

Twelve Reasons to Understand 1 Corinthians 7:21-23 as a Call to Gain Freedom

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It is fascinating how Paul explicates the principle of “remaining in one’s place in life” to provide a theological basis for freeing Gentiles from following all the trappings of Jewish Christianity and also for freeing slaves. Thus, although in its wording, this rule appears conservative, in practice, it was a key buttress for Paul’s message of freedom in Christ for the Gentiles. Paul immediately realized that this advice might turn his principle of retaining ones position, intended to give liberty for the Gentiles, into a defense of bondage for slaves. This he will not tolerate, so he immediately gives the exception encouraging freedom where possible. As with the other “but if” exceptions Paul gives in 7:9 and 7:28, for marriage, and in 7:15-16, for divorce, show that this principle is not an absolute rule that always preserves the status quo. Rather, it serves the higher goal of freedom. Paul’s statements about slavery in 1 Cor 7:21-23 show that his underlying goal is liberty: “Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly he who was a freeman when he was called is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men” (7:21-23 NIV).

Although many have interpreted “but if you can gain your freedom, do so” as though it said the opposite,¹ twelve key factors support it to be a call to gain freedom if possible:

¹ S. Scott Bartchy, *ΜΑΛΛΟΝ ΧΡΗΣΑΙ: First-Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7.21* (SBLDS 11; Missoula, Mont.: University of Montana, 1973), 6-7, charts a roughly equal split on this question by major scholars. Convincing rebuttals to the “stay in slavery” view include: Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand

1. It is extremely improbable that Paul, the apostle of liberty, would have recommended that believers choose slavery over freedom. Free people had far greater freedom to do missionary work and contribute to the life of the church.
2. In 1 Cor 7:7, 8, 11, 15, 21, 23, 26, 27, 28, 32-35, 37, 40 Paul recommends an unencumbered life. To advise refusal of manumission would undermine a major theme of this chapter.
3. The introductory word ἀλλ' means "but" and sets the following clause apart as an exception to the principle of remaining in the place to which one is called (7:20-21).² If 1 Cor 7:21 is not interpreted as an exception ἀλλ' has to be interpreted contrary to its standard meaning. If this were merely intensifying the previous command one would expect "and even if..." not "but even if..." None of the versions that advocate staying in slavery give a standard translation for ἀλλ'; most simply omit it.³

Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 315-320; Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1977), 357-61; and J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1882), 324-5, who cites Origen, the earliest commentator, as recommending liberty, as did Severianus, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Beza, Zahn, Schlatter, and almost all versions: NIV, NASB, RSV, JB, NEB, REB, KJV, TEV, CEV, Moffatt, Williams, Fenton, Weymouth, Berkeley, New Berkeley, Amplified, Beck, The New Translation, Philadelphia (1823), and JND (1904). The only versions to support the "stay in slavery" view are Goodspeed, ASV, NAB, Way, and, ambiguously, the NRSV.

² Cf. other exceptions in 1 Cor 7:9, 11, 15, using δέ, and ἀλλὰ is a stronger adversative than δέ.

³ Goodspeed, NAB, NRSV, and Way all have simply "Even if..." The ASV has "nay."

4. The normal meaning of εἰ καὶ in 1 Corinthians is “if indeed”⁴ just as in the exceptions parallel to 1 Cor 7:21 in 1 Cor 7:11 and 28, ἐὰν δὲ καὶ (also in 4:7). Most recent commentators understand this to be not a concessive (“even if”) εἰ καὶ but take the “καὶ closely with δύνασαι: *but if you can secure your freedom, prefer to take the opportunity.*”⁵ The “stay in slavery” view interprets εἰ καὶ to mean “even though,” which is not the meaning of εἰ καὶ anywhere else in 1 Corinthians.
5. The object of the command “rather use [it]” assumes reference to the closest appropriate referent, namely “freedom.”⁶ The “stay in slavery” view is forced to appeal to ellipsis from an earlier reference to “calling,” which Bartchy takes from κλήσει in 7:20.
6. Both the infinitive “to become” and the imperative “make use of” are aorist, suggesting a single action, not present as would be appropriate to convey, “keep using slavery.” Thus Moulton notes, “the aorist χρῆσαι an only be ‘seize the opportunity.’”⁷

⁴ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 317.

⁵ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: CUP, 1971), 167; cf. Robertson and Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), 147; Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889; reprinted Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 356-61, who describes how a “new fact (καὶ) presents itself, which gives a new aspect to the case” so that εἰ καὶ often means “if also,” “if therewith,” or “if however.”

⁶ Cf. Robertson and Plummer, *1 Corinthians*, 147.

7. Here *μᾶλλον* appears to be elative, “by all means,”⁸ and so encourages the use of freedom.
8. The verb “make use of” consistently means “use” in every other Pauline occurrence, including v. 31 of this same chapter and 9:12, 15. This meaning fits “make use of freedom” perfectly. Bartchy is forced to adopt a meaning from Josephus that is foreign to the NT, “live according to [God’s calling]”⁹ To make their sense clear, versions supporting continuing in slavery resort to translations that have no lexical support such as “make the most of” (Goodspeed, NAB) and “keep to” (Way).
9. The following verses (7:22-23) do not give a reason for staying in slavery, but rather for contentment in Christ’s calling. Indeed, 7:23 commands, “do not become slaves of men” and so reinforces Paul’s preference for freedom.
10. The structure of the 1 Corinthians 7 as a whole and of 7:17-24 in particular¹⁰ supports that Paul intends 7:21b to deal with a genuine exception to the principle, just as 7:9, 11, 15, 28, and 39b deal with genuine exceptions to principles.

