

1 CORINTHIANS

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Questions

How do you see verses 17-24 fitting into this chapter? Do they strike you as a “bolt out of the blue?” Is there any coherence here with what’s come previously and what follows? *Read in context!*

Why do you think that social status was so important for the Corinthians? And you, is it important for you? To what degree? What does the empire you live in have to teach you about social status?

When it comes to evaluating your own social status, what role, if any, does Christian spirituality play? Is there anything wrong with climbing the social ladder? If not, why not? If so, why so? *Reflect carefully about your criteria.*

What is your relationship with God based on? Where do you derive your notion of “spirituality” and “status?” Where and how does today’s global empire “call” you? Does God’s “call” have a voice into your life, or is it so significantly distorted or even blocked by the empire, that you are losing your hearing?

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Introduction

As we look at these passages together, it is important to remember that Corinth was situated in, and proud to be part of, the Roman Empire. Both the attractions and influences of that empire had an impact on their views of sexuality, marriage, and life in general.

Roman marriages, for example, were frequently arranged and not chosen. Marriage was seen as a way of possibly improving one's social status. One of the most important aspects of marriage was to have a peaceful standing between the man and the woman, rather than a deep, loving relationship.

Generally speaking, Corinthian husbands were still in a position of power and authority. But wives were beginning to have more rights, able to work outside the house and dissolve the marriage if necessary.

Another characteristic of life in the Roman Empire is that many Corinthians of average social and economic status had slaves. Some wealthy slaves bought other slaves. However, Roman Empire slavery has little in common with how we usually think of the era of slavery in the modern empire. Slaves in the Roman context were more often than not considered members of the larger family, and frequently lived in the same household as their masters. Others worked for the government, which brought admiration and authority, while still others worked in deplorable conditions and lacked the privilege of those with a more official status.

In the modern empire period of slavery as we know it, there was little opportunity for slaves to gain freedom. The Roman Empire, however, not only allowed this, but sometimes it was even encouraged.

The purpose of this brief overview is to help us understand something of the cultural context in which Paul wrote this letter. In many ways, Corinth, as part of the Roman Empire, was an active and thriving cosmopolitan city related to but distinct from cities of today's empires. No doubt the Roman Empire and its ways had a significant influence on

the Corinthians, and that is one of the most likely reasons they wrote their letter to Paul. (7:1) They were struggling to know how to live as Christians in the midst of a confluence of religious, spiritual, legal, and sexual diversity that mirrors much of what we ourselves face living in the empires that we do today. And this is one of the key things I want you to become more aware of. How does the empire we live in influence and affect our views? What difference does it make to live in the social, economic, and moral climate that we do, and how might that favorably or adversely affect our view of Christianity?

In addition to the cultural climate of the text and a growing awareness of our own contextual influences and even authorities, we also need to be attuned to the literary context of the text we are reading. Its literary context will be an important factor for discerning the authorial, theological, and historical meaning of the text as a piece of literature, and for ourselves.

The particular text we're going to study is a letter, and it should be read as one. The author is Paul. He has addressed it to the church of God in Corinth, and through the author, audience, and text, it is also addressed to us. As we read the letter, it is best to read it in its entirety – that is, from beginning to end. When you receive a letter or email from a friend or family member, you don't usually read one sentence at the beginning, another in the middle and another at the end. Most often, you read the whole thing. It should be the same for reading the letters of the New Testament. I would strongly encourage you to read the whole of 1 Corinthians on your own.

One of the most important themes in this section is calling. We should be thinking of this term as that which describes God's call to people to be in Christ. Good examples of this are found in 1:9, 24 and 26.

God's call, as primarily manifest in the preaching of the gospel and the power of the Spirit, came to the Corinthians through Paul. (2:1-5) The apostle arrived in Corinth, preached the gospel, and some believed. When they believed, they were in a particular social, ethnic setting, for example: Jew or non-Jew, married or unmarried, slave or free.

7: 17-24

These are a wonderful set of verses. In my opinion, they reinforce a key theme – the overarching theme of this chapter: “remain as you are,” adding the important “when

called” in each of the three occurrences of the imperative in verses 17-24. These are good words for us to hear in our change-oriented society. In today’s empire, that raises the importance of social status to the level of idolatry, we are well advised to not seek a change in our present situation in order to supposedly improve or heighten our calling.

Paul begins in verse 17 with “nevertheless,” probably looking back to verses 15 a and b. He then brings in the major point: “each one should remain as they were when God *called* them.” Remember, this is not addressed to those seeking a change in vocation but primarily to those who were married or had been married who were seeking a change in their status or condition, most likely for what they thought were spiritual reasons. The apostle wants them to see that God’s call in Christ transcends their desire or need for a change in social status. They should live out the Christian life in the situations they were in when called.

A better translation of verse 17 would be something like, “Only let each one *walk* as the Lord has appointed to each as God has called each.” Paul seems to be trying to emphasize both the importance of God’s call to Christ and the possibility of living out that call as it transforms and transcends the social situation in which one was when called. The point is to live our life as a Christian in whatever social context we find ourselves. It is not our social context (be it married or unmarried) that is important, but God’s call. We are not “justified,” “transformed,” or “spiritual” through seeking a change in social status but only through God’s call in Christ.

The apostle wants his readers to be aware of the importance of living out the Christian life where they are. He is not against change, per se, only against social change that may be thought to carry some religious or spiritual significance. This is the rule he lays down in all the churches. But we need to stop and ask, “if what has been said so far is moving along the right lines, how does this fit in with verses 1-16?”

