

# “Do Not Become Slaves of Men”

## The Thirteenth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

*Texts: 1 Corinthians 7:17-40; Deuteronomy 6:1-9*

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Paul does not give us the specifics, but he speaks as though the Corinthian church is in the midst of some sort of serious crisis. While Paul has spoken in some detail about the pressing issues facing this church—the love of pagan wisdom, the rampant sexual immorality, the fact that Christians were suing each other in secular courts and failing to discipline erring members—Paul now speaks of unspecified dire circumstances confronting the Christians in Corinth. This crisis is the reason why Paul urges the members of this church to devote themselves to solving this crisis, and why in the meantime the Corinthians should remain in their current social status until things are resolved.

As we saw last time, Paul is responding to a letter from the Corinthians in which they asked the apostle a number of specific questions about marriage and celibacy. In the opening part of chapter 7, Paul discusses marriage and the question of what to do when one party to the marriage becomes a believer while the other party remains an unbeliever. Paul now moves on to address a Christian’s social status at the time of their conversion. Three times in balance of chapter 7, Paul affirms the general principle “*stay as you were when called.*” The issues here are very practical. When someone becomes a Christian, they are now a bond-servant of Jesus Christ. How does this relate to their social standing? If they are uncircumcised, do they now submit to circumcision to avoid conflict with Jews? Should Gentiles begin to live as Jews? Should Jews seek to undo their Jewishness? Do the limits placed upon slaves by their masters infringe upon their freedom (standing) in Christ? What should slaves do once they become Christians? Must they stay slaves, or is slavery incompatible with Christianity? And then what about young women, betrothed to be married—what to do about them in the midst of the current crisis?

We have much ground to cover, so we’ll turn to our text (vv. 17-40) and get started.

In verse 17, Paul writes, “*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.*” Paul has made the point that under certain circumstances—when an unbeliever deserts the believing spouse—the believer is not bound to the party who deserts them. Paul now asserts that new Christians should ordinarily maintain their present state (vocation) after coming to faith. Paul is not referring to the initial call to faith in Christ at the time of conversion. He is referring to that calling (vocation) which a person had before coming to faith.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase “lead the life” literally means “to walk.” “To walk” is a favorite metaphor in Paul’s writings for a person’s course of life and implies progress in the faith. The main idea is that we should retain “the walk” which each of us had before coming to faith. God’s call to faith in Christ is a gracious gift, and it completely eliminates social setting (or status) as having any kind of religious significance.<sup>2</sup> To put it another way, someone who comes to faith in Christ does not need to give up their secular job and get a “Christian” job or start a ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 168.

<sup>2</sup> Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 311.

Granted, due to sin, poor choices, the mysteries of providence and so on, knowing what our own unique vocation entails can be a difficult thing. But finding our vocation is not Paul's point here. There are also people in this church who were employed in jobs which would not constitute a legitimate calling (i.e., a temple prostitute), and who, once converted cannot continue such work. But Paul's main point should not be missed. We are to remain where we are when called to faith in Christ. Becoming a Christian does not mean that we are to withdraw from the world. God gives to us certain gifts and places us in certain situations. We should use the gifts God has given us and thereby fulfill our vocations.<sup>3</sup> Paul lays down this general rule in all the churches—remain where you are when called. Don't quit your job.

In verses 18-19, Paul moves from the theoretical to specific situations. The first of these matters has to do with circumcision. *“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. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.”* Circumcision was the most divisive issue in the early church. If someone is circumcised (a Jew) and becomes a Christian, Paul says they should remain as they are. There are recorded instances of Jews disfiguring themselves to reverse or hide their circumcision. If someone is uncircumcised, they should remain uncircumcised. Echoing his comments in Galatians, Paul writes that God will judge us in light of his law (a point made by Moses in Deuteronomy 6, our Old Testament lesson), not based upon whether or not we have undergone a particular surgical procedure.

To make sure no one misses his point, in verse 20, Paul reaffirms the principle stated earlier in verse 17. *“Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.”* Because God has called us to our station in life (vocation), we should remain there once we are called to faith in Christ unless that vocation is inappropriate for a Christian (i.e., working in one of pagan temples). In the words of one writer, “a man is not called . . . to a new occupation: [rather] his old occupation is given a new significance.”<sup>4</sup>

In verses 21-23, Paul takes up the matter of slavery. *“Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) 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. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.”* If someone is a slave and then becomes a Christian, how does being a bond-servant of Christ effect their relationship to their earthly masters? Paul advises such people not to be troubled. Again, his advice is exceedingly practical—gain your freedom if you can, but if this is your station in life, you serve Christ honorably while you serve your earthly master.

