

1 Corinthians 7:17-24 “Resurrection and the Body 4: Calling and Condition”
Isaiah 49
Psalm 123

May 11, 2014

We read Isaiah 49 at the beginning of our series on 1 Corinthians –
because Isaiah’s understanding of “calling” is at the heart of Paul’s doctrine of calling
in 1 Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul said, “God is faithful,
by whom you were called into communal participation with his Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.”

God’s *call* is what effectually draws you into fellowship with Jesus.
The call of God descends into the cacophony of our babbling world
and declares us to be his.
That’s why Paul says that he was “called to be an apostle” –
and that the church was “called to be saints” –
and that we should now live the life that God has called us to live.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 123,
a song that connects to 1 Corinthians 7 in another way,
because Psalm 123 focuses on how we look to the LORD
as a slave looks to his master for protection and provision.

And Psalm 123 expresses the frustration of the poor and lowly
at the sneers of the proud and arrogant.

Sing Psalm 123
Read 1 Corinthians 7

If someone says that he wants to talk about “gender, race, and class” –
you might think that he’s a post-modern academic.

But Paul frequently connects the themes of gender, race, and class.
He says in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ
“there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.”
Here in 1 Corinthians 7, in the middle of his most extensive discussion of gender and sex,
Paul also includes some comments on race and class.
For all of human history, these three things have mattered a lot to people.
Your experience of life is different if you are male – or if you are female –
if you are married, or if you are single, or divorced, or widowed...
If you are a Jew living in a Gentile city, you will have one experience –
if you are an African-American living in Granger, you will have another.
And your class – your economic status –
will also color your perspective.
An engineer will see the world differently than a laborer.

A business owner will have a different perspective than an employee.

I have suggested that we need to see the whole of 1 Corinthians 7
in the light of the principle that Paul articulated in 6:13-14 –

“The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.
And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.” (6:13-14)

You can only understand Paul’s teaching on gender, race, and class,
if you first understand his view of the resurrection of the body.

What is the body *for*?

The body is *not* for sexual immorality.

The body – whether a married body, or a single body –
a Jewish body or a Gentile body –
an enslaved body or a free body –
is for the Lord – and the Lord for the body.

Paul’s approach to ethics is a *resurrection* ethic.

The resurrection of Jesus changes the way we think about gender, race, and class.

The Rule: Be Who God Has Called You to Be (v17)

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.*

There are two wrong ways to approach this passage.

One says that Paul is a chauvinistic conservative
who wants everyone to remain in their present social condition.

This view is wrong because it leaves out *entirely* Paul’s teaching on *calling*.

It is *God’s call* – not your present social status – that you must remain in!

The other misguided notion is that Paul is emphasizing eschatological freedom –
as though our social condition is irrelevant to God’s call.

Paul wants to hold these two things together.

Your social condition should not be *confused* with God’s call.

But neither should God’s call be used in the service of your social ambitions!

Paul’s concern is to make sure that *nothing* trumps God’s call in your life.

The kingdom of God does not exist to serve your social ambitions.

Your social condition exists to serve the kingdom of God!

Let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.

Think for a moment about how Paul does this.

Paul (or Saul of Tarsus, as he was known then)
had been a Pharisee – a religious leader in the Jewish community.
When he was called by Christ,
he immediately sought to lead the Jewish community to *follow Christ*.
But Paul was also a Roman citizen.
And throughout the book of Acts,
Paul always uses his Roman citizenship in the service of the gospel.
There are times when he will appeal to his Roman citizenship
in order to avoid getting a beating.
But there are other times when he will remain silent –
and he will accept a beating for the sake of the gospel.

Paul understood, “my social condition of Roman citizenship
is *not* for my own personal benefit and social advancement.
It is for Christ and his call.”

We sometimes talk about “vocation” in the Christian life.
There is a “calling” – a “vocation” – of the gospel ministry.
But only a few people are called to be pastors.
But every Christian is “called” – every Christian has a “vocation” –
a calling to which God has called you.

As Paul talks about “vocation” here in 1 Corinthians 7,
he wants you to see that your calling – your vocation –
is not something that you have to “find.”
It’s something that you *have* right now.