If what has been seen as a better understanding of verses 1-16 – that Paul is addressing those who are or have previously been married throughout – how does this relate? (The question of whether or not to marry in 1-16 is dealt with more in more detail in another paper. Gregory J. Laughery, Paul: Anti-Marriage? Anti-sex? Ascetic? A Dialogue with 1 Corinthians 7:1-40).

The married of verses 1-7 are to continue sexual relations: remain as you are with full marital rights. And to the previously, but not presently married of verses 8-9: remain as you are. The married of verses 10-11 considering divorce: remain as you are. The married believer to an unbeliever in verses 12-16: remain as you are. Yet each time there is an exception. In verses 17-24, we may have then a reinforcement of Paul's position concerning each of these cases: "remain as you are," adding this time the relevance and importance of calling. If Christians are seeking social change for some kind of religious or spiritual reasons, Paul tells them they should not. This is to have misunderstood both their call and their spirituality.

It is likely that some in Corinth were arguing that the celibate life was religiously and spiritually superior. Therefore, the married should cease sexual activity, the widows and widowers should not remarry, the married should perhaps not stay married and the believers should not stay married to an unbeliever. Remember, in the view of some in Corinth, even believer-believer sex was unspiritual. For them, believer-unbeliever sex was downright defiling. Others, however, went to the opposite extreme. Their view of the body and their absolutized "freedom" meant they had no sexual constraints.

If this is the case, perhaps verses 18-19 become more clear. Paul uses circumcision as an analogy to make his point. If one was circumcised when called, they should not be uncircumcised. If they were uncircumcised when called they should not be circumcised. No exceptions. Why?

Neither circumcised nor uncircumcised is important. God does not distinguish between one or the other. Religiously-spiritually, what social status we have when called is not finally what makes us who we are. Christ has broken down any ethnic, socio-economic and cultural dividing barriers. In other words: Don't think your religious-spiritual standing is based on your social condition or actions. This is simply not the case. God does not put value on such things. Again, this is not to say that changing in life (which is inevitable) or aspiring to change is always wrong. It is not. But that change is not what determines right standing before God. Such standing is not based on your social condition when you were called.

It is because of this that Paul can write in verse 19 that circumcision and uncircumcision are nothing. Neither has any spiritual-theological significance as far as

God is concerned. Paul adds in verse 19b that what counts is “keeping God’s commands.” This may come as something of a surprise. It is likely that here that the apostle means that what counts is to be obedient to the will of God as revealed in Christ, or the “law of Christ.” “Good works” versus “the works of the law.”

In verse 20, we read the second “remain as you are.” Each of us should continue in the calling we were in when called. Paul seems to want to stress again that God’s call in Christ actually brings a new meaning to the social condition or circumstances in which we were when called. It seems evident that this is Paul’s concern as we go on to verses 21-24. He is again stressing the possibility, not the absolute necessity, of remaining as we are. His example this time is slaves. “Were you a slave when called?” Many of the Christians in Corinth had a low social standing. You may recall this from 1:26. Paul writes with an imperative: “Don’t let it trouble you.” This time, however, we have an exception. If you can gain your freedom, he writes, do so. This is similar to verses 1-16 but not to verse 18. There is no theological question involved. Slaves are not to ultimately be concerned with their social status. The work of Christ in their lives transforms their social condition.

“For,” in verse 22, the slave who is called by Christ is Christ’s free person, and the free who are called by Christ are Christ’s slaves. Both belong to Christ, and both are to live out the Christian life in their social contexts. If slaves can gain their freedom, however, they should do so. This configuration of slave/free-slave reflects the metaphorical yet substantive reality of the life lived in tension.

To emphasize the point of verse 22, Paul repeats what he already wrote in 6:20: “You were bought at a price.” Because of this purchase through the work of Christ, both the slave and free belong to Christ, who has the capacity to set them in a transformative and transcendent context beyond their present social status by freeing them from sin. Therefore, the called slave has been set free and the called free enslaved. Because both belong to another, namely Christ, their particular social status is rendered irrelevant. The slave is both slave and free and the free both free and slave. Neither are to be slaves of humans, as it is ultimately God who both are to serve.

Verse 24 brings us to the conclusion of the paragraph. Paul addresses brothers and sisters. Each of us is responsible to remain with God in the situation in which we were

when called. This is not intended to be an absolute freezing of our social situation. If it were, it would border on the ridiculous. Social changes are inevitable. Rather, Paul wants to emphasize that spirituality is not dependent on our social circumstances but on remaining with God in Christ in whatever those circumstances may be. That is, if we are married, we are to stay that way. If we are single, stay that way, but if we chose to marry it is fine. Each of us is to serve God in the midst of our social conditions.

Remember that Paul's concern in these verses is not primarily with change. He is addressing those Christians in Corinth who were seeking change supposedly for religious or spiritual purposes. They would likely have argued that the celibate or ascetic life was superior in status to married life. Paul argues this is not so. There is no such thing as "social status" before God. Therefore, remain as you are and live out the Christian life based on God's call in Christ. Self-identity, then, is to be found in Christ, which affirms and transcends gender on the one hand and social status on the other.

Paul's pastoral calling for Christians is to be free to wholeheartedly serve God "wherever they find themselves" in whatever present situation. Again, change per se is not a problem, but social status or even gender as primary orientations end up putting self before the other and deny the reality of having been bought at a price. The transformative and transcendent work of Christ allows each of us to remain with God instead of depending on social status for our identity or life.

The call of God is an everlasting call. It goes far deeper and far beyond the superficial and short-lived call of today's empire, which persists in making idols out of social change for its own sake, or for some false notion of spiritual status.