

## Devotion on 1 Corinthians 7:20-24 (LTS in Tshwane, 2015-09-16, Werner Klän)

At first sight, this passage seems to be a very conservative political program. Everybody should stick to the calling that he/she has found him-/herself in. Nothing should change, seemingly. Does Paul really tell us so? If we look more thoroughly at the apostle's words we find at least two hints that make us aware of a deeper understanding. On the surface, it seems as though everything should be as it is, and in all eternity. No changes, no alterations. But this would be a rather superficial perception. For in one remark, Paul obviously allows changes, particularly to those who became Christians being slaves: "If you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity" (v. 21b). Thus, changes in personal life, and we may conclude, in social life, are not excluded right from the outset, not even in Christian ethics. Another remark Paul makes here, is equally striking: "Do not become slaves of men" (v. 23b). That means, even under the conditions of slavery, there must be room for some kind of freedom, over against the masters. Moreover, on a spiritual level, the realities of freedom and slavery have been altered for those Christians in Corinth foundationally.

The conditions of earthly life may not have changed for those who belong to Christ, but in terms of their spiritual life, everything has changed, and dramatically so. Those who had been living as slaves to sin, death, and the devil, have been liberated from those fatal conditions of life. Those who were not in the position to act out what may be labelled their "free will" have been freed from the bonds that linked them to the powers of destruction. Those who were far from being able to get to any kind of self-determination, due to the down-keeping might of those masters hostile to God, have now been called to be God's children. In this regard, in terms of our relationship with God, the changes that apply to us cannot be overestimated.

These changes are radical, because they go down to the roots of our very existence. When Christ called us to be His brothers and sisters, when God called us to be His children, when the Holy Spirit called us to be members of God's family – all of which happened the very day we were baptised –, the links that tied us to those old masters, were cut, and the bondage we had been kept in from the day we were begotten, came to its end. The state of slavery that had ruled over us since the day we were born was abandoned on the very day, when Christ embraced us with all His salutary might and His salvific love. When God reached out for us in Christ, the Gospel message reached us; when faith was created in us, God's calling reached His goal: We were enabled by His Word and Spirit to grasp this liberating message.

That is why Martin Luther teaches in the Large Catechism: "Those tyrants and jailers are all expelled now. In their place has come Jesus Christ, Lord of life, righteousness, every blessing, and salvation. He has delivered us poor, lost people from the hell's haws, has made us free, and has brought us again into the Father's favour and grace." This is the biblical, spiritual meaning of Christian freedom. And indeed, if and when we are freed from sin, death, and the devil for the sake of Christ through faith, we are free people.

Not necessarily does this spiritual fact change our social or civic positions. Over a long period in history, e.g., verses like these from St. Paul, were used by political leaders, often supported by their court clergy, to support suppression, to advocate exploitation and inequality in the field of economy and social life. South Africa in the years of the apartheid regime is an example to that. But it is not the only one. Slavery was abandoned in the United

States of America only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the old German guild laws a carpenter's son had to become a carpenter, a son of a peasant would always be a peasant, and a child of a bondservant remained a bondservant, a slave by law, and it was said, on the grounds of divine law, too, according to the word: "Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called."

We have to admit that Paul does not advocate revolutionary means; nor does he support slaves in running away from their masters. His letter to Philemon shows the apostle's attitude quite clearly. He admonishes the runaway slave Onesimus after (and because) he has come to faith, to go back to Philemon, his master whom he had left. At the same time, he recommends to the master to receive the former slave now that he has become a Christian, as a Christian brother. The social order is not put upside down. But it is revolutionized from the inside, when a master meets his servant as a brother, and a servant is allowed to worship their Lord Jesus Christ together with his master. But this is the crucial point: In Christ, by virtue of Holy Baptism, there is "neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free", etc. but we are "all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28).