Someone may be a slave and therefore bound to an earthly master. But this does not negate the fact that the slave has been freed from something far worse than slavery: slavery to sin, the law and death. Slaves who come to faith in Jesus Christ, should view themselves as the Lord's freedman—free from sin, the law and death. Even people who occupy the lowliest stations in this life (slaves in Greco-Roman culture) are in actuality kings and priests in the kingdom of God. This view of things is what has led Christians (with a few shameful exceptions) to be so outspoken against the institution of slavery. As marriage is a picture of Christ's relationship to his church, slavery serves as an illustration of what sin does to us. This is why Christians exalt the institution of marriage and decry the institution of slavery.

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<sup>3</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 109.

<sup>4</sup> Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 170.

Another irony is that even freedmen and women are slaves to sin, death and the law, unless they are set free from these tyrants by Jesus Christ. Having been set free from sin, the law, and death, the free man or woman is likewise a bond-servant of Christ. Both the believing freeman and the believing slave serve the same master—Jesus. In the kingdom of God, all class and social divisions are removed. There is no difference between slave and free, as Paul tells us in Galatians 3:26-29: “*for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*” These are revolutionary words, not only to a Jew (who regarded Gentiles, slaves and woman as inferior), but to Greeks as well (since Greeks regarded slavery as shameful). In God’s new society (the church), all of these societal distinctions are removed. We are all bond servants of Christ.

The price of our freedom (whether we be slave or free) from sin, the law and death is the blood of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:20). To be purchased by the blood of Christ is to be a freeman, never again to be slaves of sin.<sup>5</sup> Since all believers belong to the Lord who bought them, they belong to no man and they are never again to be slaves to sin! Paul’s point may even have served as an admonition to the Corinthian Christians that they should themselves own no slaves, and set free those that they may have. While the institution of slavery is clearly an abomination on a number of grounds, Paul is probably speaking here in a metaphorical sense—Christians are to behave as freemen, never again to be slaves to the false religions of men which offer no relief from sin, the law and death.

For the third time, in verse 24, Paul reiterates the principle already laid down. “*So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.*” God has placed us in specific life situations (vocations) in addition to calling us to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul does not mean that we should not seek to better ourselves or that we cannot change vocations once we become Christians. His point is that unless God calls us to a new vocation, we are to continue to remain where we are when called. As Morris reminds us, “conversion is not the signal to leave one’s occupation (unless it is clearly incompatible with Christianity) and seek something more ‘spiritual.’ All of life is God’s. We should serve God where we are until he calls us elsewhere.”<sup>6</sup> Well said.

In verse 25, Paul now discusses the unmarried. He writes, “*Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.*” Given the previous discussion, a question now arises about virgins and whether the term refers exclusively to unmarried young women, or to both male and female virgins. That these are young women (and not young men) is clear based on the fact that of the five of the six times Paul uses the term, he uses the feminine article.<sup>7</sup> In Greco-Roman culture, whether or not a young woman married was usually determined by the young woman’s parents (or guardian, in the case of slaves). She had no such right.

As used here, a virgin is a young woman thirteen or older, and still under the guardianship of parents. In the strictest sense, this does not refer to a single young woman who has decided not to get married, or who has delayed marriage until beyond majority as in contemporary western culture—although much of

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Morris, 1 Corinthians, 111.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 111. Cf Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 174.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 112.

what is said here should inform how Christian singles conduct themselves. Since there is no saying of Christ which specifically deals with this subject, Paul will speak (give a judgment) from his apostolic authority, which, as he now qualifies, arises from the Lord's mercy to him.

In verse 26, Paul speaks of the difficulties in Corinth. *“I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.”* Given the difficult circumstances facing these new converts to Christianity, (the struggle to live as a Christian in a pagan culture), the current situation, in Paul's estimation, has reached the level of a crisis. Some think this to be a reference to the imminent the fall of Jerusalem, or even to the second coming of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> Others think the crisis may be a reference to the famine during the reign of emperor Claudius. But I think more likely that Paul is referring to the problems within this church mentioned earlier in this letter<sup>9</sup>—a man sleeping with his father's wife and the lack of discipline in response (chapter 5), the matter of litigation among church members, Christians using prostitutes (chapter 6), as well as the questions now being put to Paul regarding the problems faced by married, widowed and singles who have come to faith in Christ (chapter 7).

Paul's response to those who find themselves in this uncertain environment is simple: *“I think that it is good for you to remain as you are.”* As one commentator quips, “when high seas are raging it is not time to change ships.”<sup>10</sup> Paul is not saying that people who are virgins when converted must remain unmarried. Rather, because of the crisis being faced by those in the church, it is good (wise) for people to remain where they are, until such time as the Lord changes the present circumstances. You need not leave your job (cf. verses 17-24), your spouse, or change your status in life, simply because you have become a believer. Paul's advice is to tell people to remain where they are until such time as the crisis is over, when they can make an informed and rational decision about such important matters as marriage.

