

PREFACE

In vv18-20 the apostle Paul uses the example of circumcision to illustrate how the mechanical changes we make to ourselves in an effort to render ourselves more “spiritual,” more acceptable to God, mean nothing. What matters is our obedience to Him. Now in vv21-24 Paul employs another example—slavery—to illustrate that our social status, our lot in life, is secondary to the fact that every believer has been purchased by—and thus now associated with—God. That is, earthly status is nothing; it is our heavenly status in Christ that is all. Yet these two illustrations are not synonymous: Paul makes a different point with each.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:21-24.

v21

Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it;

Although there are similarities to the structure of this paragraph and the previous, they are not identical. If they were, Paul would have said, *Were you a slave when called, do not become a freed person; were you a free person when called, do not become a slave.* But a slave had no ability to just decide to be freed; unlike with the previous situations of marriage/divorce, circumcision/uncircumcision, a slave could not choose his or her status. So instead, Paul writes, “Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it.”

but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.

It is best to see this “exception” clause as parenthetical. The flow of Paul’s thought is, “Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman...” But he inserts this parenthetical clause (I believe with a shrug) to make the point that neither condition really matters. If you are a slave, be one for the Lord; if you are given the chance to be freed, be a freedman for the Lord.

v22

For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman;

Here a knowledge of ancient history helps us understand Paul’s argument. Reading v22 in the twenty-first century, we are left scratching our heads. What does Paul mean when he writes, “he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman”? We want to read that, “if I was a slave when God called me, the Lord has now set me free.” Our reference for slavery is the first two centuries of the United States, in which if one gained his or her freedom (i.e., manumitted), one was free to walk out the front gate and make a life for oneself. One was now an independent human being, no longer owned by an earthly master.

But then, why does he follow that with, “likewise he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave”? So if I started out as a slave, I have now been set free, but if I started out free, I am now a slave? How can that be right?

The answer lies in understanding what is meant by a first-century “freedman,” and particularly a “freedman of the Lord.” Under Roman law, a “freedman” was not literally set free of all ties to his master. “Freed slaves were not free to do as they pleased.” There remained an obligation, both personal and legal, to the master to serve and render lifelong *obsequium*—i.e., “eagerness to serve respectfully,” with the former master, who was now the slave’s patron, looking after the welfare of the freedman (Garland). The freedmen took pride in being associated with a great patron, a great house. They would even include the name of their patron on their tombstone: “*apeleutheros* of [name of their patron].” Is this starting to sound familiar?

Remember, too, that a former slave turned out onto the streets was not in an enviable position. Poverty at that time would be just as foreign to us today as slavery. It was *real* poverty: no roof, no money, no food, no means of support. This is why some in that culture would voluntarily sell themselves as slaves; better to be fed and sheltered as a slave, than to starve in the streets as a free man.

So if one is still a slave when called by the Lord, in the flesh one may remain a slave, but in the Spirit, in Christ, he is declared a “freedman”—but now under a new Master and patron. He now serves Christ Jesus, owes Him his allegiance, and even takes on His name: Christian.

D. Martin: The slave’s real status is determined by his or her placement in a different household entirely: the household of Christ. The slave is a freedperson of the Lord and shares in the benefits, status, and obligations that relationship brings.

Sidebar: Keep in mind that here Paul is not just illustrating a point with slavery, he is using it metaphorically to make a point—which we will see in a moment.

To the church in Colossae the apostle offers more detailed instruction on this tension between being a literal slave to an earthly master, while serving the Lord as a believer.

Read Colossians 3:22-24.

We obey our earthly masters *fearing the Lord*. We do the work for our earthly masters *as for the Lord*. It is Christ Jesus we serve.

likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave.

One thing Paul is saying here is, *Don't think less of yourself if you are a slave, and don't think more of yourself if you are free.* We might say, *Don't think less of yourself if you are a ditch-digger, and don't think so highly of yourself if you are a CEO.*

Along with that the apostle is also foreshadowing something he will be addressing later in the letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

In Christ, earthly social status, where we work, how much money we have, what role we play within the church—none of that means anything, for we are *all* slaves of Christ. We are all equal under Him. Once again, *Remain as you are.* And for those who bridle at the thought that in Christ we are slaves, Paul adds v23.

v23

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

This is the second time in this letter that Paul has stated the first half of this verse—but with a different second half. He closes a discussion of immorality and the body with “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (6:19-20).

Here in Chapter Seven this statement expresses the mystery of the cross: In Christ we are both slave *and* free. It is patently obvious that the one who purchases something, is the one who then *owns* that thing. Every believer has been purchased, and in the worship of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders they sing to the One who made that purchase of every Christian on earth.

Read Revelation 5:9.

That is the definition of a slave: someone who has been purchased by someone else. But it doesn't stop there; here is the rest of the mystery.

Read Revelation 5:10.

Only in Christ are slaves also kings and priests—and there is certainly no one more free than a king.

do not become slaves of men.

So to pull this together, the slave who comes to Christ is now declared a “freedman” in Christ: that is, he has been purchased by a *new* Master/Patron that he would now eagerly serve that Master. Similarly, the free man who comes to Christ has also been purchased (*seemingly; Satan notwithstanding*) for the first time, to serve his new Master, Christ. The first has been purchased for freedom; the second has been purchased for servitude—both stated in contrast to their former lives, but in reality both have been given freedom, and both have been given a new Owner to serve.

Paul’s command then to “not become slaves of men” (*anthropos*) is not literal, but metaphorical, and is probably aimed at those institutions that have held the Corinthians enthralled: the human “wisdom” of Hellenistic philosophies of spiritualism, leading some members of the church to seek celibacy instead of marital conjugal relations, or divorce instead of the God-ordained marital union. And it takes little effort to draw contemporary parallels to this, where individuals and families have enslaved themselves to spurious and unbiblical teachings, thus doing violence to their relationship with God in Christ.

v24

Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

Here we have an inclusio to how Paul opened this interlude. In v17 he states, “Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk.” Paul is simultaneously referring to one’s situation when called *and* to God’s call itself. It sanctifies that situation as a place where one can truly live out God’s call in the present age (Fee).

Let me illustrate the apostle’s emphatic point from my own life. For many years the Lord called me to serve Him on the stage: acting, singing, writing, directing. I remained obedient to that call. But then the Lord called me to something else; He moved me from the stage to the classroom. I did not *seek* that change, nor did I accept it with the misguided notion that it would either improve my social standing or render me more “spiritual.” I just accepted and obeyed His call. If God is glorified by my life, that is all that matters, regardless who I am and what I am doing.

One might interpret the echoing command of this chapter to “Remain where you are” as “Wherever and whatever you are, remain faithful in service to the Lord God who bought you and called you.”