescriptive verses of the book of Acts which make up a very small portion of the book, possibly no more than five percent of it. And finally, they are found in the New Testament epistles. These, in particular, are doctrine for the church based on the fulfillment of the Law of Moses by Christ.

To reinsert the law, or to pick and choose portions of the law - such as mandating circumcision, no eating pork, or observing a Sabbath, etc, is to set aside the grace of Christ and is "another gospel" and thus heresy. We must trust that Christ is the fulfillment of the law and that His work is sufficient to save us, wholly and entirely. And yet, we must also understand that His work in salvation does not give us license to sin by ignoring prescriptive elements of the New Testament. For example, women who preach violate New Testament law based on Paul's words to those in Corinth and also his words to Timothy. This is an example of what Paul

is referring to here. It is a willful disobedience of what God has shown He expects of New Testament believers.

Life application: If you allow yourself to be circumcised in an attempt to meet the standards of the law, the Bible says that you have "set aside" the grace of Christ and have become a debtor to the whole law. As no one can fulfill the law, it is a self-condemning act. This is true with any precept of the law fulfilled by Christ. Don't be led astray by a false teacher who boasts in works of the flesh and negates the glorious work of Jesus Christ!

Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.

1 Corinthians 7:20

This verse is a repeat of the thought given in the second half of verse 17, which said,

"as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk." He has been speaking about circumcision and has said that "circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing." And this came after his words that those who were circumcised when they were called should stay that way and those who were uncircumcised when they were called should likewise stay that way.

His thought now in verse 20, is given as a confirmation of this. Whatever was our calling when we were called is where we are expected to remain. In order to show that this is not limited to circumcision, but that it is an overall precept to show that we are acceptable to Christ in the station in which we were called, he will give a new example in the coming verses, that of slavery.

Shouldn't it be obvious that if Jesus accepted us in a certain condition, that we thus must be acceptable to Him? And yet, many then spend the rest of their walk with Christ trying to please the One who already found them acceptable. In this, they forget that grace is grace and so they attempt to find justification in their own personal works and not in the work of Christ. It is a sad cycle which can lead

to neurotic believers who waffle in their convictions and are always worried about "losing" the eternal salvation they have been granted.

It should again be noted that remaining in the calling in which one is called does not refer to the abusive and forbidden lifestyles referred to in Scripture. One cannot say, "I was called as a homosexual and therefore I can remain a practicing homosexual." This is what we are called *from*, not *to*. A person is not called *from* circumcision. This is a thing that they already possessed which is not contrary to New Testament doctrine. Freedom in Christ never means freedom to sin.

Life application: If Christ is the end of the law, then let the law be ended! Don't reinsert precepts which will only bring you into bondage and mental confusion.

Were you called *while* a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use *it*. 1 Corinthians 7:21

Paul now refers to the second major issue tied to what he said in verse 17 - " But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk." This second issue is slavery. He asks a question of those who are bound in slavery, "Were you called *while* a slave?"

Slavery is something that has occurred throughout human history and has come in different forms, from complete bondage and absolute rule, to simply being owned by another yet with varying amounts of freedom, but without pay for the work which is performed. The Old Testament details provisions for slavery, how certain slaves are to be treated, and the rights which slaves bore within the context of Israelite society.

In the Roman Empire of Paul's time, a large portion of the population were bound under slavery and it was as common and accepted as the general paid-labor force is in the world today. The difference mostly centered on the amount of freedom offered to slaves. In coming to Christ, the individual slave may feel that his

allegiances were now confused. He or she is bound to a master and yet they have committed to Christ. This might have brought about a level of concern or anxiety concerning their position.

His question as to their state when they called on Christ is to show them that there is no true complication in the matter. If they are slaves now as he writes and they were slaves when they were called, then there currently is no change in their state. Christ called them while they were in servitude and they were accepted by Him. And so, He understands the dilemma they feel which to Him is no dilemma at all. Because of this he continues with, "Do not be concerned about it..."

