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# **A Social Status Change: An Examination of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The text in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 poses a challenge to the idea that one should actively improve his or her social standing. A surface reading of this text could lead to the conclusion that a person should remain in their place in society without seeking opportunity for improvement. The researcher's position is that through an exegetical study of the text in 1 Cor. 7:17-24 and related passages that biblical teachings do not preclude changes in social standing. The article will also touch upon Paul's perspective on matters as ethnicity, the rite of circumcision, slavery and the call of God. Paul proposes with regard to seeking to change or not to change one's social status for the believer must be their understanding of God's sovereign purpose and will for them. The furtherance of the gospel and the advance of the kingdom should be the primary concern.

## **KEY WORDS**

Social status, circumcision, slavery, the gracious call of God, the unity of the church and advance of the kingdom.

## **INTRODUCTION**

An important tenet of most modern cultures is opportunity. With opportunity, a person through hard work, sacrifice, and character can improve his or her lot in life. Books, seminars, and other self-help methods exist in abundance to assist people in their quest for improvement.

Social conditions are an inevitable part of the human condition. Wherever people coexist in a society, that social order contains people who live under different social conditions. Some people have a stronger or higher social standing than others. For example, the wealthy have a higher social standing than others who have a lesser financial standing. In some societies, a particular ethnicity may have a higher social standing than other ethnicities. Other factors such as gender and family background can determine one's social standing. A functioning society will have people of various social standings. Regardless of one's social

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standing, an implied ethic exists in many cultures that a person should have the opportunity to improve their social standing.

Yet in an initial reading of the text in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 can one find a challenge to this idea that the believer ought to seek to actively improve his or her social standing? The researcher's position is that this passage does not teach that one must remain in a certain social condition without seeking improvement. Careful exegesis of the chosen text and related passages will demonstrate that biblical teachings do not preclude changes in social standing.

## THE BIBLICAL TEXT

The translation by the English Standard Version (ESV) of 1 Corinthian 7:17-24 is as follows:

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. <sup>20</sup> Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. <sup>21</sup> Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) <sup>22</sup> For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. <sup>23</sup> You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. <sup>24</sup> So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.<sup>2</sup>

The research revealed no textual variants in this passage.<sup>3</sup>

## THE DIFFICULTY OF THE TEXT

First Corinthians 7:17-24 poses some difficulties in a couple of ways. In one sense, the text seems to teach that believers should be content with their lot in life realizing that their social situation is what “the Lord has assigned to him” (1

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<sup>2</sup>Unless indicated otherwise, English translations of biblical text quoted from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>Bruce Manning Metzger and United Bible Societies, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament*, 4th Rev. Ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), s. v., “1 Corinthians 7:15.” Metzger provided no commentary on any of the verses within the pericope that the passage text studied in this paper.

Cor. 7:17). At a surface level, Paul prescribes a universal practice of this teaching as the “rule in all the churches” (1 Cor. 7:17b). If this text teaches contentment in social status, then the person who seeks to improve his or her social situation could sin in doing so. Other verses in this passage seem to substantiate this idea. For example, verse 20 states that “each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.” Verse 24 further states, “in whatever the condition each was called, there let him remain with God.”

The teaching that one should never change their social status poses some difficulties in modern application. Could one seek to improve their financial standing through a better paying job? Is it wrong to move to a neighborhood with a higher social standing in the community? What about a young man who wants to pursue his call to ministry by leaving a career and going to seminary or serves in a different social environment?

Other biblical passages such as Ephesians 6:5-8 seem to corroborate the position of one remaining in a particular social standing. This passage presents a challenge in trying to understand the Bible’s teaching on the particularly sensitive subject of slavery. Slavery is an issue where slaves and masters are in vastly different social statuses. The masters’ social status puts them in place of power where they can exploit or oppress the socially weaker slave. Does the Bible condone or condemn the social practice of slavery? One who does a surface reading of 1 Cor. 7:17-24 and Ephesians 6:5-8 could wrongly interpret these texts to justify the system of slavery and the absolute and unmitigated subjugation to the elitists of a higher social status.

The other way that this passage seems difficult is the parenthetical statement in verse 21 that states “But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.” This statement seems contradictory and paradoxical to the predominant teaching in this passage. So, what is the text really teaching? On the one hand, the text exhorts the Christian to remain in a particular social situation. On the other hand, the text gives one the liberty to seek opportunity for change if it is available.

