

People and pastor: Slaves

Introduction

Throughout the New Testament, there are two prominent words for servants: one is slave, or *doulos*, and one is deacon, or *diakonos*. Here in our passage, and many times (27) in Paul, the word is slave. He claims to be a slave. He's a slave, and by implication, we're slaves, too.

What could this mean? Isn't slavery *always* bad? How could a pastor get up in a pulpit in 2018 and tell his people that they are slaves? Are we introducing dominance and oppression into church life? Isn't talk of slavery in poor taste?

Let's listen carefully to Paul's heart. Let's listen to God's Spirit, who felt speaking of slavery would help us in our Christian lives, and in our life together as people and pastor. And let's see if Paul, and Christ, through our passage, can guide us toward answers to these three questions:

1. What happened with Jesus to make us his slaves?
2. What happened with us to make us slaves?
3. What does it mean to be his slaves as people and pastor?

The first of these questions isn't directly answered in our passage. But it lies in the background of our passage.

1. What happened with Jesus (to make us slaves)?

First, a couple things about slavery.

There was a form of slavery in Old Testament times in Israel. God's law permitted it. It was not what we think of when we think of more recent slavery. In fact, in the law, the penalty for stealing a human person and making them a slave, was *death*.

Slavery was a carefully-managed social relief system. The law allowed it so that people might be able to pay off crippling debts. You did not sell yourself, but rather your labor, to your master. When your debt was paid, you were free. Also, every slave's bond service was seven years at the most. And all slaves were automatically freed in the year of jubilee.

Sometimes a slave would get to the end of their term of service, and decide, "you know what? It turns out I deeply love my master. I don't want to be set free." Then that slave would go to the judges with the matter, and they would pierce the slave's

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ear, as a symbol that the slave was committing themselves to the service of their master for life.

Guess where so many of these slavery regulations are found in our Bibles? In Exodus 21. Right after the 10 Commandments. And right after a solemn reminder that God himself brought his people up out of slavery and bondage in Egypt. Over and over the Old Testament reminds Israel that they were once slaves, and that their freedom should mean justice and mercy for other people, both Israelites as well as foreigners among them.

At the time of Jesus, a different system of slavery was in place in the Roman world. In this system, not just a slave's labor, but a slave's entire life, was owned by their master. What mattered most to a slave? Who their master was! If you had a good master, you would be treated with dignity, and given status. If you had a bad master, you were treated like an animal.

With all of this in the background, Paul tells this same church in his prior letter what Jesus did to make them his slaves: that they were bought with a price, and are no longer their own---that they belong wholly to Jesus (1 Cor 6:19ff). The church, and each Christian believer, was redeemed---this is slave market language!---by Jesus.

I just discovered this week that the price Judas was paid to sell Jesus into captivity, 30 pieces of silver, was the price of a common slave. He was sold into the hands of the cruel Roman authorities, and the angry religious establishment.

But the price that he paid in order to redeem us from our slavery to sin and death was the price of his very life. His bondage for our freedom. His death for our life.

What happened with Jesus to make us his own, his slaves? Jesus went into the slave market, where the Corinthians were in bondage, where we were in bondage, and purchased us for himself, with his life. And he became the best master in human history, winning our hearts so that we would choose to be his slaves rather than go our own way.

2. What happened with us?

But what exactly happened in our hearts to make us commit to our master forever?

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In the middle of our passage Paul says (4:5) that “what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants (or slaves) for Jesus’ sake.”

All around this declaration of Paul’s slavery is the *reason* we’re glad and loyal slaves. What happened that set us free from bondage to the world, our sinful desires, and the Devil, and made us commit ourselves to Christ as bond slaves?

A glorious light shined on us, the light of Christ himself.

Verses 3-4: Those who don’t see glory in the message of the gospel are glory blind. They hear the good news, but for them it’s no good. And, in fact, “the god of this age” --- either the desires for worldly security and status and stuff, or the Devil, or both---have oppressively enslaved them, and they can’t even hear good news as *good* when they hear it. They have glory passing right before their eyes, but they won’t see it.

Sometimes when we’re taking a hike with our kids here in Switzerland, they don’t seem to see the beauty we are seeing. Some of you that have lived here for a long time have become a bit blind to the glorious scenery all around you. Same with our spiritual lives.

But thankfully, our blindness didn’t win! Verse 6: the same “God, who said ‘let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Christ.”

If you were describing what had happened to you when you became a Christian to a slave in Roman times, you’d tell them that you *used* to belong to the harshest and ugliest of masters. And when you first heard that you were heading to the slave auction block again, your biggest fear was that things would only be worse with your new master. But, you’d say, this new Master, to your astonishment, is a supremely glorious master who gave his very life for you. And you’re now his own, and it is glorious! No slave has ever been given such dignity, such honor, such riches!