If Christ wasn't worried about it, then they shouldn't be either. The allegiance they have to Him is one that will not conflict with the allegiance they have with their own master. They are to remain obedient to their rightful owner and what he expects. A good example of this actually comes from the Old Testament. It is found in 2 Kings 5. A Syrian officer, Naaman, came to know and call on the God of Israel, but he also had allegiances which bound him to his master. This caused him a bit of anxiety as to what he should do when he had to accompany his master into the temple of Rimmon where his master would worship. He asked Elisha the prophet for pardon concerning this matter. The request and response are found in 2 Kings 5:18, 19 -

"'Yet in this thing may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the temple of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand, and I bow down in the temple of Rimmon—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD please pardon your servant in this thing.'¹⁹ Then he said to him, 'Go in peace.' So he departed from him a short distance."

Jesus is looking upon the hearts of his faithful and He understands the difficult position that they are in concerning worldly responsibilities. As He called us, so we may continue, but with a different heart and direction concerning Him. However, at the end of Paul's words today, he gives this final thought, "...but if

you can be made free, rather use *it*." What he means is that if a slave can free himself, then there is nothing wrong with that.

In the Roman Empire, like in Israel, there were provisions for obtaining freedom. One could buy their freedom or earn it in various other ways. Paul told them that despite being called as a slave, nothing bound them to remain as slaves. But if they did remain as slaves, there was nothing wrong with that either. Today, this is comparable to changing jobs. If you were a lawyer when you were called, there is nothing wrong with changing one's profession. The principle which is being laid down is one for peace and contentment in the state one is in, but not necessarily being firmly bound in that state.

Life application: There is nothing degrading in menial labor or even bondage. If the Lord calls you in such a state, then how can it be considered degrading? You have been given the highest honor in all the world. Whatever lowly position you think you're in is only in your mind, not His. To Him, you are a member of His family and in a high and exalted position!

For he who is called in the Lord *while* a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called *while* free is Christ's slave. 1 Corinthians 7:22

In the previous verse, Paul said, "Were you called *while* a slave? Do not be concerned about it..." That may seem uncaring about the plight of the slave unless one understands the freedom of those in Christ, even if they are in bondage to another human. In an exchange with the Jews of His time we read these words between Jesus and them in John 8 -

"If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.³² And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'³³ They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How *can* You say, 'You will be made free'?'"³⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.³⁵ And a slave does not abide in the

house forever, *but* a son abides forever. ³⁶Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." John 8:31-36

The premise of the Bible is that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Because we are in our father, Adam, we inherited his sin. Further we eventually come to the age where we commit our own sin on top of the inherited sin in our lives. Because of this, we are in bondage to the devil, and he is a cruel and harsh taskmaster. But once in Christ, we have become free of the devil's power. Thus, "he who is called in the Lord *while* a slave is the Lord's freedman."

Regardless of the burden of being bound to a human master, it is nothing in comparison to the freedom that is found in Christ. The earthly master may have temporary say over the earthly existence of the believer, but Christ has eternally set those in Him free from a much greater bondage. Building on that, Paul then says, "Likewise he who is called *while* free is Christ's slave." In other words, we are all slaves in some way. Nobody is truly free to act in complete independence.

Therefore, in Christ the slave and the one who is free are actually on the same spiritual level. We are bound to His laws and the freedom that we have in Him is equally shared regardless of our fleeting time on earth. In this then, a sense of complete contentment should be shared by all. In Christ, we have all been freed from the power of Satan and we all are slaves of the One who created us, redeemed us, and has complete and eternal control over the endless future which lies before us.

Life application: If you feel the weight of day to day trudge and toil because of your work or because of those who are appointed over you in some way or another, let that not overly displease you. Rather, if you are in Christ, you are the freest of all beings. Whatever temporary displeasures you face will be erased for all eternity when you are glorified at His return.

You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 1 Corinthians 7:23

This verse isn't saying what may initially come to mind when it is read. What it sounds like is that because we were bought at a price, meaning the finished work of Jesus which included His cross, that we are now His and so we shouldn't allow ourselves to be sold into literal slavery as bondservants of another. However, this is not what is being referred to.

