

Work in Freedom not Slavery

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on 1 Corinthians

In answering the question, “What should believers who are slaves do if they have the chance to gain freedom?” Paul makes an important statement about calling and work.

Slavery in the ancient world was a complex phenomenon that is by no means identical to its modern manifestations. Modern slavery always diminishes the lives of those enslaved. But in Paul’s context, while slavery was heinous in many cases, some slaves were better off, at least economically, than many free people. Many educated people, including doctors and accountants, chose slavery for economic reasons. Thus, for Paul, it was a genuinely open question whether slavery or freedom would be the better lot in any given situation.

Paul's question then is not whether slavery should be abolished, but whether slaves should seek to become free. It is difficult to determine the precise nature of Paul’s instruction here because the Greek of 1 Corinthians 7:21 is ambiguous, so much so that it is open to two divergent interpretations. As a number of commentators understand it, it should be rendered as follows: “Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present

condition now more than ever” (1 Corinthians 7:21, NRSV). Equally possible (and more likely, in our opinion), however, is the sense given in the NIV, NASB, and KJV, which is, “Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so” (1 Corinthians 7:21, NIV). Whatever Paul’s advice, his underlying belief is that, compared to the difference between being in Christ and not in Christ, the difference between being a slave and a free person is relatively minor. “For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ” (1 Corinthians 7:22). Thus, if there are no compelling reasons to change your status, it is probably best to remain in the situation in which you were called.

Paul’s teaching here has important application for the workplace. While we may feel that getting the right job is the most important factor in serving God or experiencing the life he intends for us, God is much more concerned that we make the most of every job we have over the course of our lives. In a given instance, there may be good reasons to change jobs or even professions. Go ahead and do so. Yet any morally legitimate job can fulfill God’s calling, so don’t make finding your life’s work into your life’s work. There is no hierarchy of more godly and less godly professions.

No matter what profession you choose, you have a right to enjoy the fruits of your labor. Paul explains this in 1 Corinthians Chapter 9. He begins by asserting the right of workers, including apostles, to receive wages for their work. We serve the Lord in our work, and the Lord intends that we draw sustenance from it in return. Paul quotes Deuteronomy in support of his argument. “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain” (Deuteronomy 25:4). If even animals deserve a share of the fruits of their labor, then surely any person who participates in bringing about some benefit should share in that benefit.

This text has clear implications for the workplace, especially for employers. Workers deserve a fair wage. In fact, the Bible threatens employers with dire consequences if they deny their employees just compensation. A variety of factors affect the determination of a fair wage, and Paul does not try to prescribe a figure or formula. Supply and demand, regulation and unionization, wages and benefits, and power and flexibility in today’s labor markets make simple prescriptions complex. But the principle is not. Those who employ human labor cannot neglect the needs of those whose work they employ.

As it happens, God has made it possible for Paul to earn a living in Corinth by introducing him to fellow tentmakers (or leatherworkers), Priscilla and Aquila. Paul doesn’t expect that God will arrange things so that all church

workers can afford to work for free. But in this case, God did, and Paul accepts God's provision with thanks. The point is that only the worker has the right to offer to work without fair remuneration. The employer has no right to demand it.