## CONTEXT OF THE PASSAGE

### Sociological Context

The Corinthian culture, similar to any historical or modern culture, contained social stratification. Christians within the Hellenistic culture of Corinth existed in every class of this social stratification. Therefore, the fellowship of the church contained an eclectic mix of believers of different social statuses. Gerd Theissen

commented that the social makeup of “the Corinthian congregation is marked by internal stratification.”<sup>4</sup> This internal stratification was a natural result of the church members who functioned within a stratified society. Theissen stated, “the social makeup of the Corinthian congregation may, therefore, be characteristic of the Hellenistic congregation as such.”<sup>5</sup> Although the fellowship of believers in Christ transcends temporal statuses or classism found within a society (Gal. 3:28), these social distinctions do not easily subside.

### Marriage Matters

The Epistle of First Corinthians addresses several matters that concerned and affected the local church. One of the critical issues that the apostle Paul, the author of this epistle, covered was the matter of marriage. He addressed various subjects on marriage and put forth some principles for the Christian in 1 Corinthians 7. The first verse in the chapter provides the premise for Paul’s discourse. Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 7:1, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’” The issues that Paul addressed in this chapter likely stemmed from ascetics who “were consequently advocated celibacy in marriage, divorce from unbelieving partners, and remaining single if you were a ‘virgin’ or a widow.”<sup>6</sup> The topics that Paul discussed were those critical to marriage relationships such as conjugal rights (7:1-5), singleness (7:6-8), divorce (7:10-16), purity (7:7-9), and betrothals (7:25-31, 36-38).

The passage in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 seems like a digression from the stream of discussion throughout the chapter. This passage, however, is not a complete diversion from the primary discussion since it buttresses Paul’s arguments he makes throughout this chapter. Scholars such as David Garland suggested that this section of the text functions as a “*digressio (egressus, egressio)*, which does not wander away from the main theme but amplifies or illustrates the main topic.”<sup>7</sup> With the overarching theme of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul seems to be advising believers that their marital status is insignificant in their relationship to God. A change of social status, therefore, should not be the foremost pursuit for the believer in his or her relationship with God. In giving

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<sup>4</sup>Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, ed. and trans. John H. Schütz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 69.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, edited by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 310.

<sup>7</sup>David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 298.

explanations and illustrations for his advice, he used as analogies two social distinctions in the Corinthian culture—circumcision and slavery.

### Analogy of Circumcision

The first analogy was circumcision, social status based primarily on ethnicity. A man's status of being circumcised or uncircumcised had social implications. A circumcised man could be one cultured and esteemed in the Jewish culture but marginalized in the Greco-Roman culture. If a circumcised man desired to hold an office of public leadership or participate in the socially elite activities of the culture such as baths or gymnasiums, his circumcision could be a hindrance. The circumcised man could seek uncircumcision through epispasm<sup>8</sup> in order to improve his social standing. Brad Ronnell Braxton commented, "without removing the marks of circumcision, a Jewish man in Corinth may not have full access to Corinthian social life and power, and he would also have been the object of potentially severe social ridicule."<sup>9</sup>

An uncircumcised man could also have aspirations where his uncircumcision could be a hindrance. Greco-Roman societies contained Jewish proselytes who were attracted to Jewish practices and institutions.<sup>10</sup> The uncircumcised men could have sought benefits from the Jewish culture such as building or maintaining the synagogue or membership into the synagogue assembly.

Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 7:19 (King James Version), "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God." Paul wanted believers to know that the social identities that circumcision or uncircumcision created did not matter in their spiritual standing as a child of God. Braxton commented:

To submit to epispasm so as to scale more swiftly the ladder of Greco-Roman life or to seek circumcision so as to be more fully incorporated into the synagogue are equivalent actions for Paul. They are two manifestations of the same problem, a denial of the most important identity bestowed upon the believer by the call of God, membership in the *ekklēsia* [*sic*].<sup>11</sup>

### Analogy of Slavery

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<sup>8</sup>Epispasm is the process of reversing circumcision.