Rather, the idea of being a slave that Paul is speaking of would be yielding to unnecessary rites and customs which a false teacher or non-believer might impose on them. As slaves of Christ, we are under His ultimate authority. We have been granted grace and are freed from the constraints of both the law and of the world around us. We are to live as slaves to Him. If we were to allow ourselves to fall back under the law, or to be swayed by those who reject or manipulate the gospel, we would be brought into a form of slavery from which we had been bought from.

Paul explains this in a concise statement found in Ephesians 4:14 where he says that "we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting." If we fall into their trap, we are making ourselves a slave to a far lesser authority than Christ who redeemed us. The Pulpit commentary gives an excellent explanation of this verse when they say the following:

"There is a grand play of words in the advice to them not to become slaves, at the very moment when he is advising them to continue in slavery. In that which the world called "slavery" the Christian slave might enjoy absolute liberty. The price which a master paid for them was but an unmeaning shadow; they had been bought once and eternally by an infinitely nobler price, and that purchase was the pledge of absolute emancipation."

Again, the words of Paul in Galatians 5:1 give another beautiful rendering of the thought he is making when he says, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage." The "yoke of bondage" which makes us "slaves of men" is speaking on a spiritual not a physical level.

Life application: The greatest freedom we can ever possess is to be found as a slave of Christ. To enjoy the fullness of this freedom, we must read, learn, and apply the Bible to our lives. If we don't do this, but rather trust in the doctrines of men, then we are putting ourselves back into bondage, even if we think we are following a path of freedom and ease. Read your Bible, keep its precepts in context, and apply them to your life. In doing this, you will truly experience the fullness of the life that Christ desires for you during this earthly existence.

Let us no longer be children

Tossed to and fro and carried about

With every wind of doctrine

By the trickery of men who rave and shout

In the cunning craftiness of their deceitful plotting

Let us their wayward tricks be a'spotting

And let us speak the truth in love

That we may grow up in all things into Him

Who is the head—Christ, our Lord above

Let us in His doctrine immerse ourselves and swim

Let our walk be acceptable in His sight

Let us always follow the noble path, the one just and right

Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.

1 Corinthians 7:24

This verse is somewhat of a repeat from verse 17 and it covers the entire thought from verses 17-23. In essence, Paul is saying that whatever state one was called in is acceptable and that there is nothing wrong with remaining in that condition. Whether one is married or single, a slave or a master, or whether they are circumcised or uncircumcised, there is nothing in the Christian faith which they have accepted that would ask them to change that state.

In this thought though, there is nothing which condones a lifestyle which is contrary to the Christian message. In other words, if someone's lifestyle was contrary to what is expected of a Christian, that is not included in Paul's word here. Only those things which are neutral, or those things which are set aside in Christ (such as circumcision) fall within the parameters of these words. We are not granted license to continue in the life of sin which we were engaged in when we called on Jesus.

We are to conduct our walk side by side with the Lord and in harmony with His expectations, but not fearing that we must change our state now that we are in Christ.

Life application: Let us walk confidently with Christ, knowing that He has accepted us in the state in which He called us. If we are poor and drive an old car, we are just as acceptable to Him as if we were loaded with money and had a large house and many possessions. What we possess is not what is important. Our faith in Him and our adherence to His word, however, is worth much in His sight.

Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy.

1 Corinthians 7:25

Based on the opening words "Now concerning virgins," we can infer that this begins another section of answers to questions addressed to Paul by those in Corinth. This is based on his opening line of chapter 7, which said "Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me..." The question which begins in

verse 25 is about virgins. What is it that a family with young virgin daughters who are coming of age should do with them? Should they keep them in an unmarried state? Should they allow them to be married? And so forth.

His response begins with, "I have no commandment from the Lord." There is nothing that was spoken about concerning this issue by the Lord during His earthly ministry, nor did Paul receive anything specific from Him during his time of direct instruction from Him. He is careful to note this so that his words are not intended to be taken as such. Instead, he is giving his personal opinion on the matter for their consideration. Because of this he says, "yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy."

