

Calling

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

Right in the middle of instruction about marriage and singleness, Paul changes subjects to make the same point: live faithfully where God has put you (vv17, 20, 24). Eight times in this passage he uses a form of word *called*, and in two senses: 1) God's call on a person to trust in Him and follow Jesus; 2) the work God calls us to do on this earth. Rather than set our spiritual life against our vocations or vice versa, the Bible teaches us to serve the Lord everywhere. We distinguish our callings but should not separate them, which means we are able to love God and people during the 90,000+ hours we will work in a lifetime.

Called to Know God

The Christian church is the most diverse organization on the planet because God draws people from all tongues, tribes, and walks of life. If someone comes to Him it is because the Father has drawn him (Jn. 6:44). This is referred to as effectual calling, when someone comes to the Father: "Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Rom. 8:30). The church in Corinth had Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen, rich and poor side by side with equal value, dignity, and status as Christians. The ancient world was full of divisions that set people against one another, but the gospel makes us one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). If someone was called while circumcised, Paul says not to become uncircumcised, and if called while uncircumcised, not to be circumcised (v18). Circumcision was a striking identity marker. Men would be naked in baths and some sporting competitions, so being Jewish was obvious and despised by many Gentiles. God gave circumcision to Abraham as a sign of the covenant between Him and his descendants (Gen. 17:10). It meant God loved you and your family. But just as God set it up, so He took it down, fulfilled in Christ (Col. 2:11-12). The necessity of circumcision is *the* debated issue in the New Testament church, and Paul says "Circumcision and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God" (v19). The command of God is to believe in Jesus Christ whom He sent (Jn. 6:29). It's lawful today to get circumcised so long as you don't think it makes a spiritual difference. Knowing who we are in God allows us to resist all the pressures to forge some kind of other identity. If our identity is in family, friends, work, talent, success, money, wisdom, reputation or anything else, we are on sinking sand. But God's calling and gifts are irrevocable.

Called to Serve God

Paul says again to remain in the same calling in which you were called (v20). People in this congregation would have ascribed their gifts and trades to the pagan gods, but now they know the Lord distributes gifts (v17). Paul doesn't want anyone in the church despising their gifts and leaving the good work He called them to do. Just as the world was divided religiously into circumcised and uncircumcised, so it was divided vocationally and socially between slave and free. It didn't make you less of a

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Christian to be a slave, and if that was someone's situation, they shouldn't worry about (v21). Paul is by no means indifferent to slavery—"but if you can be made free, rather use it" (v21). Christians who were bought with a price out of bondage to sin ought not to be the slaves of men (v23). Roman slavery was an attractive option for many people who could achieve comfort and status in a slave owner's household, and many slaves had the opportunity to purchase their freedom. But slavery is not a good option because God's free people should not be controlled by someone else (v22). He who is called while free is Christ's slave, a slave of righteousness (cf. Rom. 6:22). Christianity ended societal slavery by this means, the same way we ended polygamy, through consistent gospel living and influence. While it's not a sin to be a slave, it's a sin to act like one, needing coercion in order to work. Christ's free people should not be slaves, nor ideally work for people who act like slaves or treat people like it. If a loan shark or an ambulance-chasing lawyer or an abortion doctor becomes a Christian, they need to change their work in order to honor the Lord. But their training and calling can be greatly used in the kingdom of God. Paul says to "remain with God in that state in which he was called" (v24). Christians don't have to move offices or careers to find Him, but to realize He has been with them the whole time.