<sup>9</sup>Brad Ronnell Braxton, "The Role of Ethnicity in the Social Location of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24," in *Yet With a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Randall C. Bailey (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 26.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

The second social issue that Paul used as an illustration in this pericope of Scripture was slavery. Slavery was a more vivid illustration since it was an integral part of the Roman culture and applied to a broader perspective of the society. Ben Witherington III commented on slavery in Roman Corinth: “The Roman Empire was dependent on slave labor. Slavery was a burgeoning enterprise. The more territory the Romans captured, the more prisoners they sold as slaves. Corinth, due to its location and its status as a colony, was a significant center for the buying and selling of slaves.”<sup>12</sup> The prevalence of slavery in the Corinthian church likely meant that members of the church included slaves and slave masters. Therefore, the social dynamics of Christians in these contrasting and possibly conflicting social classes presented a challenge to the unity and health of the church.

The allusion to slavery would serve as a strong and relevant illustration in Paul’s teaching on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. Biblical internal and external evidence provides no clear motive for Paul using a provocative topic as slavery as an illustration in relation to marriage. Some scholars, however, believed that Paul’s allusion to slavery was more than an illustration. In connection with the overall theme of marriage and sexual relations in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul could be addressing these issues as they pertain to Christians who are slaves. Jennifer Glancy stated, “As he sets forth the second example, however, he is aware of the problematic ramifications of slavery with respect to sexual expectations and marital status, so he also offers one of the many exceptions that he scatters throughout the chapter.”<sup>13</sup> Slavery contributed to social conundrums in many ways.

Since slaves had not legal standing in the culture, their marriage and family life were unstable. Slaves were unable to marry in Roman culture. If they did marry, their marriages were unrecognized within the society. As a result, their families were at risk of separation and breakdown due to the potential of their master selling them. The slaves’ lack of legal standing in society made them vulnerable to abuse and sexual exploitation by their masters.

While many slaves functioned in the lower classes of society, not all slaves shared the same social standing. Slaves held various positions within the occupational ranks of the society. Their jobs ranged from the lower status positions of agricultural labors and menial household servants to the higher

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<sup>12</sup>Ben Witherington III, *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 181.

<sup>13</sup>Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 69.

status positions of bureaucratic, professional, or managerial jobs.<sup>14</sup> Slaves in the higher status positions had opportunity for social advancement that was not available to some free people. Dale Martin stated, “being connected to someone in power, even if only a slave, was the next best thing to being in power oneself.”<sup>15</sup>

The social situations of slaves in the Roman culture were complex with no consensus among scholars as to their treatment in society and opportunities for manumission. Byron summarized the practice of slavery within the New Testament context:

As appalling as the notion of slavery is in any society, the fact remains that, in the context of the New Testament, slavery did take on some positive aspects. This is not to suggest, of course, that Paul was a supporter of slavery. But he and other New Testament authors were able to find something that was of ‘redeeming’ value for their theology.<sup>16</sup>

The redemptive purpose of the New Testament would overshadow these social situations.

## INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS

### Remaining as Called

Paul used the word translated as *call* or *called* eight times throughout this passage (1 Cor. 7:17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24). This word deserves further attention. What does the text mean through its repetitive use of the word? Does its use mean that God calls a person into a particular social status? A careful study of the original language and context reveals the potential of a couple of different meanings. The correct understanding of this word establishes the biblical principle that this text puts forth. The thesis of this article depends on the hermeneutical analysis of this word that specifies a call.

Each instance of the word translated as call comes from the Greek word καλέω. The word καλέω as an action verb within this context means to “invite or summon [in] the extended sense [to] choose for receipt of a special benefit or experience.”<sup>17</sup> The word call can have a soteriological or situational meaning.

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<sup>14</sup>Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 11.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>16</sup>Byron, John. “Paul and the Background of Slavery: The Status Quaestionis New Testament Scholarship.” *Currents in Biblical Research* 3 (October 2004): 136.

<sup>17</sup>Frederick W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s. v., “καλέω.”



Several instances of καλέω throughout the New Testament occur where the word has soteriological connotations.<sup>18</sup> The word καλέω can also have a secondary meaning where it applies to certain circumstances to which the Christian's call occurs and continues.<sup>19</sup> If the secondary meaning applies to the circumstances in this text—circumcision and slavery—then the Christian's social status is one where he or she should remain in obedience to the call of God. Such an idea favors the status quo of a particular social situation regardless of its merits. To change one's status, therefore, would be disobedience to God.