In other words, the Lord demonstrated confidence in Paul to reason out an issue and to make a right, sound judgment on it. What he writes has the full force and authority of that bestowed upon him by the Lord. Being considered "trustworthy" also implies that he will render a judgment which has no self-seeking motivations or biases, but rather will be with the intent of bringing glory to Christ and also building up those who receive his instruction.

Life application: Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians who received them and kept them for sound counsel. Eventually, these letters became a part of the Bible. They are the inspired words of God, spoken through Paul, as doctrine for the church age. Let us consider them with that in mind, never deviating from the precepts he has laid down under this state of inspiration.

I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that *it is* good for a man to remain as he is: 1 Corinthians 7:26

A portion of the words in today's verse are probably either a direct quote from the letter he had received (verse 7:1), or are the same basic substance of what was asked. There was obviously a "present distress" which afflicted those in Corinth. Possibly the entire population, or Christians in general, were affected by this distress which might have made getting married a difficult proposition at that

time. Some believe it was a time of general famine and deprivation (see Acts 11:28). Others believe it was from the persecution of Christians by Nero which was coming around that time. Whatever is being spoken of, they had probably asked Paul, "Don't you think that it is good, because of the present distress, for a man to remain as he is?"

His response then would follow their words - "Yes, I suppose therefore..." Having said this, there is nothing to suggest that this was anything other than a temporary arrangement and not the standard for all times. In other words, Paul is not promoting monasticism. Were there a massive famine in the world today, his words would still ring true. Why would someone want to get involved in a marriage, which is a time of expected happiness and family growth, when neither of those could be expected because of the difficult circumstances? Should things get worse, only sadness and death would result. This isn't what one would expect for a marriage!

Likewise, if it were a time of war or major persecution, would it be wise to get married and spend those moments of life together fleeing, hiding, and possibly dying? No. Rather it is better to get through such a major calamity without the additional burdens and heartaches which may come from a marriage.

Having noted this, the next few verses will show that even if staying single is a wise choice during such a time of deprivation or hardship, remaining married is expected for those who are already married. Paul is covering each contingency in order and ensuring that proper biblical and Christ-honoring standards will be upheld at all times.

Life application: The context of life around us is an important guide in making big decisions about the future. Would it be wise to invest in a construction company when the housing market had collapsed? Would it be wise to buy land for a farm during a cycle of severe famine? Likewise, is it wise to consider getting married in a time when one cannot provide for a spouse and family those things that they need to remain healthy and content? Just as ensuring proper context when

reading the Bible is necessary, so is considering context when evaluating the world in which we live concerning major decisions about the future.

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 1 Corinthians 7:27

There is no reason to suppose that Paul's words in verse 27 are a fixed and firm rule, but rather a temporary guide. This is based on the previous verse which spoke these words -

"I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that *it is* good for a man to remain as he is:"

The colon at the end of that verse, used by the translators to signify the thought being presented, shows that verse 27 is based on "the present distress." It is also evident from the coming verses. Therefore, based on this, and taking in context the other times Paul speaks of this issue, this is a temporary measure, not a fixed and prescriptive directive. In this temporary state, he asks, "Are you bound to a wife?" His answer, which is based on his previous guidelines and which is confirmed by the word of the Lord Himself is, "Do not seek to be loosed."

And his next question is, "Are you loosed from a wife?" This can mean "free" from a wife, such as in being single. Or it can mean one who is loosed in a host of other ways - death, divorce before becoming a Christian, divorced because of sexual immorality, or single because the non-believing spouse departed, etc. If in this state, and because of the temporary trials he says, "Do not seek a wife." Again, this doesn't mean a suitable woman for a wife might not come along and that she should be shunned. Rather, he is certainly inferring that a man who is caught up in the current dilemma should focus on those circumstances and not be seeking a wife.

Who would be in battle during a war and be looking for a wife at the same time? Who, in a time of famine would say, "Gee, it should would be nice to find a wife to starve with?" And so forth. There is a time for all things and the current distress that Paul was writing about showed the need for right thinking on the issue of marriage.

Life application: Seeking a spouse is a good thing, but doing so in a time of hardship or calamity will more than likely only increase the hardship or calamity. Therefore, take all things in a proper order and without causing increased suffering in what is already a tough world.