⁷ James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek Vol. I Prolegomena* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), 1:247, who cites Origen as supporting this reading, cited by Claude Jenkins, “Origen on 1 Corinthians,” *JTS* 9 (1908): 508. Cf. also Moule, *Idiom Book*, 21; Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek Vol. III Syntax* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 76; Robertson and Plummer, *1 Corinthians*, 147-48.

⁸ Moulton and Howard, *Grammar*, 2:165.

⁹ Bartchy, *Slavery*, 155-59, who translates it, “But if indeed you become manumitted, by all means [as a freedman] live according to [God’s calling].”

¹⁰ Cf. Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 315.

11. Bartchy's thorough analysis has found no historical evidence that a slave could refuse freedom.¹¹ Since slaves apparently had no option of refusing manumission, it would make no sense for Paul to say, "Even supposing you could go free, you would be better off making the most of your slavery." (NAB)

12. It would not make sense that Paul would enjoin Philemon to accept Onesimus "no longer as a slave" (Phlm 16) but tell the Corinthian slaves to reject the opportunity to become free.

It is a testimony to Paul's commitment to freedom that he would command slaves to gain their freedom if they can in the midst of promoting the principle of retaining the situation in life to which God has called one. Since Christ purchased their redemption, Paul commands believers, "do not become (imperative *μὴ γίνεσθε*) slaves of men" (7:23). Even "Don't let it [being a slave] trouble you" (7:21) has a libertarian ring since the justification for this contentment is their knowledge that in Christ they are free men. Paul's advocacy of gaining freedom from slavery, if possible, parallels his words to a believer whose marriage partner leaves, "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances" (1 Cor 7:15 NIV¹²). As in the case of slavery, when God provides a way to escape the bond, the believer is no longer bound. God's calling is for peace (7:15), which is a guiding principle that is usually enhanced by gaining freedom. The principle, after all, is to remain in the situation *to which God calls* believers (7:17, 20, 24). God calls believers to peace, and a slave called by the Lord "is the Lord's freedman" (7:22). The acceptance of God's calling to peace may entail accepting a new situation that God provides.

¹¹ Bartchy, *Slavery*, 62-120.

¹² Cf. Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 302, especially n. 31, argues that Paul does permit divorce in this case.

The “house tables”¹³ in Eph 6:5-9 and Col 3:22-25 that address slaves both conclude with an emphasis on the principle that “there is no favoritism with God” (Eph 6:9; Col 3:25), a principle that strikes at the heart of discrimination and provides just grounds for abolishing slavery. These “house codes” assure slaves that God will reward them for the good they do (Eph 6:8; Col 3:24). Paul’s call to slaves to obey their earthly masters as they would obey Christ (Eph 6:5-7; Col 3:22-24) does not contradict Paul’s encouragement to gain freedom if they can in 1 Cor 7:21, especially since in the Roman world slaves often could gain their freedom by being loyal. Many slave “owners guaranteed [manumission] in their will as a reward for loyal service.”¹⁴ Consequently, loyal service was the best recipe for freedom. The early church followed Paul’s command to pursue liberty. “One of the earliest forms which Christian benevolence took was the contribution of funds for the liberation of slaves.”¹⁵

Paul applies the parallel¹⁶ “there is no slave or free” in Col 3:11-12 to the practical life of the church by commanding masters in Col 4:1 to give their slaves “justice and equality (ἰσότης, BAG 382, entailing at least fairness),” and Col 3:25-4:1 warns, “Anyone who does wrong will be

¹³ Cf. above pp. qqq [Eph 5:23 first section].

¹⁴ David Brian Davis, “Slavery,” in *The World Book Encyclopedia* (Chicago: World Book, 1992) 17:502-3.

¹⁵ Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, 326, citing Ignatius, *Polycarp* 4, and *Apostolic Constitutions* 4. 9.

¹⁶ Cf. above pp. qqq 2-3 [Gal 3:28].

repaid for his wrong... you know that you also have a Master in heaven.” So practical application is to be expected of the closely parallel “there is no slave or free” in Gal 3:28.

Similarly, in Eph 6:9 Paul commands, “masters, treat your slaves in the same way” (Eph 6:9). This demands at least that they treat them “with sincerity of heart,” “do the will of God from your heart,” and do “good” to them. Paul concludes 6:9, “Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.” Here Paul argues that since God does not show favorites, masters must treat their slaves well and with respect. Paul’s explicit opposition to threatening slaves undermines the primary means of perpetuating slavery: fear. His statements not only curb abuses of slavery, they establish a basis for respect for human dignity that ultimately is incompatible with slavery.¹⁷

Paul gives both of these passages, like Gal 3:28,¹⁸ a new creation context that emphasizes the new social reality they introduce. Col 3:10-11 states “you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no ... slave or free.” Similarly, Eph 4:22-23 states, “put off your old self, ... be made new in the attitude of your minds, and put on the new self.”