This becomes clear in the next verse. *“Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.”* A man or woman who is married should not seek to end their marriage (literally “loose the tie”) merely because their spouse remains an unbeliever—Paul has just spoken of this situation (vv. 12-16). Those who are widowed and virgins are not to look for a spouse, *if* they have the gift of celibacy. If they do not this gift and are burning with lust (and although it is not stated, but is certainly implied) and struggling with sexual sin, it is better for them to marry rather than continue to struggle with their sins (v. 7-8). Otherwise, it is better for people to remain where they are.

Paul further qualifies this in the next verse. *“But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.”* While Paul has encouraged those who, like himself, have the gift of celibacy to remain single, those who do not have this gift do not sin if they marry, despite what some in the Corinthian church may have been teaching. Paul believes that there is nothing sinful about marriage. In fact, it is the normal state for humanity, since only those who are given the gift of celibacy are able to do so without struggling with sexual sins. Yet in Corinth, where many were struggling with unlearning a pagan sexuality, it may indeed be a good thing to remain unmarried and to serve the Lord without distraction.

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<sup>8</sup> Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 174.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 113.

<sup>10</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 113.

Ever the realist, Paul gives his reason for stressing that those who are virgins and widowed are to remain where they are, especially in times of crisis such as the Corinthians are now facing. Those who are married will face troubles in this life. Despite the many benefits of marriage, there are not only additional stresses facing those who are married, but these stresses are especially acute in difficult times. Marriage puts two sinful people together in the day to day struggles of life, with all the stress that goes with it. Married people face many struggles that virgins or widowed people do not, and it is Paul's desire to spare people from such troubles. These struggles can detract from the more urgent struggle facing the members of this congregation, many of whom are still thinking and acting like pagans.

The practical application is simply this: Those who are single or widowed and who think that getting married will solve all their problems are sadly mistaken. Marriage entails a whole set of unique difficulties—even in times not characterized as that of “crisis.” Nevertheless, Paul teaches that marriage (not celibacy) is the normal state of life, and if entered into with “eyes wide open” and not in times of crisis (such as the current crisis in Corinth), it is an enjoyable and fulfilling state.

But those who have the gift of celibacy should not seek to be married and Paul will tell us why in verse 29. *“This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none.”* There is a huge debate about the meaning of the phrase, *“the appointed time has grown very short.”* While Paul often speaks of the Lord's return, elsewhere he never gives this kind of counsel. In his Thessalonians letters and in Philippians, Paul exhorts Christians to live blameless lives, including family life (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Philippians 1:9-11). There is no reference in any of Paul's other letters to a crisis, such as that mentioned here. Those who argue that Paul is speaking of the Second Coming, cannot explain why it is that those living at the time of the end should live differently from Christians who do not live at the time of the end.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, I think this is a reference to the present crisis in Corinth. As the Corinthian church becomes more established and deals with the issues it faces, the crisis will ease. Life will return to normal. In the meantime, people ought to remain where they are. In light of the fact that the end of the crisis is soon, Paul gives a number of exhortations. The first is that those who are married are to live as if they did not have wives. By this, Paul does not mean that married men are to withdraw sexually from their wives, or else to live as they did before they were married. Paul is referring to the fact that the crisis this church faces is a matter of some urgency, and that people must devote themselves whole-heartedly to dealing with the matters facing the church, especially the disciplinary matters mentioned earlier.

But there is another consideration which is seen in the following verses (30-34, especially v. 32): *“and those who mourn [should live] as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.”*

Those who mourn are consumed by their grief. But there are important matters to be addressed, now. Those who are happy are preoccupied with their present joyful circumstances. But there are pressing

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 114.

matters with which this church must deal—now. Those who are consumers are enjoying their new possessions. There will be time for that later—this church is presently in a crisis. There is also an eternal perspective on temporal things. Those preoccupied with the things of this world, should not be engrossed by them because such things are temporal, in their present form are passing away. It is folly for believers to act like these things are permanent, for they will not last.<sup>12</sup> While these things have their place in this life, they will pass away in the next. Christians need to consider that while temporal things are important, sometimes eternal things become more important—especially in times of spiritual crisis.

Because of this, Paul wants the Corinthians to be free from such temporal concerns (cf. v. 27). Whatever concerns people have (marriage, grief, joy, possessions, preoccupation with things of the world) distract them from dealing the issues at hand. Someone who is unmarried is not worrying about how to please their spouse, while a married man has other responsibilities. A married man's attention is divided. Someone who is a virgin or widowed is able to be more devoted to the Lord, in both body and spirit. While the time may come for them to marry later on, now is the time for them to remain as they are.

