

## Answering the Call: Toward A Biblical View of Vocation

1 Corinthians 7:17–24 | July 17, 2016 | Body Life @OBC

When I graduated from college, I moved from Michigan to Tennessee.

Tennessee was a strange land to me, full of bright orange idols + Peyton Manning stories.

Feeling far from home, I began looking for all the cars from Michigan. Whenever I'd see a blue license plate, I'd look to see if it was from Michigan and any signs of home.

Over time, I developed a habit of looking for Michigan license plates, which were plentiful on I-75 as snowbirds escaped to Florida during Michigan's 10 months of winter.

What I wasn't expecting was that my radar would help me locate a Michigan license plate in the back of market shop in one of the remotest cities in Israel.

After leaving TN, I went to Israel w/ a team of friends to share the gospel and see the sights.

That trip took us to Tzfat, a city in Northern Israel. This town had only a few Christians in the whole city. And we went to encourage a church planter there.

On a walk through the market that day, I looked at the stores lining the street . . . and what did I see? In the very back . . . but **A Blue Michigan License Plate . . .**

The spotting of that license plate had a huge impact on me . . . because I learned that the owner of the shop had lived in Cadillac, MI.

In Cadillac, he would have been surrounded by Xians. . . . Only to return to Tzfat, where the gospel is almost non-existent.

It confirmed my calling to pastor in the United States . . . and to reach displaced foreigners with the gospel . . . and it burdens me still to think about ways we can reach our neighbors from the nations.

**But that's not my point today. My point has to do with how we see things.**

Walking past that shop 1000s of miles away from home . . . I spotted a familiar License Plate because my eyes had been trained to look for them.

The same thing happens when we come to the Bible, a book thousands of miles away and thousands of years removed from our modern world . . .

Naturally, we come to the Bible w/ all sorts of biases— **eyes trained by 21<sup>st</sup> America.** And our cultural, racial, gendered, political views . . . give us lens to read the Bible.

Lens which either help or hurt our understanding . . . and nowhere is that more the case than in a passage like **1 Corinthians 7:17-24** . . . with its highly individualized teaching on faithfully living out your calling . . .

Before diving into these churning waters, let's stick our toe in: Look at **verse 17**:

**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.**

As he addresses "each person," P speaks to individuals with very different situations.

As we've seen, he's addressed married and singles, men and women,

And now . . . he speaks to Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freedman . . .

To all these demographics . . . Paul is applying the unchanging truths of the Gospel

That is . . . he speaking about   The Lordship of Jesus Christ +  
  The redemption of Christ's cross

And he's also speaking about the implications of the Gospel

                          The commands . . . to be holy and loving  
                          The calling . . . to live in community with other Christians

And in everything . . . he's applying them to individuals in every kind of situation.

And so he says: "Let each person lead the life the Lord has assigned him, to which God has called him."

**Church, this is hard saying . . .**

Not because we cannot understand the basic command: Glorify God with your body!

But b/c every person in this church will follow God differently . . .

And how much more in the broader church . . . where culture and global setting differ.

So: This contact point between Christ/culture + Scripture/society isn't easy to grasp.

And this is 1 of the reasons why in America: the Black Ch + the White Ch are so divided

Going back to the Civil War and the question of slavery . . . Bible-believing Christians have come to the same Bible and come away with different answers – [Mark Noll](#)

This shouldn't make you distrust Scripture, but it should make you boast less in yourself

We desperately need the Spirit's aid as we read God's Word . . . and we need to come to Scripture aware that our own experiences, our own cultural, theological, even racial LENS will shape our views.

**So how should we proceed?**

## Two Interpretive Questions

### 1. How does our culture shape our understanding of the Bible?

We might ask . . . how much time do you have?

The study of culture, hermeneutics, and biblical interpretation is massive.

And not surprisingly, there is a difference between those who approach the Bible as the final and sufficient authority . . .

. . . and those who treat the Bible as sacred writing that should be combined with psychology, philosophy, or any other human belief system.

**Church:** I am so thankful that among our elders and our teachers, there is absolute agreement on the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.

This doesn't mean it's easy or that we will come to perfect agreement on every issues . . .

But know that the way OBC has always read the Bible and will read the Bible is to put Scripture above our own opinions and preferences.