You don’t need to find “the right situation” in order to follow God’s calling on your life.
I’ve heard people say, “I could follow God’s call, if only...”
There is no “if only.”
God’s call came to you *right here*.
And you can follow him *right now* – in your present situation –
because the body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body –
and in the resurrection of Jesus, you *now* belong to him.

1. Application One (Race): Keep God’s Commandments (v18-19)

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.*

In verses 18-19 Paul applies his doctrine of calling to matters of race –
particularly Jew/Gentile distinctions.

Paul is famous for his emphasis on how Jew and Gentile have come together
in one new man in Christ.

But here, Paul points out that this “one new man”
does not obliterate the categories of Jew and Gentile.

If you are a Gentile who got circumcised because you (mistakenly) thought that you had to,
you don’t need to get “uncircumcised” (and yes, there was a procedure for that –
but please don’t ask me to describe it!!)

For that matter, if you are a Jew who wants to “identify” with Gentiles,
don’t get “uncircumcised” for that!

Your status as “circumcised” or “uncircumcised” doesn’t matter.
What matters is “keeping the commandments of God.”

Let’s think about verse 19 a little:

*For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the
commandments of God.*

Does that sound familiar – but not quite right?

There’s a more popular version of the same statement by Paul in Galatians 5:6 –
“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything,
but only faith working through love.”

In Galatians, Paul objects to the idea that we are justified before God by “works of the law.”
Your standing before God depends on what *Jesus did* – not on what you do.

But even in Galatians, where Paul is so insistent on a justification that is only *by faith*,
Paul will say that this justifying faith is a faith that works by love.
And here in 1 Corinthians, Paul seems convinced that the church in Corinth
understands that God will sustain us to the end
“guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:8)
and that Christ Jesus *is* for us
“wisdom from God, righteousness, and sanctification and redemption” (1:30).

So, to a church that understands justification by faith,
Paul says,
*For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision,
but keeping the commandments of God.*

Keeping God’s commandments is not about “becoming right with God.”
Keeping God’s commandments is about living as God’s people!

God’s standard has never changed.
God calls us to be holy as he is holy.
Indeed, to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

After all, what’s the alternative?

Does God ever say, “well, if you want to sin – go right ahead! I don’t care!”??
Of course not!!

Paul’s point here is that OT boundary markers
should not be treated as boundary markers anymore.
And if that is true for boundary markers that God himself established,
then how much more is it true for mere cultural boundary markers – like skin color.

Later, in chapter 9, Paul will make his famous “all things to all people” statement.
But that is grounded, here in chapter 7,
in Paul’s conviction that all matters of race, and gender, and class
need to be seen in the light of God’s call.

Are you white? Don’t try to become black.
Are you black? Don’t try to become white.
Be who God has called you to be.
Of course, that means that “being white” or “being black”
cannot trump who God has called you to be!
Your “natural status” does not override God’s call.

But God’s call does not make your status and condition irrelevant.
Rather, God’s call takes your status and condition
and *uses your status and condition*
for the glory of Christ’s kingdom!

So, for instance, as we talk about the importance of bringing the gospel to all peoples,
the point is *not* so that we can have a multi-ethnic church.
That would be to subordinate the gospel to some other end.
But we also need to be wary lest we use the gospel
in order to have a nice, comfortable place
where we can spend time with people just like us!
The gospel must not be subordinated to *any* other end.

2. Application Two (Class): Social Climbing Is Not the Point (v20-24) **a. Remain in Your Condition (v20-22)**

Verse 20 restates the principle very clearly:

²⁰ *Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.*

“Condition” here, is the word “calling.”

Each one should remain in the calling in which he was called.

And particularly, Paul applies this idea about vocation to the most difficult condition in Corinth:
slaves.

Slavery, however, is not an occupation.

It is a social status.

Slaves, in the Roman world, could be laborers or domestic help,
or cooks, teachers, doctors, merchants – pretty much any occupation.

So when Paul says “each one should remain in the condition in which he was called,”

Paul is not saying that you need to remain in the same occupation –
or even that you need to remain with the same employer.

He’s saying that you should not be concerned with social climbing.

