

Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Servants of a New Covenant

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:21–23; 2 Corinthians 3:6

Code: B110908

“All things belong to us, and we are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.” Paul made that tremendous, seemingly unqualified promise to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 3:21–23). Christians are free. Yet there is a paradox that balances that truth. Though free, all Christians are slaves. It is a new kind of bondage: we are “servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). As willing slaves, we must voluntarily restrict our own liberty for others’ sakes. Isn’t that what Jesus Himself taught? “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Paul applied the principle of voluntary servitude to evangelism. He made himself a slave to all—including the roughest, most contemptible, loathsome pagan. Being free, he nevertheless joyfully entered into slavery for the gospel’s sake.

This principle of voluntary slavery was pictured graphically in the Old Testament law. Exodus 21:5, 6 describes the process by which one could choose to make himself another’s servant: “If the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl he shall serve him permanently.” The Israelites were permitted to keep fellow Jews as slaves only for six years. On the seventh they were to be set free. But if one voluntarily chose to continue serving as a slave, his master would literally put his ear against the doorpost, take an awl, and drive it through the ear. The hole in the slave’s ear was a sign to all that he was serving out of love, not because he had to. Paul was saying he had voluntarily relinquished his freedom in order to serve all men. In a spiritual sense, Paul had perforated his ear on behalf of the unsaved. “Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more” (1 Corinthians 9:19).

The word translated “made . . . a slave” is the Greek verb *douloō*, “to enslave.” This is a strong expression. It is the same word used in 1 Corinthians 7:15 in relation to the marriage bond. And the same word is used in Romans 6:18, 22 to speak of our union with Christ. It describes an exceedingly secure bond. Paul had denied himself in the truest sense by placing himself under such a bond to everyone else.

The phrase “that I might win the more” is not talking about winning earthly or heavenly rewards. Paul was speaking of winning the lost to Christ. Such was Paul’s concern for lost souls that, though he was free in Christ, he was willing to enslave himself to people if it would give him an opportunity to proclaim the gospel. He expressed a similar commitment in 2 Timothy 2:10: “I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.”

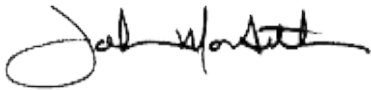
Consider all that Paul suffered for the gospel’s sake. He became a prisoner. He went to jail. He was beaten, whipped, shipwrecked, and stoned. He continually set his own life aside. Ultimately he was killed for the testimony of the gospel. He would have gone even further if it were possible. To the

church Rome Paul wrote these shocking words: “I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:23, 24). In other words, he felt as if he would have given up his own salvation if he so that his Jewish brethren could be saved.

In contrast, the Corinthians were demanding their rights. They were misusing their freedom at others’ expense. Weaker brothers were stumbling, and it is very likely that unbelievers were repelled by the selfishness and strife that dominated the Corinthian fellowship, so carefully chronicled in Paul’s first letter to them.

Paul wanted them to follow his example. “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). And what was his example? Go back one verse, to the end of 1 Corinthians 10: “Just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved.” So the only sense in which we as believers are to be men-pleasers is in looking “not only to [our] own but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4, NIV).

That’s the point Paul was making here. He was not advocating a marketing plan. He was not making a plea for “contextualization.” He was not suggesting that the message made more acceptable, or that the role of preaching replaced by psychology, skits, and worldly entertainment. He was calling for self-denial and sacrifice for the sake of proclaiming the unadulterated truth to those who do not know Christ.



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