**That being said . . .** We must consider how our modern, individualistic American experience, . . . informs the way we read a passage about slavery.

In fact, this is exactly what the ESV translation committee did in 2011, when in considering the word “slave” and its connotations in our culture, they changed the translation of *doulos* in our passage from **slave** to **bondservant**.

**Now why did they do that?** If you have an ESV . . . you can find their explanation in the 2011 notes . . .

Here's what they say

The word “slave” currently carries associations with the often brutal and dehumanizing institution of slavery in nineteenth-century America. For this reason, the ESV translation of the words *'ebed* and *doulos* has been undertaken with particular attention to their meaning in each specific context. Thus in Old Testament times, one might enter slavery either voluntarily (e.g., to escape poverty or to pay off a debt) or involuntarily (e.g., by birth, by being captured in battle, or by judicial sentence). Protection for all in servitude in ancient Israel was provided by the Mosaic Law. In New Testament times, a *doulos* is often best described as a “bondservant”—that is, as someone bound to serve his master for a specific (usually lengthy) period of time, but also as someone who might nevertheless own property, achieve social advancement, and even be released or purchase his freedom. The ESV usage thus seeks to express the nuance of meaning in each context. Where absolute ownership by a master is in view (as in Romans 6), “slave” is used; where a more limited form of servitude is in view, “bondservant” is used (as in [1 Corinthians 7:21-24](#));

Now, if you're like me . . . . You may feel a bit uncomfortable w/ all this talk about culture.

Can't we just read the Bible ???

Aren't liberals / post-moderns the ones who make the Bible fit with culture?

Well . . . yes . . . but so do all of us.

Therefore, we need to recognize how our culture / language may get in the way of . . .

. . . understanding the author's original intention

. . . **Which is always our goal** = to know what God has said in the words he has spoken

For that reason,

We take time to find the shape of the passage . . .  
and we let the shape of the text reform the shape of our thinking

What would have happened if I saw a royal blue license plate in mountains of Israel w/  
Hebrew letters?

Would I argue that because I knew some Jewish people in Michigan, this must be  
a special edition, Michigan license plate?

OR Would I change my thinking based upon the shape of the letter?

Hopefully, the latter.

Well, the same principle applies . . . when we read the Bible.

We must let the shape of the text inform the shape of our thinking.

**And I say shape** because the text of Scripture doesn't come to us as a dictionary  
on morality or a systematic theology textbook with propositions and proof texts.

Rather it comes in the form of poetry & prose, analogies & art, stories & song.

IOW = Scripture comes with shape . . . and the more we see the contours of  
Scripture, the more it will liberate us from our culture and bind us to Christ himself.

## 2. How does the shape of Paul's argument reform our understanding?

From 7:1, we know Paul is answering questions about church life in Corinth.

But he's not just writing a stream of conscious Facebook post.

Rather, w/ the limited space of his parchment, he's making a well-crafted arg

And so we should look for the way in which he is shaping his argument:

And in these vv esp., we find . . . what one commentator calls: **Club Sandwich**

Meaning = we have in these verses 3 pieces of bread . . . in v. 17, 20, 24  
In btw we have 2 analogies 18-19, 21-22  
These two analogies make up the meat  
A meat that is processed from calling in X

*So let's look at these . . .*

**Three Pieces of Bread** = Three repeated commands to remain as you are  
v. 17    v. 20    v. 24

**One Kind of Meat** = The word "call" or "calling" that repeats nine times

It fills the whole section . . . and defines what it is about.

Just as ham defines a ham sandwich; turkey a turkey sandwich.

Spliced between the three commands to abide . . . we find "Calling"

**Meat of the Message . . . Abide in the calling to which you were called.**

**Two Patties** = Two illustrations or applications Paul mentions to reinforce and expand all he's said about marriage & singleness

The first analogy compares Jews and Gentiles (v. 18 – 19).

The second analogy compares Slaves and Freedman (v. 21 – 22).

And notice how these applications are made = question / command / reason

So . . . he's making them/us think . . . directing our steps . . . answering why

**The Skewer** = Verse 23 holds everything together and

"You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men."