He’s not saying that social climbing is inherently sinful –

just like he’ll say in verse 28 that getting married is not sinful!

Rather, he’s saying that you should not be focused on social climbing –
just like you should not be focused on getting married.

Use your present condition –

whether single or married, Jew or Gentile, slave or free –

to love God, love your neighbor, and repent and believe the gospel!

Even if you are a slave.

When you think of slavery, what picture comes to mind?

A black man working on a plantation in the American south, right?

In the Roman world, slavery was not connected to race.

Many slaves were born into slavery (if your mother was a slave, so were you!) –

but the way you became a slave was usually either by selling yourself to pay your debts,
or as a prisoner of war.

Under Roman law, a master could do just about anything to his slave.

Physical and sexual abuse was very common.

But it appears that a very high proportion of Roman slaves were set free –
usually in their early 30s.

If you worked hard, you had a very good chance of being emancipated.

This is not because Roman masters were especially kind.

Rather, they viewed it as a sort of incentive for hard work

(and if they kept you as a slave into your 50s and 60s,
you might become a financial liability).

Further, *if* you were set free, you would become a “freedman”
under your former master’s patronage.

So emancipation was very common,

and if you worked hard,

you had a very reasonable likelihood of obtaining your freedom.

So it’s somewhat shocking when Paul says don’t focus on that!

²¹ *Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it.*

Paul says that Christianity is *not* about social revolution.

Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever tried to do anything to end slavery.
Slavery may well come to an end when the gospel is put into practice –
but the *goal* of the gospel is *not* to end slavery.

It took hundreds of years for the gospel to bring about the end of slavery in the Roman empire.
Historians of ancient Rome have looked in vain
for a social revolution caused by Christian preaching.

Now, where the gospel takes root, social change *happens*.

But if you aim at social change, the gospel winds up getting lost along the way.
You cannot *use* the gospel for some other end.

As soon as we start to think that we can use the gospel in order to get what we want,
we are headed for trouble!

Again, if Christian masters and Christian slaves
are loving God, loving one another, and repenting and believing the gospel –
then just like the gospel will change marriage,
so also the gospel will change economic and social relations.

Verse 21b is notoriously difficult to translate.

The ESV says:

(But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)

This probably overstates what Paul is saying.

The wooden translation reads:
“but if you are able to become free, rather make use of it.”

Anthony Thiselton translates it:

“Even if there is a possibility that you might come to be free,
rather, start to make positive use of the present.”

Paul’s concern, after all, is for the *present*.

His argument in chapter 7 is all about your current condition.

After all, how should a Christian slave think about his situation?

Should a Christian slave constantly be thinking about the injustice of his condition?

No!

If a Christian slave can obtain his freedom, that’s a good thing –
just like if a single woman finds a husband, that’s a good thing.

But don’t be so focused on trying to get what you want
that you neglect to lead the life that the Lord has assigned to you!

Now, I realize that because American slavery was exacerbated by race,
it's almost impossible for us to think about slavery apart from race!
But if we are going to understand what the Bible says about slavery,
then we need to work hard at this.

And let me be clear – American slavery was evil.
Racial slavery is especially pernicious.
I've spent more than 20 years studying American slavery,
and the more I study it, the more I despise it.

But what were you supposed to do if you were born a slave?

Or, if you were born a slaveholder?

Robert J. Breckinridge was a Presbyterian minister who owned slaves in Kentucky.
He worked hard for the cause of emancipation in Kentucky in the 1830s and 1840s.
He helped draft a constitutional amendment
that would have moved Kentucky towards emancipation in 1849.

What were R. J. Breckinridge's slaves supposed to do?

There is an interesting document from 1847.

It contains the record of an interview between a city official from Canonsburg, Pa,
and one of Breckinridge's slaves.

Letitia Jones had come to Pennsylvania as a housekeeper for RJB.

Pennsylvania law said that no slave could return to the South
without being given an opportunity to choose freedom.

So the town clerk and a town burger interviewed Letitia and offered her her freedom.

She told them that Dr. Breckinridge had told her that she was free to choose her own path
but that she would prefer to return to Kentucky and remain a slave.

