

Drew Dyck wrote in his Church Humor blog this week: I saw a disturbing video a few days ago. It was grainy cell phone footage shot inside a French grocery store where a riot broke out. What made the French—not exactly known for their warring spirit—lose their cool? Nutella. You know, that nutty, chocolaty spread people put on toast and pretend that it’s somehow different from putting a snickers bar on a piece of bread?

Well, apparently the Nutella was 70 percent off. And since the supply was limited, the French pushed, elbowed, and tackled their countrymen before it was gone. All without even saying *excusez-moi*. As I witnessed the melee I started wondering how we could use Nutella’s powers for good.

Then it hit me: let’s give away Nutella at church. Lots of it. We try all kinds of other gimmicky things to get people to come out. What about free Nutella? That just might work. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t bring in Millennials. They’re the ones driving the bizarre (and costly) avocado on toast trend. That’s OK. More Nutella for the rest of us.

What people in Corinth were demanding in Paul’s day is the very same as what people in every tribe and culture and country have demanded since Pharaoh let the Hebrews go: IT’S FREEDOM. In the ancient world people were purchased for freedom (out of slavery) or for service (into slavery). The New Testament is full of slavery. In fact, if you have a translation of the Bible that translates the Greek word *doulos*, as “servants,” change most of them to “slaves.” There were few “servants” in the ancient world, and they had a word for them: *hirelings or hired servants*. Even though slavery was rampant in the ancient world, slaves could hold responsible jobs for their masters; some were political emissaries, even doctors and teachers. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9, links salvation to slavery. This is surely a paradox of the Christian faith—two opposites that don’t seem to fit together: *freed by Christ and yet enslaved by Christ*.

In the New Testament the word most used for “church” means “the assembly of the free.” Christ set us free, yet Paul calls himself, if not all Christians, *slaves*. Paul is in the middle of explaining why he does not take compensation from the Corinthian church. Paul’s calling is to proclaim the good news about Christ. He is not motivated by either reward or punishment. The gift of evangelism has permeated and enveloped his person. He experiences it as an obligation and a commission from Christ. Thus, he had better do what he is told! If one must put Paul’s preaching within the concept of reward, then yes, he has his reward or wages. His being able to share the good news that changes people’s lives forever, and to do it without being paid for it—that is reward enough. Because Christ has set him free from sin and death and the negative consequences of the law, Paul is free to become a slave to everyone, which means serving everyone, in order to bring them to Christ.

Whether speaking in a Jewish or non-Jewish idiom or living within a Jewish or non-Jewish culture he adapts in order to attract people to Christ’s grace. If people do not live within Jewish ritual laws, Paul will disregard such regulations in order to live and communicate with them about Christ. He is not breaking a moral law but operating upon the wider principle of Christ’s love for all, which is Christ’s “law.” If someone is weak (as we talked about in chapter 8) about whether one can eat food offered to idols, Paul will for their sake “become weak” and not eat the food offered to idols. Paul makes every accommodation to cultural and non-moral differences in order to convert people to Christ.

In verse 18 he states that he lives as he does “*so as not to make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.*” This is a somewhat sad and confusing word for Americans who have been taught that they

possess “rights” and that we should all demand our rights. I have my rights! If Paul were going to turn his thinking in the direction of “rights,” he would probably suggest we expend our energies in securing and defending the rights of others, not our own.

He also suggests that some people who change according to the situation do so because they are weak, others because they are hypocritical. Paul is not a chameleon, changing colors against the newest cultural background. He is a camouflaged agent of Christ, infiltrating the world with good news. Underneath the external differences that he puts on and takes off depending on the company he keeps is the heart of an evangelist. His dual concern is to be faithful to his gracious Lord and to share the joyous news of what his Lord can do for others.

In his letter to the Galatians he reports that Peter tried to do the same, but it was not so thoroughly Peter’s gift as it was Paul’s (2:11-14). Paul does not write about engaging in risky moral behavior. Elsewhere he states clearly, “*abstain from every form of evil.*” Here he refers to the kind of behavior the ancient Greeks called “*indifferent.*” Christian theologians have made healthy use of this concept after Paul, and even though various Christian groups chalk different activities on the “*indifferent*” board, all of us use the standard of judging behavior that is neither necessary nor forbidden—whether we do so consciously or unconsciously.

By stating that he is compelled to preach and that he therefore does not do it voluntarily, Paul is explaining why he’s not looking for a paycheck from the Corinthians. (Dale B. Martin, *Slavery As Salvation: The Metaphor Of Slavery in Pauline Christianity*, p. 71).

Martin Luther once said, “A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” He’s echoing the same experience as Paul’s, and to be totally transparent, it is an experience, not just a thought. Let’s paraphrase: “Christians are free, subject to none. Christians are the most dutiful slaves, subject to all.”

He’s expressing the great freedom we have in Christ and the complementary truth that we are Christ’s servants: Free to do anything we want, along with our bound duty to others. You might not be able to follow the reasoning well if you were sitting in a logic class, but it’s true nonetheless. Paul explains to his church that as a free person he can do anything he wishes. Yet he’s free *in Christ* and therefore he doesn’t want to do just anything, because not everything is helpful for others. Not everything is beneficial to the family of God if it doesn’t build up Christians in faith, hope, and love. Paul wishes to build up the church, not dominate people. He doesn’t try to turn people into *his* slaves.

It doesn’t take many years in ministry to start recognizing the people in churches who want to dominate others, not necessarily in doctrine, but more I would say in how things are done. You’ll find Christians who try to dominate and make life miserable for others who don’t quite agree with them about the right way to take up the offering; the right color of the sanctuary carpet; the right way to say, or not to say, the Lord’s Prayer; the right songs to sing; the right way to arrange Christmas lights; the right hours to hold worship; the right way to take communion; the right recipe for the Lenten soup; and these are just a few of the minor things. Let that person become a theologian, and pretty soon we’ll all have one final chance to do the right thing before judgment day. Really what these people exhibit is the pride of wanting things done *their way*.

There’s even a tiny miniscule itsy bitsy chance that you’ve known pastors like this (Wink, wink), Take heart, there are non-Christians like this too! Paul doesn’t spend his time trying to get everything in

Corinth to go his way. If he has an independent opinion, he's careful to note that it's his idea and not something that came to him from the Lord. He tries to win people to Christ. He has many acquaintances, and his intention is that all of them understand and trust Christ. Therefore, he in many cases, goes along with what they think is important. You think Saturday is the right day to worship? I'll worship on Saturday with you. You think that it's right to stay away from meat that's been offered in sacrifice to pagan gods? I won't eat meat.

He's free to live this way. He's free in Christ. For the sake of others, he defers on matters that aren't centrally important. All so that he might convince them to believe in Jesus Christ. He doesn't tell us exactly how we are to live in every single situation. He believes that Christ cared about God's will and the good of all people. That's the place to start. Paul gives us both the advice and the example of someone who tried his hardest to live for God and others, as Jesus did.

Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life for many. He died as slaves die. He was rich but he became poor for our sakes. Are we serving ourselves and our inordinate ego needs so life goes our way? Do we serve our church in the same way, just so we can get our way in things? Paul doesn't give cookie-cutter answers. We each have to figure out how to live for our Lord today. So I suggest an old motto that comes from Augustine about how to live and think about these things: "*Love God and do as you please.*" Let's keep our freedom and never fight over the Nutella!! Besides, doing as Augustine says should keep us busy for the rest of our lives. Amen.