This is why Paul prefers celibacy to marriage. He is not distracted from the Lord's work at this most critical time. As he puts it in verse 35: "*I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.*" Paul is not trying to restrict (harness) people from going about the affairs of daily life. He has already said that he does not want Christians to withdraw from the world. Nor is he saying that celibacy is superior to marriage (as those who depreciate the body might argue, and as monastics have done). But Paul is saying that those who have been given the gift of celibacy have certain advantages—they are not distracted during these difficult times because of the need to take care of a spouse.

In the balance of the chapter, Paul qualifies his comments about celibacy. Although he sees great advantages in remaining celibate, Paul is also clear that marriage is not to be despised. A virgin does not sin, if they decide to marry. "*If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.*" This is a very difficult verse to translate and interpret. My view is that Paul is referring to a situation (created by Greek paganism, or misguided Christian asceticism), where people got engaged, but they held to a pagan view of the body (sexual desires and bodily passions were evil) and abstained from sexual relations even after marrying. They sought a spiritual union, but not a physical one. The man finds the strain too great and desires the woman—acting unseemly toward her. In this case, Paul permits them to marry and cohabit, effectively refuting the erroneous pagan sexuality which underlies such a relationship.<sup>13</sup>

In the next few verses Paul reiterates his view that virgins should remain unmarried but lists four conditions before this advice be followed. "*But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well.*" The four conditions are as follows: 1). The man must have settled this matter in his own mind—he must be convinced that this is the proper course of action. 2). He is under no compulsion, that is, there is no external contract (i.e. "a formal betrothal"). 3). He has control over his will (i.e., he is not a slave) and then, 4). He has made up his mind not to marry the woman. If these four

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<sup>12</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 114-115.

<sup>13</sup> Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 84.

things are in place, the man has done the right thing by keeping the woman from marriage.<sup>14</sup>

In verse 38, Paul adds, “*So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.*” Someone who marries his betrothed does right, but only in light of the failure to meet conditions described in the previous verse. But the man who does meet the conditions, and therefore waits to marry his betrothed until things improve does even better.

Finally, Paul discusses the status of widows in verses 39-40. “*A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.*” In Paul’s view of marriage, partners remain bound until death (although there is the adultery exception taught by Jesus, and the desertion clause, mentioned above). Christians are not to seek divorce—although divorce may become necessary. However, if one spouse dies, the survivor is free to remarry, provided they marry “in the Lord,” i.e., they marry a Christian. And yet, Paul continues to see advantages (not superiority) in remaining unmarried. And as Paul sees it, his advice is that of an apostle—because he has the Spirit of the Lord, something others in the congregation may have claimed as well.

What, then, do we say by way of application?

While many of Paul’s directives in chapter 7 are conditioned upon the fact that the Corinthian church was facing a serious spiritual crisis when Paul wrote this epistle, much of what Paul says was absolutely revolutionary in its day. Becoming a Christian did not change someone’s current social status. But once in Christ, one’s vocation and social standing no longer divides them, as these things did before they became Christians. Christianity is not a culture—it transcends all cultures by concerning itself with the most fundamental human problem, namely that we are sinners, enslaved to sin, and therefore under God’s wrath. This is why in the midst of a discussion of social mores (slavery, circumcision, marriage), and the fact that Christians are to leave pagan ways of thinking and doing behind, Paul now reminds the Corinthians one more time that they have been bought with the blood of Christ. Therefore, they are not to become slaves of men—a reference to the bondage foisted upon them by the false and pagan religions of ancient Corinth. Whether a Christian be a wealthy merchant or a lowly slave, in Christ these differences no longer matter. All believers are bond-servants of Christ—purchased by his shed blood, joint heirs to all the riches and treasures that are ours in Christ.

Paul’s practical advice—which is remarkable for its common sense—is for the Corinthians to remain in the state they were in when they came to faith, and to devote themselves to solving whatever crisis it was that the church was facing. Makes perfect sense. But the underlying point is that becoming a Christian doesn’t change (or negate) our calling and vocation, it changes how we understand our calling and vocation. We are Christ’s, therefore we should not be enslaved to sinful passions, pagan ways of thinking (i.e., that our bodies are bad), or rash and foolish behavior. Because we are Christ’s, Paul exhorts us, “do not become slaves of men.” And that means living as servants of Christ, no longer bound to the foolishness of pagan wisdom. It means we need to stop thinking and acting like slaves to sin.

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<sup>14</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 119.