Maybe it's easier when you know that your master is working to end slavery,
maybe her two years in Pennsylvania taught her that racial prejudice in the north
would leave her with very few options!

But Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 7

is that when you are dealing with the *real world* situations of life –
don't get obsessed with an idealistic future.

And, even more importantly,

don't get obsessed with *your own* social and economic climbing.

The present, as C. S. Lewis observed, is the place where eternity and time meet.

If you are always living in the future –

trying to bring about some great change in society –

you are missing the point of the gospel.

The abolitionists are often hailed as heroes today,

but what did they accomplish?

They started a bloody war that killed 600,000 people.

Sure, the slaves were freed – and then handed right back to their old masters
under a new system of oppression that lasted another 100 years.

American slavery was evil and corrupt.

I will not defend American slavery.

But the problem in American history is that slavery was based on race.

After so the Civil War, yes, slavery ended,
but they just exchanged one oppressive economic system
for another oppressive economic system!

But even worse, the Civil War saw Paul's vision of the gospel split apart permanently.

For some, the gospel became an engine of social change,
and so what *really* mattered was changing social structures –
and the gospel was just a tool towards the betterment of society.
For others, the gospel became abstracted from society,
so all that mattered was “saving souls.”

Both sides became fixated on the future.

Whether trying to change the world or trying to save souls,
neither side spent much time reflecting on what Paul says is what matters –
namely, the *present!*

Yes, your present calling involves some planning for the future –

but love for God and neighbor demands *present* action.

Keeping God's commandments in the present is what matters.

As Paul says in verse 22:

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.

If Paul's point was that everyone is free in Christ,

then verse 22 makes no sense.

Paul is not saying that social differences are irrelevant in Christ.

Paul is saying that your differences are *useful* in Christ!

You are useful to Christ – *right now* – in the condition you are in *right now!*

Paul says that the one who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord.

“Freedman” has a very definite meaning in the Roman world.

A freedman is a former slave.

When the master sets his slave free,

the “freedman” still has particular obligations to his former master –
now his “patron.”

In Paul's terms,

Letitia Jones was R. J. Breckinridge's slave –

and as such, she was Christ's freedwoman –

she had Jesus Christ as her patron.

But R. J. Breckinridge was free –
and therefore, he was a slave of Christ.

The result is not a social leveling, but a social inversion.
The least will be the greatest – and the greatest will be the least.

I know, we much prefer that everyone be equal!

But we're not all equal.

Paul's point is that it is precisely our *inequalities* that are useful to God.
The powerful man – like RJB or Paul himself! – is the Lord's slave,
and needs to *think of himself* as the Lord's slave.
Otherwise, he will use his power for himself and his own family.
But as the slave of Christ, he must be subservient to Christ!

And even so, the Corinthian slave (or Letitia Jones) is the Lord's freedman,
and needs to *think of herself* as the Lord's freedman.
She has certain rights and privileges in the Lord's house
that she doesn't have in her master's house.

So what does this mean for the modern economy?

Paul is not saying that the Christian should never look for a better job –
nor is he saying that a career change is wrong.
Rather, he is challenging us to live *now* for the gospel of Jesus.
Don't think that you have to find some "better" way of serving Christ.
You can love God and neighbor right where you are.
You can keep God's commandments in your present situation.

After all, how does Jesus summarize the Ten Commandments?
Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength –
and love your neighbor as yourself.
On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

And all this because of the gospel:

b. You Are the Lord's (v23-24)

²³ *You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.*

All of you were slaves to sin.
All of you were in bondage to death.

But you were bought with a price –
you were redeemed from slavery.
Therefore, Paul says,
“do not become slaves of men.”
Don't intentionally put yourself in a *worse* condition!

²⁴ *So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.*

Hear that!

“there let him remain with God.”

Remember the resurrection of the body!

“The body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.
And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.”

When God called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ,

he united you – body and soul – to Jesus.

This means that in whatever condition you were when you were called,

Jesus Christ is present with you in that situation.

Even if you are a slave – in the most horrific social status known to man –

God is with you.

And therefore you may abide with God in the midst of that situation.

The gospel of Jesus Christ provides not just the hope that one day things will be better –
but the power and the wisdom and the *love* to remain in your condition.