

“PAUL, SLAVE OF JESUS CHRIST.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Romans 1:1-2

Prayer: Holy Father, grant us now a humble spirit to hear your Word and receive it as your eternal truth. Draw back to yourself all who have strayed from your wisdom and will.

Introduction.

Last week I read from Philippians 3 where Paul tells us the credentials he used to introduce himself before his dramatic conversion/transformation.

I am a Hebrew of Hebrews, belonging to the people of Israel, to the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Pharisee. I am righteous under the law, blameless. I am more zealous than my peers.

Paul could have introduced himself to the Romans saying, I am the greatest apostle, the first great missionary, who has suffered more than all the other apostles, planter of many churches, doing great works and miracles for God, author of more books in the NT than anyone else.

Paul begins this letter with three phrases that are his new set of credentials, the new letters after his name. This is Paul's view of himself. Notice how different these credentials are to the ones he gave in Philippians 3. What a transformation.

A slave of Christ Jesus.

Called to be an apostle.

Set apart for the Gospel of God.

Paul, a slave of Christ.

Slave. What do you think when you hear that word? Does your mind go back to a horrible time in our history? Do you think of something humiliating and shameful? Slavery was rampant in Paul's day, why would he chose that word to describe his view of himself, a slave?

Let's unpack this word which is filled with meaning and application.

First, the Greek word is *doulos*, it only and always means slave. It should not be translated servant. There is another Greek word for servant. So why do most of our English Bibles translate it servant or bondservant? Why are translators afraid of the “s” word, slave?

Translators soften the word to servant out of fear of offending our western sensitivities Bible. They cover up or obscure the true meaning of this word, doing us a disservice and committing a great injustice against the inspired Word of God. Check the footnotes for the true translation.

Servant and slave don't mean the same thing. A servant has freedom to do what he pleases. He can perform his duties and then return home to live however he pleases. A slave is bound, subject to the will of another, and completely dependent on his lord.

Second, the Greek word *doulos*, is the word we get *doula* from. ***What is a doula?*** A doula is a woman who helps another woman do the hardest work of her life, a slave to the woman in labor. A lot of doulas aren't doulas, they think they are experts, they want you to know how important they are and they take charge. A true doula sees herself as a slave to the woman in labor, she is there to do whatever the woman wants, to let it be about the woman having a baby.

Paul sees himself as a doula of Christ, it was not about him, it was all about Jesus.

“This is what I am, this is who I am. First and foremost. This is the most important thing you need to know about me who is writing this letter to you. Whatever else you might remember about me or know about my past, remember this first.”

Paul's life revolves around Jesus, Paul isn't just introducing us to himself, he is introducing us to his Master. In the first seven verses of his introduction to Romans he mentions Jesus six times.

The mark of a person who is growing in God's grace is they talk less about themselves and more about Jesus. Paul thinks of himself as a slave of Jesus Christ.

What does he mean by that title? Several things.

First, a slave is a person who has been bought for a price. You are no longer your own.

The price was blood. Christians are not “ransomed” or “redeemed” or purchased “with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1Peter 1:18-19).

No person can make themselves a Christian. Every person starts out born a slave to sin, a slave to Satan. We are only liberated from that bondage by the blood of Jesus, who is our liberator and redeemer. We are bought, we have a new Master and Lord.

Second, this is not just a one-way street. Christ owns Paul and Paul also delights to be owned. He is captured, but he is also captivated, devoted.

Paul freely, openly, even proudly says he is a slave of Christ Jesus. I am a slave, but I am a willing slave. I want no other master. He is my master and I am his slave.

Romans 14:7 I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me.

Are you a willing slave of your master Jesus Christ? Has He captivated you? Has He won you over? Is there nothing you would rather be than known as a slave to Christ Jesus? Paul glories in being able to say, first and foremost, I am a slave to Jesus.

Third, there is a certain dignity or honor to be a slave of an important person.

In Caesar's palace there were more than four thousand slaves serving Caesar's household. They proudly bore the title slave of Caesar. They had the highest rank among slaves. No doubt some of them were part of the church in Rome.

Paul declares himself Christ's slave, having been given this honor by Jesus Himself, and with that honor he has the authority of his master. Jesus has employed Paul as His slave to build His church and His kingdom. To be a slave of Christ is the highest honor. Paul is honored to be counted worthy to be a slave of so great a master.

Fourth, what about the verse that say we are free in Christ Jesus?

II Corinthians 3:17 The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

How do you explain that verse with we are slaves to Christ? The paradox of being a slave to Christ, is that it is also the greatest freedom you can know. Every other freedom is actually bondage apart from Christ. Slavery to Christ is a unique type of slavery. It is a slavery through which we are made free.

A train on the tracks is more free than a train off the tracks. Being a slave to Christ is what we were created for, what most fits who we are.

Fifth, slave is the universal meaning of the word *doulos* and the one word in the Bible that most uniquely describes a believer's relationship to Christ, what is true of a slave is true of a Christian.

