

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: miracles

Show Yourself to us and to the world Lord God through amazing miracles of love and grace; love towards those who are suffering and need Your help, and grace towards those who are trapped in worldliness and evil, and who need Your forgiveness and salvation. Be gentle with us, Lord God, for we do not always perceive what You are doing even though miraculous things happen before our eyes, and all too often, we remain blind. Open our hearts, our minds and our senses to all You are doing: AMEN

For self

Pray about those things that are on your mind; those you love, the church, the state of the world. Wait on the Lord and place these things before Him. Accept that he is in control and trust in Him.

For others

Pray for all who work in NGO's (non-governmental organisations). Some are Christian and some are not, but pray that God's purposes will stand higher than human need or aspiration.

Meditation

Listen for the voice, my soul,
the call that tells you
when and how and where to do God's will.

See the shining light, my soul,
let it shine forever bright
within the darker corners of this world.

Seek the true 'shalom', my soul,
the Spirit's gracious gift
that calms and soothes the troubled breast.

Turn the corner now, my soul,
redirect your eye's focus
towards the glorious goal of heaven's prize.

Speak the eternal truth, my soul,
hear the powerful Word
known only to you by the Spirit's revelation.

Accept the love of Christ, my soul,
receive within your heart
the grace of all His loving, saving passion.

Stay open to your God, my soul,
see and hear and do
the things of faith by which you truly live.

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 7:17-40

¹⁷ So then, each one of you should live as the Lord has assigned and as God has called, for this is the instruction I give in all the churches.

¹⁸ Those who were already circumcised when they were called should not seek to be uncircumcised, and those who were uncircumcised should not be circumcised; ¹⁹ for circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is keeping the commandments of God.

²⁰ Let each one of you remain in this calling you were given.

²¹ Do not let it worry you if you were a slave when you were called, and if you can gain your freedom, take full advantage of it. ²² For whoever was a slave when called by the Lord is a 'freedman' of the Lord, but equally, whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of other people.

²⁴ So, fellow believers, each of you should keep close to God in that to which you were called.

Review

This passage is not always well understood and the Biblical text is not straightforward, so I must begin by explaining some of its difficulties. This is no small matter, because at this point in his letter, Paul is driving home a vital piece of Christian doctrine, which is that each person saved by the grace and love of Christ has been assigned a place in God's Kingdom, a work to do, sometimes referred to as a 'calling'. Moreover, the Christian remains spiritually unfulfilled until this calling is not only known and understood, but also carried out. What then, is Paul saying here?

What does this passage really mean?

Unfortunately, a quick reading of this passage may give the impression that it advises God's people to remain forever in whatever 'state' they find themselves, as if God's call is defined by our personal circumstances. Paul then gives two examples, first about circumcision and second about slavery. They may appear conclusive; he says that whether or not a male Christian is circumcised he should not seek to change this (7:18,19), and he says that a Christian slave should accept the very institution of slavery in which he is bound (7:21f.). It seems a tough message.

However, as we continue to study we will find that what Paul says here is more complex, and though he recognises the limitations of physical life that cannot readily be changed, the Christian call is more complex. From all Paul has said about God's power and grace within 1 Corinthians, we should surely be aware that God's power is certainly not limited by worldly and personal circumstances, and to suggest this would be a spiritual lie! What then is going on in this passage and what can we make of it?

The assignment of God (7:17)

To start with, I ask you to compare some different Bible versions of this passage, and we will look at the first verse (7:17). I have written out below the NIV, the King James, and my own translation.

'Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord has assigned to him and to which God has called Him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches' (NIV)

'As God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all churches.' (KJV)

'each one of you should live as the Lord has assigned and as God has called, for this is the instruction I give in all the churches.' (PHA)

Now each version, including mine (PHA), translates the same Greek words, and within the limits of normal translation, technically, none of them are 'wrong'. However, the NIV and the King James versions both give us the strong impression that Paul's teaching is that everyone should accept their 'lot' in life, and this is the nub of our problem which I have sought to moderate in my translation. But why have I done this?

At the heart of verse 17 is one word meaning 'lot, assignment or distribution' (you will find one of these words in each version of the verse). However, the NIV has attempted to explain Paul's meaning here by adding the phrase '*place in life*' (7:17), and this phrase simply does not exist in the original manuscript. This is unfortunate, because this, more than anything, leads us towards the idea that everyone must accept their 'lot' in life. Now both the King James and my own version leave the matter more open. They speak of living according to God's 'assignment' or 'distribution', meaning more than our mere circumstances. As well as our time and place of birth, God's apportionment includes our character, our gifts, our graces, and much more of us. God's apportionment is what makes us individual people in the fullest sense. It is what makes me, 'me'!

Paul's main point - keep close to God in who you are (7:17,20,24)

The whole passage has a simple structure. Paul states his main theme three times, in verses 17,20 and 24, and between them, like a double layer sandwich, he offers two examples of what he means, and they are fascinating examples. If we are to grasp Paul's meaning then it can be helpful to read the three key verses side by side:

- *17 So then, each one of you should live as the Lord has assigned and as God has called, for this is the instruction I give in all the churches.*
- *20 Let each one of you remain in this calling you were given.*
- *24 So, fellow believers, each of you should keep close to God in that to which you were called.*

All together, this is a powerful call from Paul beseeching the Corinthians to remain true to the Gospel. He thinks of each church as like a tribe of Israel that has been given a 'portion' of the Promised land (see Joshua 15:1, 16:1 etc.), their 'assignment' within which they will find a home, worship and be obedient to their God. He is asking the Corinthians not to wander from the spiritual and practical pathway they were launched upon when he founded the church, on the '*calling you were given*' (7:20). If we were to ask Paul what this means, I believe he would say that he was calling God's people to establish His Kingdom and preach the Gospel, using all the gifts and graces given them.

