

Excursus: Running the Race to Win

The principle of Christian freedom is central to the Corinthians' quandary regarding food sacrificed to idols. How directly they raised the issue of freedom in their letter to Paul is uncertain; what is evident from Paul's response is that the more mature at Corinth regarded freedom and its use in terms of knowledge and rights: Those who have knowledge on their side have the right – indeed, the responsibility – to act accordingly; to fail to exercise one's rights as dictated by the facts of a matter is to denigrate the truth rather than uphold it. So the strong at Corinth felt it proper (if not altogether necessary) to uphold the truth concerning “idol meats” by eating them freely and encouraging their brethren to do the same.

The Corinthians embraced and celebrated their freedom, as well they ought. The glorious truth at the heart of the gospel is that, in and through Jesus Christ, people are liberated from all that has bound and enslaved them (cf. Luke 4:14-21; John 8:31-36; Acts 13:26-39). Paul had experienced this freedom and he proclaimed it in his gospel (cf. 9:1 with Galatians 4:21-5:1); he had no intention of limiting the Corinthians' sense of their freedom in Christ and their employment of it. Paul didn't want to direct the Corinthians away from their freedom; to the contrary, he wanted them to embrace it more fully. So also he wanted them to employ their freedom, *but employ it correctly – which is to say, employ it in accordance with the truth.*

Paul understood that freedom exists only where there is conformity to the truth. So one's exercise of his freedom in Christ must accord with and serve the cause of the truth as it is in Jesus or it is not the exercise of freedom at all; all deviation from truth is bondage. And if life in freedom is life in conformity to the truth, then the Christian who would live into his freedom must live in accordance with the reality that *Christ is his life* – that the life he lives is Christ living His life in him. Thus true freedom for the Christian means living as the Lord's bondservant and so the servant of His agenda and ends. And given that the divine goal is the summing up of the whole creation in Christ, the person who thus lives as the Lord's “freedman” (7:22) gives himself to be the slave of all men for the sake of their faith and perfection in Jesus. Christ's faithful bondservant is the slave of men, but in order to exercise that sort of slavery he must also exercise true *mastery*, namely mastery of himself.

Again, no man can serve two masters: No Christian can be the Lord's servant and the servant of another master, including the inherent “lord” that is *self*. Christ's bondservant must exercise mastery over his own thoughts, desires, interests, concerns and agenda. And he does so as the slave of all men, but out of obedience to his master; he serves men *unto the Lord*. Any other servanthood is illegitimate and unholy (ref. 7:23).

This is the sense in which Paul made his body his slave. He was determined to fulfill his calling to partner with the gospel and this meant that he had to bring every aspect of his life into subjection to that cause. And so, while Paul was no ascetic, moralist or pietist, he was fiercely committed to a life of self-mastery. There are two essential reasons for this: The first was addressed above, namely that the one who is Christ's servant cannot serve himself as “lord.” The second is that the faithful servant must be on guard against everything that would distract, derail or destroy his servanthood. To use Paul's metaphor, the runner who intends to win must do more than simply run fast and hard; *he must be able to spot and avoid obstacles and pitfalls.*

So it is with the Christian life: The believer who runs well is ever vigilant for those things along his course that can impede him or cause him to stumble (cf. Hebrews 12:1). The running metaphor is helpful in another way: It highlights the fact that the Christian's vigilance serves his own interest. *Christ's servants serve Him and His agenda, but in so doing they serve themselves.*

- Many Christians think of their servanthood purely in terms of doing what God requires of them; they ought to think of it as serving the goal of their perfection in Christ.
- Their labor for the Lord isn't servile compliance with the demands of a strict master; *it is the life of sonship and thus life in the freedom and flourishing of conformity to the truth.*

Serving Christ according to the principle of slavery which Paul embraced and promoted is the way of one's own freedom, joy, fulfillment and self-realization. One of the most profound ironies held out in the gospel is that the self-actualization which all men long for and pursue through devotion to themselves is to be obtained by serving a different master. It is by being taken up in and conformed to the True Man that human beings realize their true humanity. *The one who loses what he believes to be his life actually finds his life* (Matthew 16:13-25).

The true human life is life in conformity to the true humanity that is in Jesus Christ; it is the life of *christiformity* which is the life of a bondsman: living as Jesus' servant expressed in being the slave of all men for the sake of their faith and perfection in Him. Those who serve men in this way truly serve their Lord and the goal of His lordship (Ephesians 1:9-10; Colossians 1:15-16).

Living the Christian life well – running our race to win – means living as a bondsman. There is no other legitimate course to run and no other way to run it. *This being the case, what does it mean in practical terms to live in conformity to the principle of slavery?*

1. Of first importance is the matter of the Christian's **slavery to Christ**. For the other two aspects of slavery (slavery to men and enslaving one's body) must be understood in terms of being Christ's bondsman. And being Christ's bondsman means serving Him and His purposes with respect to oneself, the Church and the world. But in order to serve Christ's purposes, the Christian must know *what they are*. And this necessitates that he know *who he is* and *how he stands* in relation to the Lord and His goals.