The literary use of call in the passage under study supports the idea of the call to salvation. Verses 18, 20, and 22 refer to situations (circumcision, slavery) that existed during the call of the Christian. The Christian's call would not be to these situations since they were already in these situations. Obviously, the call referred to another event besides their current situation. Such a literary construction supports the idea that the call in these verses has a soteriological meaning—the moment the believer came to faith in Jesus Christ. Richard B. Hays affirmed this view by referring the Christians' "position in life at the time they first accepted the preaching of the good news about Christ."<sup>20</sup> The call within the text refers to the experience in which God graciously called the believer to faith in Jesus Christ.

Adhering to the idea of the Christian's salvation call is important in understanding this text and avoiding incorrect application. Anthony C. Thiselton stated, "To attempt to make the primary meaning coincide with a mere notion of 'vocation' to a particular kind of work would risk clouding Paul's meaning."<sup>21</sup> Thiselton acknowledged that, "Yet in v. 20a τῇ κλήσει comes very close to the notion of a calling to a specific state or role. The very use of the phrase ἐμέρισεν ὁ κύριος in v. 17a should make us wary of claiming that Paul did not regard some prior role in society as a matter of divine vocation." In consideration of the sovereignty of God, one can still deem his or her social status as the call of God.

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<sup>18</sup>Romans 8:28, 30 and Ephesians 4:1,4 are New Testament instances where καλέω refers to the salvation call.

<sup>19</sup>In 1 Cor. 15:9, Paul used καλέω in a vocational sense to describe his call to be an apostle. Peter used καλέω in 1 Pet. 2:21 in a situational sense to describe the believers' call to suffering. Paul's use in 1 Cor. 7:15b indicates a call to peace that could be applied to salvation or a situation.

<sup>20</sup>Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, in *Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, eds. James Luther Mays, Patrick D. Miller, and Paul J. Actemeier (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 122.

<sup>21</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, in *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 549.

The call of salvation is the priority to which Paul exhorts the believer to remain committed. Frederick Fyvie Bruce commented that the calling in verse 20 “is the divine call from darkness to light (cf. verse 17); it is to this, not to one’s social status, that every one should remain faithful.”<sup>22</sup> The call to remain faithful to a social situation does not fit the emphasis that Paul is making in this text. The emphasis, rather, is faithfulness to God in a social situation. The positives or negatives of a social standing should not affect one’s faithfulness to God. Bruce stated, “The man who was called to faith in Christ as a slave, for example, is exhorted not to remain faithful to his slavery but to remain faithful as a slave to the call which came to him in slavery. If he does that he will indeed be a faithful slave, but that is not the primary point.”<sup>23</sup>

### Opportunity for Freedom

First Corinthians 7:21 states, “Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)” This verse seems paradoxical in its appeal for the believer to avoid concern about their social situation as a slave but allows them the option to escape that social situation through seeking freedom.

Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthian believer was not to allow their social situation to trouble them. The text states that the Christian should “not be concerned about it [being a slave when called]” (1 Cor. 7:21).<sup>24</sup> This statement is a key one where Paul seems to address the issue of believers being anxious about their social status. Such worry and stress could cause them unnecessary hindrances in living out their faith. Garland stated that, “Since they lacked human worth in the world’s eyes, they could easily anguish that they also lacked worth before God.”<sup>25</sup> Anxiety over the social situation would consume the believers’ lives and distract them from the weightier matters in life—living the Christ-centered life that transcends the issues of life. W. Harold Mare stated, “Paul is not speaking against human betterment or social service, but he is stressing that the Christian in Corinth is to live for the Lord without anxiety in his present situation.”<sup>26</sup> The Bible teaches that anxiety should not be a part of the believer’s life experience (Matt. 6:25-34; Phil. 4:6-7).

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<sup>22</sup>Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, edited by Ronald Clements and Matthew Black (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), 71.

<sup>23</sup>Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 71.

<sup>24</sup>The NASB states, “Do not worry about it;” the KJV states, “care not for it.”

<sup>25</sup>Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 308.

<sup>26</sup>W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” in *Romans Through Galatians*, vol. 10 in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 233.