The illustration of circumcision (7:18,19)

Why then does Paul speak about circumcision and make the rather obscure point that someone who was 'circumcised' should not try to become 'uncircumcised' (7:18)? Surely Paul was capable of humour, for the very thought of 'uncircumcision' is painfully ridiculous if not surreal and impossible! The situation Paul faced however was that there was tension in the church between Christians who were culturally inclined towards Judaism and who wanted Gentile Christians to become circumcised (see notes on 1:10-17). As we have already discovered, Paul felt that the church benefitted nothing by such divisions and cultural judgements.

So here, Paul reiterates the judgement of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), which is that Gentiles Christians should not be required by Jewish Christians to accept circumcision; '*those who were uncircumcised should not be circumcised*' (7:19). His point is this, Christians of whatever background should be obedient to God and not be defined by culture, not even the ancient Jewish culture! He then adds, as if to refocus the church properly; '*what matters is keeping the commandments of God*' (7:19).

The illustration of slavery (7:21-23)

Paul now turns to the contentious example of slavery, and with the way this passage is sometimes interpreted, we might expect him to urge slaves to remain in service! But he does not. In those days, slaves had few chances to escape their bondage, but it was not impossible. Freedom could be gained by giving special service, or by being purchased out of slavery either by someone else or by saving. Paul does not mince his words here and advocates taking any chance of escape; '*if you can gain your freedom, then take it*' (7:21), and adds, '*do not become slaves ...*' (7:23)! So much for the idea that we should all accept our station in life!

Calling

We must now return briefly to the Greek text, which leads us firmly in the right different direction, for each of verses 17,20 and 24 contains an important Greek word, which is '*kaleo*', meaning '*calling*'. Verse 17 urges the Christian to live according to their assignment '*as God has called*'; verse 20 emphasises '*let each one remain in the calling to to which he has been called*'; and verse 24 appeals to each Christian to remain close to God in their '*calling*'! Throughout the Bible, this word means the call of God which lies above and beyond earthly circumstances! This is the call God places on those who respond to Him by faith, a spiritual 'allotment' in God's Kingdom, and the work He assigned the faithful!

So we must read this passage of Scripture not as call by the apostle to stop God's people aspiring to something more than their circumstances. It is a call to all Christian people to be rooted in the eternal and unique Gospel of God in Christ and apply this in their own life circumstances! Cultural circumstances may present barriers that seem insurmountable, such as slavery to the first century Christians who were slaves, but nothing could or should stop a servant of God doing His will.

Discipleship

Application

The Lord's assigning

This is exciting, and fits with the Gospel we know. Jesus did not call the disciples to remain fishermen, or Matthew to remain a tax collector! He '*called*' fishermen to '*fish for men*' (Mark 1:17), then He '*called*' the tax collector Levi to '*follow me*' (Mark 2:14). Peter became the leader of the church (Matthew 16:18); James became a martyr (Acts 12:2), John preached across North Africa and wrote three Biblical letters, and Matthew (Levi) followed his Lord so closely he was able to write the story of His life; 'Matthew's Gospel'. Each one followed God's '*call*'. How tragic that for centuries, people have misunderstood 1 Corinthians 7:17-24, and thought it said God's people must accept their station in life. No! It is a forthright summons to each Christian to accept what God has called on them to do under the banner of the Gospel, and be obedient to this.

It is imperative that the church preaches the full and true message of the Gospel, in which all God's people are involved and have a place. The church is not a place where some people organise a fellowship and the rest come and go as they please. Everyone who is saved has a place, has a work to do and a role to fulfil, not because this is what the organisation of the church is all about, but because this is what we are called to!

Fulfilling our calling

I remember when I felt called to be a minister of the Gospel, shortly time after I became committed to the Lord. After this I felt that I had something to do and a role to fulfil, and I found it astonishing to find that others thought of Christianity as a life option, or a spiritual choice! Paul's call here is for each of God's people, and it demands that they all be involved with the Gospel message as it was delivered to them, because this is the power of God for salvation and the only purpose of the church. I knew I had my own role to fulfil within the life God has given me, and it is a powerful incentive for life

God speaks to each in His own way to deliver His call, His prompting, His whisper of guidance, His vision of action, and so much more. Some calls are static and for life, like the call to ministry, others are dynamic, requiring the following of a varied path of life to deliver a vital piece of the Gospel message to a broken world. The best text to conclude this study is in 2 Thess. 1:11,12; '*may our God count you worthy of His calling, and that by His power He may fulfil every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith ... so that the Lord Jesus may be glorified in you ... according to the grace of our God.*'

Ideas for what to do

- *Think carefully about your own Christian life. What is your 'calling'? Have you yet found it? Are you worried about it or will you walk with your Lord until you discover it? Pray about this.*
- *Seek to discuss the issue of Christian call with a friend, and share your thoughts with each other about your own Christian 'call'.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *What does this passage teach about Christian life today; how important is this passage, and what other Scriptures say something similar?*
2. *How easy is it for anyone to 'escape' the boundaries of their own culture; give examples of how people might be able to do this today*
3. *What are the barriers to people finding their calling in life today?*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, bless each of us as we live out our Christian 'call'. If we have not understood this, help us find it in the pace of Your presence, and if we have already found it, help us deliver it with zeal we pray:
AMEN