

Our Situation is our Calling
1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Turn to 1 Corinthians 7 please. Our situation is our calling; that's the title today.

Called by God

What does it mean to be called by God? I grew up hearing God's calling spoken about in a way that made called people somehow different than the rest of us. God had set them aside for something special. For me, "called" by God meant set apart by God for some particular work.

The New Testament as a whole does not talk like that, and our paragraph in particular completely erases that idea. This sermon is for every believer who feels like their situation in life has trapped them, their circumstances have tied them up, and we are no longer players in the kingdom. One way or another, we have ended up in a position where are of no real use to God.

Maybe we never were much use to God, some disadvantage we've always had rules this out. Or, maybe we used to get things done for the Lord, but then something happened to us that takes this away. Maybe we did it to ourselves, or maybe we got hit with something we did not see coming. Either way, circumstances have put us on the sidelines.

No, says God to us in the Scripture, that never happens, that's never happened since the world began. For each one, your particular and exact situation, just the way it is, that's your assignment from the Lord and that's your calling. Be faithful to the Lord right there, with all your strengths and weaknesses and troubles and abilities. Your calling is to be a follower right there.

Scripture – 1 Cor 7:17-24

*Each one, as the Lord assigned them, each one, as God **called** them, should live as a believer in that situation. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was **called**? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was **called**? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each person should remain in the **calling** they were in when God **called** them. Were you a slave when you were **called**? Don't let it trouble you. (Although if you can gain your freedom, do so.) For in the Lord, the one who was a slave when **called** is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when **called** is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. Brothers and sisters, each one should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.*

The Corinthian Error

Someone taught the Corinthians that marriage was bad. Paul warned about this kind of teaching in 1 Timothy 4. Deceiving spirits, Paul says there, and teachings of demons, come into the church through people who are hypocritical liars. And what do they teach? They forbid people to get married. They tell believers that even in marriage, sexual union is wrong and sinful.

Teaching like this had come into the Corinthian church. Some believed it. Some husbands in the church were saying to their wives, “being together wrong, I’m not living with you any more,” and some wives in the church were saying to their husbands, “being together is wrong, I’m not living with you any more.” If you read carefully the first 7 verses or so of this chapter, that’s clearly the problem. Then Paul branches out to speak of marriage more generally.

Paul wants to get rid of any idea that any of us can possibly move closer to God or become more useful to God by changing our life situation. For example, that anyone’s life would be more honouring to God celibate than married, or more honouring to God married than celibate.

That any of us could be more faithful to the Lord by getting rid of some handicap or burden. Or by changing anything about our circumstances. No, no, says Paul, your situation is your assignment from the Lord, your circumstances are your calling from God.

Stay in the Lord’s Assignment

Each one as the Lord assigned them, each one as God called them, should live as a believer in that situation. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.

Wherever these people were when they became Christians, that was the Lord’s assignment for them, being faithful right there was God’s calling. It will become clear that the real truth here is not that we must stay put. Paul is too practical for that. But no one must ever think that a different situation would be more pleasing or glorifying to God.

What Matters to God

Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.

Being circumcised or not had to do with religious status. Gentiles might want to be circumcised to be as good as Jews, to be included in the righteous people. Jews might want to hide it, to be more acceptable to Gentiles. For a Jew to say “circumcision is nothing” is remarkable, but that’s what Paul says.

Quite a few Christians around still who have not learned this. This keeps popping up, Christians who think they have gotten themselves a little higher on the God ladder by keeping some OT law that the NT says does not matter any more.

Jesus and the apostles are entirely clear about which commands of God that we should obey. That's what matters. We do that, as we are able, in our particular situation. That's what matters.

When I was a seminary teacher, I got the feeling from some students that they had come to seminary and were going into ministry because they wanted to move closer to God. Seminary and ministry was a way to show that they loved God and were devoted to God. Did they want God to see, or others? Or was it just to convince themselves? Hard to say.

I recognized that in others because I had some of that myself. I thought that's just what you did if you loved God and wanted to serve the Lord. The Lord did want me at seminary, and as time passed he pruned away my other ideas. No situation or calling is holier or more pleasing than another. Your situation is your assignment from the Lord.

It's good to be devoted to God, and it's good to want to show him, and God is glad for that. But then we can stray from the path and do things that aren't what he asked. Many believers have done that. God gave us these paragraphs to be clear in what he wants from us.

Stay in God's Calling

Each person should remain in the calling they were in when God called them.