Many Christians envision their servanthood in terms of obedience to a master. That is, Jesus is *Lord*, and thus believers are His subjects obligated to discern His will – generally expressed in explicit directives – and comply with it. (This perspective is evident in the prevalent understanding and application of the notion of “lordship salvation.” Regarded as the antidote to “easy-believism,” this doctrine insists that Christians cannot embrace Jesus only as Savior but must also obey Him as Lord, i.e., submit to His commandments.)

Jesus is indeed Lord and Christians are obligated to obey Him. But true obedience doesn't consist in compliance with a list of moral and ethical directives; *it consists in living a life of love* – love for the Father, Son and Spirit expressed in love for His people and the world of men (John 15:1-17; cf. 1 John 3:13-24). The obligation of Christian servanthood is the obligation of *sonship* – a life lived in conformity to the truth.

2. Christians fulfill their calling as Christ's bondslaves when they live out their sonship. But their sonship is ontological and not merely a title given to them. That is, they are sons *in the Son* – sons by virtue of sharing in the life of the Son in union with the Father through the indwelling Spirit. And being sons in the Son, they live out their sonship when they live out Jesus' life in them. In practical terms, this means ordering their lives according to His mind, purpose and work. But this raises the question of how the Christian discerns those things. Unless and until he does, he has no way of knowing that he is actually serving his Lord. *He could be at cross-purposes with Jesus and never know it.*

The answer – not infrequently overlooked by Christians – is that the Lord's mind and purposes are disclosed and framed in the *Old Testament scriptures*; true, Jesus' person, words and actions are recorded in the New Testament, but their *meaning* is revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures which provide the basis and context for them.

- All that Jesus is, said, and did – the totality of the “Christ event” – served to fulfill the scriptural revelation and promises regarding the kingdom of God and its Messiah. Thus the repeated refrain of the gospel writers, “*This was to fulfill...*,” and Jesus' corresponding insistence that Israel's failure to discern Him and His work reflected their failure to understand and believe their Scriptures (cf. Matthew 5:17-20 with Luke 24:13-32, 44-48; John 5:39-47, 10:22-26, etc.).
- The Hebrew Scriptures reveal Jesus' mind and purpose, and what they show is that His goal is to fulfill His identity and calling as His Father's messianic Servant and True Israel, and therefore the promised Seed of Abraham. And as the true Abrahamic Seed, Jesus' calling is to bring His Father's blessing to all men. He is fulfilling this calling, *but by His Spirit through those who are sons of Abraham by sharing in His life and so also in His calling* (cf. Galatians 3:26-29 with Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-49; John 14:1-26, 15:26-16:15; Acts 1:1-8, 2:1-39).

This is precisely why slavery to Christ means **slavery to all men**. Jesus' bondservants do His will and work, which is laboring to see all men enter into and be perfected in His life. The gospel is the “good news” that God has fulfilled His word to Abraham by sending the promised Seed in whom His blessing comes to all of mankind. In Him God has reconciled all things to Himself and has charged those who are sons in the Son with carrying His word of reconciliation to all men (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). In Paul's words, Christ's saints – like he himself – are to do all things for the sake of the gospel: They are to partner with the gospel and its cause in the world; they are to become all things to all men in order to win them; they are to become slaves to all men for the sake of their faith.

Most Christians are rightly concerned with being faithful to their obligation as Christ's bondservant. But few seem to consider that their faithfulness as servants depends upon their labors conforming to the true nature and goal of their servanthood. Simply serving others and their needs isn't what Paul was calling for. Indeed, Christians aren't subject to men and their needs, sensibilities and interests *as such* (cf. 9:19a; Colossians 2:16); they are called to serve others *for their good*, which means that they are slaves of men *unto Christ and their completion in Him* (ref. again 9:19-23; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:1-4:18).

3. Understanding our slavery to Christ and consequent slavery to men provides the foundation for rightly understanding and exercising the third component of Christian slavery, namely the **subjugation of oneself**. As noted in the treatment of 9:24-27, this slavery doesn't pertain to the body as such, nor does it call for adopting severity or austerity in our daily lives (Colossians 2:20ff). "Making our bodies our slaves" (9:27) refers to *self-mastery* – bringing into proper subjection every aspect of our lives.