The desire for a change in social status may have a correlation to the marriage theme of 1 Corinthians 7. The slaves would have sought freedom to marry legally and have a family without the potential problems that their social conditions posed. Ciampa and Rosner stated, “One of the many motivations behind slaves’ desire to achieve freedom (besides the obvious benefits) would have been the ability to exercise some sovereignty over their own sexual behavior and the freedom to enter into a legal and formal marriage.”<sup>27</sup> A concern to change one’s social situation under these circumstances seems reasonable. Although Paul does not acknowledge the problems that slavery posed to the Christian, he is not overlooking or denying that they exist. He sets the priority for the Christian in that seeking a change in social status for even the most valid reasons should not usurp the call to serve Christ in the current situation. Faithful living in any social condition is preeminent.

Although faithful living does not depend on the Christian’s social status, it does not necessarily preempt the Christian from seeking a change if an opportunity exists. The statement in 1 Cor. 7:21b provides the believer who is a slave the liberty to seek freedom if they have an opportunity. Paul is not being inconsistent or contradictory in his teaching but giving further substance to his overall theme of faithful Christian living independent of social status.

The Greek construction of 1 Cor. 7:21b states literally, “but if you are able to become free, rather make use.” The interesting and challenging part of this construction is the absence of the direct object of *μᾶλλον χρῆσαι*. Many English Bible translations simply supply the word *it* as the object. The challenge is to determine the object of *μᾶλλον χρῆσαι* to understand what Paul is telling the Corinthian Christians to use —slavery or freedom.

### *Use Your Slavery*

The first option holds the position that the text tells the enslaved Christians to make use of their present condition, which is their slavery. The *New Revised Standard Version* translates this verse as, “Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition [slavery] now more than ever.”<sup>28</sup> This translation asserts an interpretation upon the text that goes beyond the original text itself. The argument in favor of this interpretation is that it aligns with Paul’s theme for the Christians to remain in the condition in which they were called.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 318.

<sup>28</sup>*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), s. v., “1 Co 7:21.”

<sup>29</sup>Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 309. Garland also asserted that the grammar could support this view.

Another factor that supports this interpretation is that μάλλον as contrasting comparative could mean, “rather make use of your slavery.”<sup>30</sup>

Simon Kistemaker and William Hendriksen identified two issues with this interpretation—one grammatical and the other cultural.<sup>31</sup> The grammatical issue is the verb χρῆσαι, which is an aorist middle imperative of the verb χράομαι. The aorist imperative of χράομαι “signifies a new beginning in life and not a continuation of slavery.”<sup>32</sup> Bruce affirmed that the aorist imperative of χράομαι suggests, “making use of a definite opportunity.”<sup>33</sup> The cultural issue with this interpretation is that the slave did not possess the authority or autonomy to acquire his or her own freedom. In the manner of manumission, it was “not the slave but the master made the decision to free the servant.”<sup>34</sup> This position makes a questionable and simplistic assumption about the Corinthian culture that “the slave who wanted to stay in slavery could simply inform his owner of his decision and that the owner would quickly agree.”<sup>35</sup> The interpretation that supplies slavery as the object of μάλλον χρῆσαι could also assume Paul’s support of slavery.

### *Use Your Freedom*

The second option for the object of μάλλον χρῆσαι is τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ (freedom) based on the use of ἐλεύθερος in the previous part of the verse. More scholars hold this interpretation rather than the former. A linguistical, lexical-grammatical, and historical-cultural analysis provides adequate support for this view. The first grammatical reason for supporting this view is that for elliptical sentences, “one would ordinarily supply a word from that sentence—in this case ‘freedom’—not a word from an earlier sentence.”<sup>36</sup> Another reason in support of this view is χρῆσαι as an aorist imperative suggests a one-time event rather than a continual one where the believer continually makes use of his or her slavery. A present tense verb would be more applicable if Paul intended to convey that the Christian should continue in their slavery. The meaning of the

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 18 in *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 232-3.

<sup>32</sup>Kistemaker and Hendriksen, *Exposition*, 233.

<sup>33</sup>Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 72.

<sup>34</sup>Kistemaker and Hendriksen, *Exposition*, 233.

<sup>35</sup>S. Scott Bartchy, *Μάλλον Χρῆσαι: First-Century Slavery and The Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21*, SBL Dissertation Series (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 97.