Paul states the core truth three times in our Scripture: at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end (vv17, 20, 24). This is the second. When God calls us to himself and to Christ, when he calls us into his kingdom, he means us to do this where we are. Our call to believe and be saved includes living it out right where we are.

Paul is practical: if you need to change something in your situation, then change. Just don't think for one minute that you've improved your relationship with God, or shown him anything special, by changing your situation. Moving into a different situation is not moving toward God.

God sometimes calls us to change our situation, to go somewhere else or do something else. Then we do that, we obey. But we do not become more righteous or special or set apart by doing this. In the kingdom it is a lateral move.

Don't be Troubled by your Limitations

Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you.

Some of us were born with disadvantages that we cannot escape. We have limitations we don't like, and it seems to us that these weaknesses or burdens rule out the kind of service that we'd like to give the Lord. God says, "don't let it trouble you!"

Things come into our lives that change our situation. Thirty years ago Elyn was born to us. That changed Marilyn's life a lot, from that day on. It changed mine, too, but Marilyn's far more. Marilyn had always looked outside, and was gifted in that, and now she was called to look inside far more. New situation, new calling.

Two years ago, Marilyn's sight was damaged. Another list of things she can no longer do, and pain of every kind. New situation, new calling. How can she obey God in these new circumstances? In the kingdom, she has moved neither up or down. She's the Lord's slave on a different assignment. This room has all kinds of stories like this.

What does it look like for someone in exactly your position to be faithful to God? *That* is your assignment. *That* is who you are called to be. How could you, in your situation, in your present circumstances, bring glory to Jesus? Don't be a hero. Be you. What works for you?

If you Can Change it, Do so

(Although if you slaves can gain your freedom, do so.) This line gets quoted a lot more than the rest of these lines, but it is just a parenthesis.

Here's something else: this line is very unclear in Greek. It could just as easily mean the opposite. "*Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your slavery now more than ever!*" That's how the NRSV translates it, and that is a fine translation.

Even the commentaries that take this as the NIV does, Paul allowing slaves to pursue freedom, even they have a long discussion on these words, and they all admit that it's hard to say which direction to take it. I'm sorry if someone led you to believe that reading Greek makes everything clear. It is not true. But I think the common translation is right.

But the reason Paul brings up slavery as an example is that most slaves could not change it, they had no choice in the matter. And you can't blame the ones who really loved the Lord for regretting their slavery, and being sorry they could not do for the Lord the things they saw free people do. That's why Paul wrote this. Don't let it trouble you.

Look at Ourselves and Each Other Differently

[Don't let slavery trouble you,] For in the Lord, the one who was a slave when called is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.

Slaves could look at freed people and say, “you’re the Lord’s slave.” Freed people could look at slaves and say, “the Lord has freed you from the worst slavery.” We were all bought with a price, we are all the Lord’s slaves, and not anyone else’s. That’s the bottom line.

“Do not become slaves of humans” in this paragraph means “ignore human opinion on these things.” Others might think you’re in a higher position, others might think you’re in a lower position; ignore them both. We are all bought with a price, and answer to the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. This is the third time Paul has stated the core truth.

He’s not against changing things, he’s against any belief that changing my circumstances will move me closer to God or make me greater in the kingdom in any way at all. Let’s not reduce serving the Lord to a list of things that strong believers do, because some people’s circumstances rule them all out.

The basic call of the gospel is like this: be “completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, through the bond of peace” (Eph 4).

In another place Paul writes (Php 2), “Do everything without grumbling or complaining. This will make you pure children of God in a warped and crooked generation, and you will shine among them like stars in the sky.”

When Paul says, “keeping God’s commands is what counts,” that’s what he’s talking about. Those commands. The Lord’s new command would fit in here: “love one another as I loved you.” Let’s live these out exactly where we find ourselves. That’s the only way up.

This teaching shows us each one of us how to see ourselves before God. This teaching also guides how we look at each other. The truth of these eight verses 1 Cor 7 has not done it’s work until it has shaped both, how we see ourselves and how we see each other. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, thank you for telling us the truth. This is good news for us. Thank you that we are all just as called as the apostle Paul, and thank you that it is completely available to all of us, it’s actually unavoidable. Thank you for making it so simple. Thank you that this leaves no one out, no one at all. You have included us all in the assigned and called, and you’ve gotten rid of many of the ways we fear we are losers. Now, Lord, aim us at your commands. Work in us so that we will want to do what pleases you, and so that we will do it. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, make you holy through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.