But this self-mastery is of a particular sort and is unto a very specific end. The Christian's slavery to men reflects his identity and obligation as Christ's bondservant, and so it is with his subjugation of himself: The goal of self-mastery is service to Christ; the Christian makes his body his slave for the sake of the gospel and its fruit in his own life, in the Church and in the world. Two crucial implications flow from this:

- The first is that self-discipline must be properly motivated and properly oriented or it is just another form of *self-centeredness* which nurtures self-righteousness. Since the first century the tendency has been to think of self-mastery in terms of self-denial for the sake of separation or devoutness. Strictness, pietism, monasticism, asceticism and other forms of self-denial are hallmarks of human religion, and they have infiltrated and tainted Christian faith and practice from the beginning. But Paul wasn't calling for self-denial, but *self-dedication*: for committing oneself in every respect to Jesus Christ as His bondservant. *Paul sought Christ-mastery rather than the mastery of oneself for the sake of oneself*. His goal for himself and the saints was a self in full subjection to the mind, purpose and work of Jesus Christ – a self taken captive to the cause of the gospel (9:22-23).
- The second implication proceeds from the first and is just as critical, though less readily discerned. And that is that the self-mastery Paul sought and prescribed is framed by a creational and communal perspective rather than our innate individualistic one. Though it *pertains* to the individual Christian, this self-mastery doesn't *terminate* with him; it *involves* him but it's not *about* him. The simple reason is that its aim is service to Christ and His gospel, not the personal benefits to be gained by a disciplined life. This ought to be obvious from the context alone, but very often it's either missed altogether or lost in the process. For the most part, Christians understand and apply Paul's ethic of "beating the body and making it a slave" in terms of personal exercises that have personal goals. The whole matter begins and ends with the individual believer.

This inclination derives from our intrinsic self-centeredness. Human beings are the center of their own universe; each person lives in his own mind and views and judges all things through the lens of his perspective, ideals, values and desires. In a person's thoughts and reasoning, actions and pursuits, all things are "from him, through him and unto him." This is true whether he lives a profligate life or one marked by complete self-mastery. But Paul was talking about something entirely different. He was talking about the mastery of self which is merely the authentic Christian life – the Christian living out the truth that "he no longer lives but Christ lives in him"; the mastery that is ultimately Christ's mastery of His own.

Paul's concern was to press the Corinthians with the fundamental principle that freedom in Christ amounts to slavery for the sake of the gospel; the question of food sacrificed to idols was simply the occasion he drew upon to make his point. But this is not to say that the Corinthians' question was merely his springboard into a new topic. Paul *was* answering their question, just not in the way they expected. The Corinthians sought a ruling on which faction was right in its conviction regarding such foods; Paul answered by insisting that they needed to think about the issue differently: They were focused on rightness; they needed to focus on love. They were concerned with upholding their freedom; they needed to recognize that freedom is realized in conformity to the truth. And the truth is that they were Christ's bondslaves, and therefore slaves to another and to all men for the sake of the gospel.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that they would, in fact, honor the truth and their freedom when they subjected themselves in all things to the cause of seeing every man – including themselves – presented complete in Christ.

If freedom is realized in conformity to the truth, then the Corinthians' exercise of their freedom in Christ demanded that they bring the totality of their lives into subjection, and that for their own sake as well as for the sake of others. Their goal in all things needed to be their own edification as much as the edification of their brethren.

Paul's instruction in this section of the epistle is critically important, and yet the heart of his meaning is frequently lost. Readers acknowledge the specifics in his instruction – his discussion of “idol meats,” the need to not stumble a brother, the question of ministerial support, the obligation of self-discipline, etc., but they often fail to treat them organically and within the larger context. This failure is perhaps most evident in the fact that so many interpret 9:24-27 in purely individual terms. That is, these verses are treated in isolation as Paul's exhortation to personal discipline *for one's own sake* (whether one's personal sanctity or one's assurance of salvation) rather than as a critical component of his answer to the question of food sacrificed to idols. Paul's statement *does* speak to the issue of personal discipline, which obviously entails personal benefit. But to reduce Paul's point to this is to miss it altogether.

Paul regarded the discipline of bringing one's life into subjection as part of an all-encompassing concern: *He was thinking in corporate rather than individual terms precisely because he saw self-mastery as serving the cause of the gospel rather than being an end in itself.* Until we recognize this distinction, it is certain that our self-discipline as Christians will merely reflect and express our innate self-concern. Of all men, Paul knew the disastrous consequences of personal “holiness” informed and driven by a natural mind and its perspective and concerns.

The natural mind regards self-mastery *selfishly*. In the case of natural-minded Christians, self-mastery concerns their relationship with God. If not determining their salvation, it at least grants them assurance of it and affords them confidence that God is pleased with them. But authentic self-mastery is Christ's mastery of His own. As such, it doesn't affect our relationship with God; it expresses it. *We take the totality of our lives captive to Christ because this accords with the truth of who we are in relation to the triune God, not in order to secure, prove or enhance that relation.* And conforming to the truth of our identity means serving the cause of the gospel in all things – not just in what we say and do, but in who we are among men and for their sakes.