**Can you see the shape of the passage?** Let's unwrap it and see how it tastes.

**Look at those 3 commands = pieces of bread = shape our passage (v. 17, 20, 24).**

There are 10 commands in the passage, but these three stand out because of their placement and their parallel refrain.

**v. 17** begins with “only let” or “if only” . . . It indicates break from what Paul has just said, and his words in verse 17 function as the title sentence for the paragraph.

In the center, **v. 20** articulates the same point as v. 17 but adds the word “abide” or “remain.” The same word Jesus gave to his disciples in John 15.

Likewise, **v. 24** repeats the command to remain in the condition God called you.

Altogether . . .

Paul’s message is to be content in whatever circumstance you find yourself in.

Don’t pine for something more . . . Don’t believe the lie that starts . . . ***If only***

Be content in the Lord!

Just as Paul had to learn contentment, so he tells his beloved children to do the same.

This is why he says: **READ v. 17b**

Paul is not picking on the Corinthians.

He’s telling everyone that the goal of the Christian life is not upward mobility, social status, or increased wealth.

He’s preaching an anti-posperity gospel . . .

Jesus didn’t come to make you “handsome, rich, or wise” (G Herbert) – all of which the Corinthians longed for

No . . . Jesus came to call you to something better. What was that?

## Look at the contents of the sandwich . . .

Eight times in this section, Paul reminds the Corinthians of their calling.

The word has its typical meaning: “Called unto salvation” not just service/activity

While verse 17 sounds like a calling to some assignment; we need to see:

Every other use of the term . . . speaks of God’s effectual/heavenly call.

It is the “assignment” which is qualified by God’s calling.

What does that mean?

When God reached into the mire of your unconverted life and drew you to himself, he totally reoriented you to himself!

Your life is no longer your own. You have been called!

It’s this calling we speak of **God’s Effectual Calling** . . . as we will see this calling must define every other earthly assignment God calls us to.

So in this chapter 7, Paul is teaching the Corinthians how to live out their calling . . .  
. . . whether they are Jew or Gentile, slave or free  
. . . man or woman, married or single

Before God . . . there is one obligation . . . and that is to live for him.

Every other assignment . . . is a means of glorifying him

This is the meat of his argument . . .

to a culture steeped in selfish ambition and self-promotion, he says ‘chill out’

to those who had no way of improving their condition, you’re not missing out

Paul has made this point to men and women, married and single

And now in vv 18–19 and 21–22, he turns to Jews and Gentiles / servants & free

And this brings us to his the next part of his club sandwich.

The third aspect of this section is the way God's calling reshapes your earthly callings.

There are more than a few commentators who have compared these verses to Galatians 3:27 – 28

“For as many of you as were baptized into X have put on Christ. <sup>28</sup>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.”

In both letters, Paul put's ones identity in Christ over ones ethnicity/status/gender

While the world unifies ppl who look/think the same . . . only X unifies diverse ppl

And Every other role or vocation is dignified and determined by your calling to God.

Let's see what this looks like:

[1] First, to the Jews and Gentiles he says, **READ vv. 18 – 19**

In Roman times, some Jews felt social pressure to remove their circumcision. Likewise, there were Judaizers who believed Gentiles should be circumcised.

To both parties Paul says – **it doesn't matter**. What matters is obedience from the heart. A reality that comes from a circumcised heart, not a bloody foreskin.

Paul's stress on God's calling . . . relativizes the pressures of this world. It presses us to care more about him . . . and less about them—whoever they are

So he says in verse 20: **Each one should remain in the condition he was in.**

[2] But then he turns to a far more controversial application of this principle.

Or at least . . . in our country, these words were once misused to keep black men and women in chains.

They are words that the ESV translation committee felt obliged to update in 2011.

And they are words strange to anyone who has always enjoyed the freedoms we take for granted in this country



Indeed, economically advantaged American Xians (maybe we could say . . . upper-middle class white Christians in America) have occupied a very rare moment in history,

Unlike most Xians, many white Americans have been privileged to live freely

And while I don't think such freedom should now produce guilt . . . we should know

This is not how most of God's children live.  
This isn't how our bro/sis of color have experienced world

And thus we should labor to put ourselves in the shoes of others . . .  
And in this case, in the shoes of those to whom Paul writes . . .