And if you were describing what had happened to you, when you became a Christian, to an Old Testament slave, you’d tell them that the year of Jubilee came, and you’d been declared free. But you had come to so deeply love your master that you declared your intention to be in his faithful service--you and your family--forever.

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You'd tell them that there is more freedom in bond slavery, in God's house, with Christ as your master, than there would ever be in the phony freedom of slavery to your former desires. You'd tell them that you've been marked by the Spirit of God in your heart, and written on the palm of Christ's hand, to remain his own, forever.

And, by the way, that's what we say to anyone who tells us that our Christian faith is like slavery. We say, "you know, in a way, you're right. But there is more freedom, in my bond slavery to Jesus, than I ever experienced in my slavery to my sin. There it was all blindness, darkness, and death. Now my heart and my life is blazing with the brilliance of the uncreated light of God as it beams on me in Jesus' glorious face." And then you would go home and pray for that person, knowing that they too are slaves---not yet to Jesus, but to cruel, oppressive masters.

3. How then must we live as people and pastor?

And now, finally, we ask the question: how does all this glory, and all this slavery to Christ, impact the way we live together as people and pastor in the church of Christ?

Well, Paul's pastorate is impacted like this:

4:1 begins: "we (pastors) do not lose heart."

In 4:2, he says that every disgraceful and secret and deceptive method of getting things done is now *out* for us. That's how to get things done when you work in the dark. But the blazing glory of Christ has shone on us. From now on, everything we do, and the way we do it, is done as if we were doing it at high noon in the middle of the Opernplatz, for all to see. Because now I see that God sees. And that doesn't scare me: it makes me want to serve him---openly, sincerely; privately as well as publicly.

What a difference this makes!

Now, when you walk into a Council meeting or a retreat planning meeting or a worship planning meeting or a choir rehearsal, you're different! Instead of jockeying for position, instead of striving to secure your preferences, and instead of consolidating your power and influence within our church fellowship, now you realize that there is only one master around here. And guess what: it's not you. And it's not me. It's the Lord Jesus.

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And our bond service to him means that we aren't trying to get what pleases us, but what pleases him. There must be an astonishing subordination of all of *our* wants when we meet together as Christians. The only question that now matters for us, slaves of Christ, is "What will please our Master, and make way for his glory to shine?" We all, in our own ways, preach "not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (4:5).

But here's the marvelous thing: Whenever any of us commends Christ as Lord, we are *also* saying about ourselves that we are his bond slaves. That we owe him our life, our labor, our all. That we, having had light flood into our blindness, causing us to see his glory, can never be the same again. We are captivated. We go where he goes; we march to his drum beat. We preach Jesus and glorify him, and every time we do, we're saying about ourselves that we are his. Not our own. Not anybody else's.

As your pastor, if the time comes when I have to actually say it, may God help me to say sincerely, and believe truly, as I was once taught: "Listen, brother; listen, sister: *you* are not my master. But: I *am* your servant, as a bond slave of Jesus Christ." And if the time comes when you have to say the same to me, or to someone else in our church, or anywhere else, may you say it firmly, sincerely, and lovingly, too.

Because if our bond service to Christ isn't evident in our words, then it's something other than the message of Christ that we're sharing. If our commitment to Master Jesus is not clear from our actions, then it's not the work of Jesus that we're doing. If, after we've shared the gospel with someone, or taught a Sunday school lesson or a Bible study; if after we've worked a week in the bank; if after we've had a heart-to-heart talk with one of our children; if after we've said difficult-to-say words at a church meeting or to a colleague; if after we've lived our lives, it isn't crystal clear that we are not our own, but that we are happy and humble servants of a Master to whom we owe our lives, then it is not a Christian message we're sharing, and it's not a Christian life we're living.

But when we are bond slaves *for Jesus' sake*, then our service to the people in our care is faithful and humble. This does not mean that we allow those we serve to abuse us. It means that whenever we lead them, we will be, like Jesus, taking up the wash basin and the towel, and getting on our hands and knees, and cleaning the grime from people's dirty feet. That everything we do will look like we are offering

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ourselves as broken bread and poured out wine. That our lives will be lived in joyous slavery to our Master, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Has the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ, blazed its way into your heart? Have you felt your heart set free, only to feel it captivated afresh by a master that it loves to serve? Have you been so liberated by his love and grace, that following his commandments gives you delight, because it gives him delight? Do you rejoice that you have been set free from slavery to the world and to ugly desires, and redeemed by his precious blood for slavery to him?

It's a glorious thing to be a Christian slave. Do you see the glory? It's in the face of Jesus. Look to him, and be joyfully at his service, forever. Amen.