Paul’s letter to Philemon appeals using all the social pressure and personal influence he can muster to make Philemon receive a runaway slave named Onesimus “no longer (οὐκέτι) as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (16). Meyer is correct to say, “we have to leave

¹⁷ Han Dieter Betz, *Galatians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 190 states, “There can be no doubt that Paul’s statements have social and political implications of even a revolutionary dimension.”

¹⁸ Cf. below, pp. qqq [Gal 3:28 end]

οὐκέτι absolute, and not to weaken it by μόνον [no longer only] to be mentally supplied.”¹⁹ The fact that Philemon must receive Onesimus back “forever” (αἰώνιον 15) in this new relationship excludes slavery,²⁰ which would be limited to this life, and stresses that Philemon must receive Onesimus back in the new status of “brother.” Some, trying to avoid the negation of the status of slave inherent in “no longer as a slave,” have proposed a dichotomy in which slavery as social status might continue for Onesimus modified only by the addition of equality in spiritual relations. Paul, however, strips away this dichotomy in this same sentence by stating that Onesimus is a beloved brother to Philemon both in the material (ἐν σαρκί) and spiritual (ἐν κυρίῳ) realms. Meyer correctly insists, “The two domains of life designated by ἐν σαρκί and ἐν κυρίῳ—which, connected by καί... καί, exclude the conception of ethical contrast—are to be left in all their comprehensiveness.”²¹ It is precisely because of the pervasive unifying influence of Christ that both fleshly and spiritual relations are transformed. Paul commands Philemon, “if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ... I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self” (17-19). Paul makes it clear that “I would have liked to keep him with me so

¹⁹ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-book to the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, and to Philemon* (6th ed.; trans. John C. Moore and William P. Dickson; NY: Funk & Wagnells, 1884) 410 n. 1.

²⁰ Meyer, *Philemon*, 409-410, acknowledges that eternity embraces the expiring age and the coming age “but not, that the Christian brotherly union reaches into eternity.” This self-contradictory interpretation is crucial to his conclusion that “not a hint of *manumission*” is implied by Paul. Cf. also Godet’s critique in *I Corinthians*, 357-61.

²¹ Meyer, *Philemon*, 410.

that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel” (14). With this in mind he concludes, “refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask” (20-21). “Obedience” here most naturally refers to Philemon receiving Onesimus back for eternity no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother. It would trivialize it to limit it to a welcome for Onesimus back into slavery or some refreshment to be provided for Paul. Nor is the “obedience” Paul expects an invoice for damages. Paul makes it clear that he intends Philemon to free Onesimus and accept a new relationship to Onesimus not as slave²² but as brother. Paul’s confidence that Philemon will do even more is a hint to underwrite Onesimus’s return to help Paul in prison. To bring to bear the maximum community pressure Paul addresses the letter not just to Philemon but also to “Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home” (2). He even commands, “Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you.” If Philemon does not emancipate Onesimus, he can look forward to an embarrassing visit. Paul then lists five highly-respected church leaders who send greetings and so presumably know about this request (23-24). This is a clear case in which Paul is willing to risk all his “capital” with an influential church leader to pressure him to free a slave. Godet writes, “This passage may certainly be called the first petition in favour of the abolition of slavery.” It is, of course, directly addressed at one particular slave’s manumission and is not a call for a social revolution. The way in which Paul contrasts the status of slavery (“no longer as a slave”) to the status of beloved brother in the Lord, however, points to the tension between these two that tends to undermine slavery in general. The oneness in Christ in which “there is no slave or free” had serious practical consequences for Paul. To interpret Gal 3:28 as though it means simply that slaves like free

²² Cf. Godet, *1 Corinthians*, 361.

people, can be saved, but that their social barriers are unaffected is to trivialize the social implications of Gal 3:28 for slaves and free persons in Christ. In the fellowship of Christ's body, one's socio-economic status as a slave or free person is irrelevant.

Slaves who became church leaders exemplify the equal standing of slaves in the church. Within a half century of Paul's writing the letter of Philemon,²³ Ign. *Eph.* 1:3 speaks highly of "Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love and your bishop." Onesimus was a common slave's name and so exemplifies this, whether or not this bishop of Ephesus was formerly Philemon's slave. The Muratorian Canon, lines 73-77 identifies Pius I, Bishop of Rome, either as a slave or the brother of the slave Hermas, the author of the *Shepherd*. Similarly, Hippolytus, Haer. 9.11f. says that Callixtus, bishop of Rome AD 217-222, was an ex-slave. All of these factors, contextual, parallel passages, and historical application, make an extraordinarily strong case that Paul intended Gal 3:28's "there is no slave or free" to be practically implemented in the church and, correspondingly, that his call for the manumission of Onesimus was indeed his intent.

²³ Philemon was written about AD 61 or 62. Eusebius's *chronicon* dates the martyrdom of Ignatius in AD 108.