“The fundamental aspects of slavery are the very features of our redemption that Scripture puts the most stress on. We are chosen (Eph. 1:4 – 5; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:9); bought (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23); owned by our Master (Rom. 14:7 – 9; 1 Cor. 6:19; Titus 2:14); subject to the Master's will and control over us (Acts 5:29; Rom. 6:16 – 19; Phil. 2:5 – 8); and totally dependent on the Master for everything in our lives (2 Cor. 9:8 – 11; Phil. 4:19). We will ultimately be called to account (Rom. 14:12); evaluated (2 Cor. 5:10); and either chastened or rewarded by Him (Heb. 12:5 – 11; 1 Cor. 3:14). Those are all essential components of slavery” (John MacArthur).

Do we see ourselves in the same light? Bought and paid for, the exclusive property of Jesus Christ? Do we think of ourselves as always under His authority?

Or do we still demand our rights, insist on our way, want our freedoms to do what we want the way we want, a right “to look at whatever we please or think whatever we please or sleep with whomever we please or spend our money however we please or pursue whatever career or course in life as suits our fancy.”

May we embrace our highest calling to be a humble slave to Jesus, submitted to His will. May He master us in everything.

Called to be an apostle.

So Paul is a slave of Christ Jesus, and to that he adds he is a particular kind of slave, he is an apostle. And not just any apostle, but one called out by God. This is a unique calling.

There are those who claim the title for themselves, but Paul is not one of those. He is not self-appointed, he has been called and appointed by God Himself. It is a title only Jesus can give. It is not like the offices of pastor, elder, deacon, which can be conferred by the laying on of the hands of men.

As I tried to make clear last week, this calling is one of the most astonishing miracles in history. That Christ should lay hold of one of His greatest adversaries and call Him to be one of His chosen apostles.

Apostle means one who is sent by another with their authority on a mission.

An apostle's words are empowered with the divine, infallible Spirit which leads them to speak the truth. By placing this title at the beginning of the letter, Paul is saying this letter has the divine imprimatur, the stamp of divine authority. This is the Word of God. Listen to this.

Paul doesn't take this authority for himself but receives it from God. He never considered himself worthy of the call or title. What God does and what Paul receives is pure grace.

Paul knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was called by God. There was no question in his mind. I call this a sense of God-appointedness. It makes all the difference.

Think about how many times in the midst of some great persecution, beating, attack, imprisonment Paul could have questioned himself, maybe he made a wrong choice or went a wrong direction. No, he never doubted, he knew God called him, and he knew God was sovereign and Lord over every circumstance.

Do you have a clear sense of God-appointedness about who you are and where you are and what you are doing?

It is humbling to consider that from before our birth, indeed from before the foundations of the earth, God had purposed according to the counsels of His own will to bring us to salvation when and how He did.

God knows you, God knows your life, your destiny, His purposes for you. As the Psalmist says:

Psalm 139:6, 17-18 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.
17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
18 If I would count them, they are more than the sand.

Set apart for the Gospel of God.

Paul follows the first two titles with yet a clearer explanation of the kind of apostle he is. His commission was to preach the Gospel, and later we will hear a further clarification of that, he is to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles.

The word pharisee means one who is separated. Separated from the world, separated from Gentiles, separated from irreligious Jews, separated for the study of the law of God.

Paul had been a Pharisee of his own doing, separating himself from all others to study the law. Now he was a Gospel Pharisee, separated by God. From one separation to a far greater one.

Galatians 1:15-16 ... he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.

Acts 13:2-3 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

To be set apart is to draw a line in the sand and to take a stand on one side or the other. It is to move from one side to the other.

Are there separations in our lives, great transitions from the old to the new?

From living for our flesh to living in the Spirit for Jesus.

From loving sin to hating sin.

From sexual immorality to sexual purity.

From worldly thinking and desires to godly thinking and desires.

From living selfishly to living selflessly.

From unwholesome words coming from our mouth to wholesome words coming from our mouth.

Implications and application.

What strikes you about those three phrases? What hits you right away?

We think this letter is about Paul, but it's not. He has been bought by someone else, called by someone else, set apart by someone else. Paul is not his own. This is not about who Paul is, but whose Paul is.

That is the reality we all need to come to grips with, not who am I, but whose am I. We are not our own, we belong body and soul in life and in death to another, to the one who created us, to the one who made us in His image, to the one who came and died for us.

I have a question for the children here, for the students here, the young adults, for all of us. Whose are you? Who are you living for? Who are you trying to please? When will we stop living for ourselves and what we want, and start living for the one to whom we belong?

The greatest and most important question is always a biography question. Who are you and what are you doing here? Do you know who you are? What do you say about yourself?

Do you know the meaning and significance of your life? What is your calling? We often apply such words to the ministry or missionary service, but that is too limited.

We all have a divine calling. We have all be called by God and set apart by God to belong body and soul to Jesus Christ. Each of us has a calling from God to be carried out for His glory and for the benefit of others.

Calling is the truth that God is God, God is our creator, God is the potter, and that He calls us to Himself so decisively, that everything we are, everything we have, everything we do is invested with special significance, meaning, purpose. We either live in submission to it or in rebellion against it. We either live for this higher calling or we live for ourselves.

Colossians 3:17 Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.