

1 Corinthians 7:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather.

Analysis

Art thou called being a servant? care not for it—the term *doulos* (δοῦλος, "slave") refers to actual slavery, a fundamental institution in Roman society. Paul's command *mé soi meletō* (μή σοι μελέτω, "let it not be a concern to you") urges slaves not to let their status trouble them spiritually. Freedom in Christ transcends earthly bondage.

However, Paul adds **but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather**. The phrase *all' ei kai dynasai eleutheros genesthai* (ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ δύνασαι ἐλεύθερος γενέσθαι) with *chrēsai mallon* (χρῆσαι μᾶλλον, "make use of it rather") has been debated: "use" what?

1. Use your freedom if offered, or
2. make use of your slavery.

Most interpret (1): if freedom is available, take it.

Paul's teaching balances contentment in one's calling with prudent pursuit of improvement when possible. Slaves should not despair in their status, nor should they feel obligated to remain slaves when freedom is attainable. This reflects Paul's pastoral realism: spiritual freedom in Christ is paramount, but earthly freedom is also good and worth pursuing.

Historical Context

Slavery was ubiquitous in the Roman Empire, with perhaps 20-30% of the population enslaved. The early church included many slaves (Philemon, Onesimus; Colossians 3:22-4:1). Paul's teaching did not directly oppose slavery as an institution but affirmed slaves' full dignity in Christ while permitting pursuit of freedom.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does Paul's teaching balance spiritual contentment in slavery with the legitimate desire for freedom?
2. What does it mean that slaves are "free in the Lord" even while physically enslaved?
3. How should this verse inform Christian attitudes toward social justice and systemic oppression?

Interlinear Text

δοῦλος	ἐκλήθης	μή	σοι	μελέτω·	ἀλλ'	εἰ	καὶ
being a servant	Art thou called	not	G4671	care	but	G1487	G2532
G1401	G2564	G3361		G3199	G235		
δύνασαι	ἐλεύθερος	γενέσθαι	μᾶλλον	χρῆσαι			
thou mayest	free	be made	it rather	use			
G1410	G1658	G1096	G3123	G5530			

Additional Cross-References

Colossians 3:11 (Parallel theme): Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.

1 Corinthians 12:13 (Creation): For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

Luke 12:29 (Parallel theme): And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind.

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