**Listen to what he says. READ vv. 21 – 22**

Now ... there have been some who have criticized Paul for condoning slavery here

And sadly, there have been in the past some Bible-believing Christians who have preached sermons from this passage defending the institution of slavery.

Neither of those positions, I believe, is faithful to Paul's words.

**First we must understand the culture he's writing to...** Paul is addressing bond-servants of various kinds, w/ differing degrees of mistreatment, differing degrees of freedom

Some would have been considered property (even sexual property).  
Others as Paul alludes would come to a place where freedom was possible.

From his vantage point . . . he was not able to change the systems of the land.

Paul's calling, after all, was to be an apostle of grace, not ruler of the law.

Therefore, he writes to bondservants and says, 'Take heart, you who are enslaved to men are free in the Lord.'

**IOW, he dignifies these lowly bro/sis . . . he doesn't dignify slavery; he dignifies the image bearers who are enslaved.**

At the same time, he tells any freedman, that he or she is a servant to God, and hence employed in the service of others.

Yes, he will say in **v. 23**, do not enslave yourself to men. But that doesn't take away the brotherly responsibility to serve others as God's slave.

Rather, P is ripping a hole in the Corinthian caste system, so that everyone in the church is on equal footing – **the servant is a freedman; the freedman a slave.**

And all this comes from the singular reality of Christ's Lordship.

This is the skewer that sticks the whole sandwich together.

Verse 23: You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men.

**In 1 Corinthians 6:19 . . .**

. . . Paul reminds them of the same truth: You were bought with a price.

. . . And he applies it vertically: Glorify God with your body!

. . . Now he makes the same statement, and applies it horizontally.

. . . He warns the Corinthians not to define themselves by their relationship to man

. . . Neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female . . .

. . . should ultimately define you . . . if you are in Christ.

Rather, if you have been redeemed by the love of God in Christ . . .

You should see yourself as his beloved servant. . .

And thus free to live out the life he's given to you . . . whatever assignment that is

If you can improve your lot in life . . . if you can escape slavery . . . Do It!

. . . But only as that "step up" serves the Lord !!

. . . Only as that step up will increase your opportunity to serve others.

And if you can't improve your position

. . . don't be discouraged . . . you can serve God where you are.

. . . Remain as you are . . . and entrust yourself to God.

. . . The same God who called you . . . is working in your personal situation.

From 1 Corinthians 7 . . . we can draw a number of practical applications.

In fact, in your notes I have listed 7 truths about the doctrine of vocation.  
On our website I have explained how they each come from 1 Corinthians 7 . . .

But instead of rehearsing all seven I want to close with something more basic . . .  
. . . **The purpose of work in God's economy of salvation** . . .

In a fallen world . . . work (**if it can be found**) . . . is often unpleasant . . . sometimes crushing.

These are tests God gives his children . . . to purify our faith and secure our calling.

For we can either . . . chafe and complain and chase a better life now  
OR

. . . we can abide in X . . . rest in his calling . . . and grow closer to God . . .  
And then from his rest . . . we can pray (enemies) . . . work 4 others (. . . curse).

**If we take God's Word seriously** . . . His calling on our lives reshapes everything.

**1 Cor 7** teaches us his calling makes every mean/mundane occupation a meaningful voc

But that being the case . . . we must like Psalm 131 says . . . calm & quiet our soul in him!

By passion and by training and by calling I am a preacher / husband / father / son / friend.

But **before** that and **after** that and **in the midst** of that . . . **I am child of God.**

This IS my truest calling . . . And so for you . . . if God has called you to himself.

And . . . our **employments** (our vocations) . . . are given to us so that we his children  
might become more like our heavenly Father, more like his Son

That's what **1 Cor 7** is all about . . . it commands us who have redeemed by his grace to  
abide in him and be content in the assignment he gives

ATST God uses our **awful employments** to make us value you him above all.

Friends . . . God in his grace . . . gives and takes away our vocations

But his eternal calling . . . he will never take away . . .  
. . . and thus all our earthly labors must be lived in light of this greater calling!

Brothers and sisters:

May we not take offense at how he rules/raises/ruins our career path . . .

In all these things . . . he is using them to give you more of himself.

This is his love . . . = his calling . . . **may we not stray from it but forever abide in it**