<sup>36</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Edited by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 317.

verb χρῆσαι also supports this view. The word χρῆσαι means, “to make use of, employ”<sup>37</sup> and “does not mean ‘make the most of’ or ‘put up with.’”<sup>38</sup> Another key factor is the use of ἀλλά that often has an adversative effect. The adversative force “suggests that the statement qualifies what precedes: ‘If you were called as a slave, don’t worry about it, *but* ...’”<sup>39</sup>

A contextual analysis provides even more convincing support that the text encouraged the believers to make use of their freedom. Paul’s arguments in 1 Cor. 7:18-19 followed a pattern of rhetorical question, imperative, and explanation. The reader would expect that this interjection meant some kind of exception. Will Deming commented, “the imperative in this diatribe pattern functions not so much as a command, but as a rebuff. Its effectiveness lies in its demand that a person do the very opposite of what he or she is inclined to do.”<sup>40</sup> Per this view, the original reader of this text would understand Paul’s exhortation to make use of their freedom if they had such an opportunity for manumission. The text is less clear on who could initiate the manumission—the master or the slave.

Gregory Dawes noted the pattern that Paul used in pairing illustrations in other Scripture texts.<sup>41</sup> These pairings were necessary for Paul to maximize the effect of the point or idea that he wants to convey. When Paul chose more than one image to illustrate his point, “it is because one image alone would have been inadequate.”<sup>42</sup> The two examples in this pericope, circumcision and slavery, follow this pattern but with an exception. Dawes commented, “This second example illustrates both the ultimate indifference of one’s state of life (v 21a) and the possibility of having a preference where circumstances allow (v 21b).”<sup>43</sup> The insertion of this exception and its uniqueness in Paul’s pattern of illustrations indicates its significance.

Slaves typically could not initiate their freedom since this was the prerogative of their masters. The use of δύνασθαι in this verse, however, indicates that the Christian slave possessed some ability in the potential of manumission. If the

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<sup>37</sup>Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s. v., “χράσθαι.”

<sup>38</sup>Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 309.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 310. Italics were those of the author.

<sup>40</sup>Will Deming, “A Diatribe Pattern in 1 Cor 7:21-22: A New Perspective on Paul’s Directions to Slaves,” *Novum Testamentum* 37 (April 1995): 135.

<sup>41</sup>Gregory W. Dawes, “But If You Can Gain Your Freedom (1 Corinthians 7:17-24),” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (October 1990): 686-9. Dawes noted Paul’s paired illustrations of 1 Cor. 3:5-7 (field and building) and 15:35-44a (sowing and different kind of bodies).

<sup>42</sup>Dawes, “But If You Can Gain Your Freedom,” 688.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 697.

master freed his slave, the slave could not refuse. Paul may be alluding to this possibility if the slaves obtained their freedom in such a way.

Another instance that supports the view that Paul allows the Christian to seek freedom from slavery is his statement in 1 Cor. 7:35 where he would speak “for [their] own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon [them], but to promote good order and secure their undivided devotion to the Lord.” That Paul would advise the Corinthian Christians to remain in slavery is antithetical to this statement in 1 Cor. 7:35.

Some scholars rebut this position based on their analysis of slaves’ liberty under Roman law. Since slaves were not legal persons under Roman law, they could not legally choose freedom. Witherington held that “it seems unlikely that Paul means in 1 Cor. 7:21 that if one has a chance to *choose* freedom one should take it.”<sup>44</sup>

The above evidence arguably indicates that Paul did not prevent the Corinthian Christians from seeking or receiving freedom from slavery that would effectively change their social status. This evidence supports the author’s position that the Bible does not preclude a person from changing their social status if given the opportunity. The text evidently teaches that one should improve their social status if the opportunity avails.

### Eschatological View

Another perspective to interpret this passage is that Paul was speaking from an eschatological point of view. Paul and other Christians were “convinced that the eschaton, the climax of God’s redemptive intervention was very near.”<sup>45</sup> Ciampa and Rosner stated that Paul’s universal rule in the latter part of verse 17 provides a hint:

The second of four such statements in the letter (4:17; 11:16; 14:33), it emerges not just from a pragmatic impulse but from eschatological convictions. As announced in 1:2 (alluding to Mal. 1:11), Paul’s open agenda is to contribute to the end-time worship *universal* worship of the one true God by Gentiles. This involves helping them to live holy lives, to walk before God, and to please him in every respect.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 184.

<sup>45</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 593.

<sup>46</sup>Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 310.

Statements in other verses such as 1 Cor. 7:26 (“in view of the present distress”) and 1 Cor. 7:29 (“the appointed time has grown very short”) also provide clues to the eschatological underpinnings of this passage.<sup>47</sup>

### Status as Secondary

Noticeably absent from Paul’s arguments is a stated position on the ethics of these social conditions particularly on slavery. Paul did not provide an extended commentary on the ethics of the social conditions in which believers existed. He did not condone nor condemn the social statuses that he discussed in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24. Paul’s silence indicated that his main concern was not the ethics of these social conditions, but the ethics of the believers who lived in these social conditions. Fee stated, “The very lack of urgency in these matters indicates that they are not at issue.”<sup>48</sup> Bartchy affirmed Paul’s priority of the believers’ ethics when he stated, “no particular activity of the Jews or the slaves in the congregation had move Paul to write [1 Cor. 7:17-24]. It was rather the behavior of men and women as such which stimulated him to write ch. 7 in the letter.”<sup>49</sup> Paul’s priority is clear from the study of this text.

In 1 Corinthians 7:24, Paul summarized the point of this digression in stating, “So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him *remain with God* (italics the author’s).” Bruce stated, “While the examples adduced in verses 17-24 are circumcision or uncircumcision, slavery or freedom, the point Paul is making in the wider context is that those who were married when they were called should remain married, while those who were single should remain single.”<sup>50</sup>

The analogy of Scripture corroborates Paul’s teaching in this text on dealing with social statuses. The scriptural analogy accords with the findings within this article. Ephesians 6:5-8 supports the emphasis of faithful Christian living in any social status—slave or master. Paul in like manner avoids commentary or criticism of the social conditions of slavery. He instead focused on the believer “doing the will of God from the heart” (Eph. 6:6). In Philemon, Paul seemed more concern with the reconciliation of brothers in Christ rather than a critique of his friend’s participation in slave ownership. The Exodus account demonstrated God’s higher purpose for His people than simply a release from

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<sup>47</sup>Kaiser, *Hard Sayings*, 593.

<sup>48</sup>Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 307-8.

<sup>49</sup>Bartchy, *Μάλλον Χρῆσαι*, 140.

<sup>50</sup>Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 72.

oppressive bondage under the Egyptians. God declared that His ultimate purpose would be that they would “serve [Him]” (Ex. 4:23).

## APPLICATION

Believers who come to faith in Christ acquire a new citizenship that is not temporal and transcends their social conditions. Theissen stated, “faith in the exalted Lord was an offer of advancement loyalty for everyone, whatever his or her existing social status.”<sup>51</sup> One’s spiritual status before God is more important than one’s social status in society. Theissen further declared, “works and achievements do not decide anything at all about a person’s status before God. All that counts is πίστις—that is, loyalty to the crucified Master who is now above all masters.”<sup>52</sup> Achieving a higher status in society does not put people in a better position to serve God. Greater status can often become a distraction and deterrent to godly living. Such was the case of the rich young ruler in his encounter with Jesus as recorded in the Gospels (Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31).

The Lord Jesus Christ calls His people to seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33). The person who seeks a change in status must beware of the temptation to allow the cares of the world to cause him or her to wane in their fervor for God.

What about the one who desires to change their circumstances? Through fervent prayer and waiting on God, the believer must have a sense or conviction of God’s purpose and place for them. The believer does not necessarily divert from God’s will if he or she earnestly desires a change in social status. Richard Pratt commented,

It is important to remember that Paul did not suggest that believers should never change their status. He said that they should seek to know how God has called them, and to retain the places God has assigned them. His general rule was: Christians should remain as they are in relationships and service unless God assigns them new tasks.<sup>53</sup>

Believers should regard their place, current or potential, as places of service to God. If one desires a change, service to God should increase and not lessen.

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<sup>51</sup>Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament*, trans Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 194.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>53</sup>Richard L. Pratt, Jr. *I & II Corinthians*, Vol. 7 in *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 117.



One concerning point for many is Paul's silence on the ethics of slavery. Does Paul's silence indicate his support for the status quo? H. W. Mare affirmed:

It is not that Paul is for the subjugation or elevation of certain segments of society, but he wants individual Christians to realize and accept God's sovereign purpose in saving and keeping them regardless of the level of society they are in. Paul is more afraid of the spirit of anarchy and rebellion, personal and national (cf. Rom 12:3; 13:1–7; 1 Cor 12:4–11; 2 Cor 10:13) than of social inequality.<sup>54</sup>

Paul understood clearly that faithful living should be inconsequential to one's place in society. Galatians 3:28 puts forth the equality of essence and worth of all people before God. Paul himself learned the value of contentment in any situation (Phil. 4:11).

The eschatological view holds that believers should not seek changes in social status because of the critical need to fulfill the missionary call. Why should believers allow temporal matters to usurp the more critical matter of the spread of the gospel and the furtherance of God's kingdom? One's temporal standings are inconsequential to his or her eternal standing in God through Christ. Kaiser summarized "this belief created a tremendous missionary urgency. The good news had to get out to as many as possible while they could yet be saved (see 1 Cor. 10:33). This expectation of the imminent end was surely an important factor for the Pauline norm 'remain where you are.'"<sup>55</sup> Realizing the missionary mandate in Matt. 28:19-20, believers should subject their secular ambitions to the greater potential for service and spiritual growth.

Social status is a temporal matter and should have no effect, positively or negatively, on the Christian's walk with God. Witherington summarized the teaching of this passage:

One of the themes of the chapter [1 Cor. 7] is that one should not try to change one's status just *because* one is in Christ. This sort of approach amounts to saying that no social status of whatever kind prevents one from becoming or being a Christian, and therefore is not necessary to change one's social status to become or be a Christian. Even a slave in Roman Corinth can be a Christian, and thus how much more anyone else.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>W. Harold Mare, "1 Corinthians," 232.

<sup>55</sup>Kaiser, *Hard Sayings*, 593.

<sup>56</sup>Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 185. Italics were those of the author.

While the Christian may seek a change in status, such a change in social status is not necessary to be more faithful to God.

What about the idea that Christians should pursue social change in the broader society to improve the social conditions for others? Concerning this idea, Christians should be discerning and exercise caution. Witherington noted, “Paul’s approach is to put the leaven of the gospel into the structure of the Christian community, not into the larger society directly, and let it do its work over the course of time.”<sup>57</sup> Christians can seek societal changes out of their call to be salt and light to society and to show love and common grace to others. The approach of social activism, however, can lead to a misplaced hope from which real change comes and a misunderstanding of how real change happens. Witherington’s provided a helpful summary: “Apparently, no early Christian, by litigation or by appeal to governing authorities or by revolt, ever tried to change the social fabric of ancient society. It was by means of witness and change *within* the Christian community that a new worldview was promulgated.”<sup>58</sup> The discipleship and fellowship within the church inherently has the power and witness to effect positive change in society.

What’s most important for the believer? He or she should realize that the life that they live on earth is fleeting. It does not make sense to consume oneself with such matters that may be important but not ultimate. Status changes may be important but they are not ultimate. Above all, the believer should seek the Lord. Whatever the social status—high or low—it should affect one’s devotion to God either positively or negatively.

## CONCLUSION

This article presented a study on the idea of social status change for the believer with an exegetical study of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 and other supporting biblical texts. The theme of the text was that each believer “should remain in the condition in which he was called” (1 Cor. 7:20). Paul primarily used this text for illustrative purposes in the broader context of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 where he exhorts the believers to remain with their spouses unless they depart. There is more to this text, however, than just illustrations. The contents of the text in its linguistic, literary, grammatical, and historical context reveals some key

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<sup>57</sup>Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 185.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

insights and wisdom for the Christian in dealing with social conditions or circumstances.

The Bible does not preclude believers from seeking social change and could encourage it when the opportunity presents itself. This textual study offered several points of application. Ciampa and Rosner provided a helpful summary for applying the lessons of this text:

Like the Corinthians believers they need to know that they should not nurture the belief that God would be more pleased with them or more willing to use them if only their circumstance would change. And like the Corinthians, they need to know that if opportunities arise that would allow them to transition to a more empowering and less oppressive situation without compromising their Christian integrity, they should feel free to do so.<sup>59</sup>

Believers should realize their opportunities and make the best of them. The believers' best opportunities may exist in their current social situation. God's promotional ways are different and far better than any status change that one perceives as necessary. Faithfulness to God does not depend on a place on earth but on a Person in heaven.

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<sup>59</sup>Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter*, 322.

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