The reason why in the Christian congregation, things may lead to different attitudes than those we experience in our average economic and social life, is Christian love. It is out of this love that a believer is a free lord over everything in faith, and at the same time, a subservient servant of all, like Martin Luther puts it in his tract on Christian Freedom from the year 1520. We do know from history that the peasants in the age of the reformation misunderstood Luther in taking this biblical-theological rule for a political, or even revolutionary program. And in the mindsets of the princes and rulers, on the other hand, the sentiment for social justice was lacking for the most part. This led to the Peasants' War in 1525 with a huge bloodshed on the side of the peasants with thousands of them being killed in the battle at Frankenhausen.

What St. Paul, and Martin Luther with him, are aiming at is a "revolution of the heart". Liberated from the powers of destruction, we are no longer forced to strive for self-realization. Instead, we feel free to serve – to serve the Lord and to serve the neighbour. For the evil powers would impede us from both – from serving the Lord and from leading a life of love for the people next to us. Under the rule of those masters, we were enslaved into self-centered strategies, revolving around ourselves and pursuing our own goals, often at the cost of others and their well-being. There cannot be much of a doubt that we are living in an age of greed, all over the globe, especially in the economy. The Gross National Product (GNP) has to increase, otherwise the stock markets will start sliding, tumbling, collapsing. This seems to be the ultimate law in the world, be it the U.S., be it Europe, be it China – an immutable law, commanded by the deities of the economy: It always has to be more. And you can see it in the shareholders, in the bankers, in the politicians with the Dollar signs in their eyes: greed, greed and avarice. But are we really free from such intentions?

Some people, even scholars talk about an age of addiction that we are living in. And addiction is not only about alcohol and drugs. People can become addicted to nearly anything: sex, eating, and, of course, money. There is a very simple definition to the term "addiction", which I have learned from a German singer-songwriter who himself was an alcohol, cannabis, and heroine addict, Konstantin Wecker; he even was sent to jail because of drug abuse, but it seems as though he were sober nowadays. The definition simply

sounds: "Enough is not enough, enough will never suffice." ("Genug ist nicht genug; genug kann nicht genügen.") It always has to be more: More income, more money, more opportunities, more success, a bigger car, a nicer home, and so on, and so on. There are trends and tendencies within ourselves that are not alien to such craving for more and ever more.

The "revolution of the heart", however, enables us to be content with what we have got, and even share what we have got with others who are in need. Thus we are empowered to acknowledge the legitimate rights of others; we are in the position to identify injustice and to help minimizing it; we are able to see and perceive the needs and necessities of fellow-Christians, and can try to think of means to mend them. It may well cost us something, if we turn to others and mind their deficiencies, if we engage in supporting them, be it in terms of material things, money, or housing, be it in terms of comforting those who mourn, or in terms of time we would have to spend listening to their sorrows and complaints. We may have to share earthly goods, or time, or empathy. But this would be nothing but implementing what it means to be a slave to Christ, like He has taught us in His words on the final judgement: "What you did to one of the least of these my brothers, you did to me" (Matthew 25: 40).

It would be the wrong way, in contrast, if we having been freed from those slave drivers became again slaves of men. This could only happen if we forgot about our Christian freedom, or if we gave in to insinuations coming from worldly counsellors. We would be trapped, if we blindly followed advisors that want to make us believe that heaven can wait, and all life is about were here and now, and now or never. We would fall back into the old imprisonment, if we adhered only to the mainstream opinions in our societal environment, applauding to ideologies that try to convince us that health and wealth were the ultimate goals of human beings. Paul warns us not to step on such roads. For it was only at great cost that our Christian freedom was achieved and established: Christ gave His life to purchase us out of that old slavery. With regard to the price He had to pay for our liberation, there should be no option whatsoever to dream of those days of imprisonment as though it was desirable to go back to them – which the Israelites did when their flight from Egypt turned out to be more stressful und strenuous than they might have thought in advance.

Do you know about such seductive feelings, like: Oh, if only it would be easier to lead a Christian life according to God's word? Do you experience such tempting thoughts, like: Oh how wonderful it would be to be with the secular crowd instead of being member of a small minority in God's Church? Do you sometimes come across such afflictions, like: Oh, it would be marvellous to live the "easy-go-happy" lifestyle instead of trying to fulfil God's holy will by earnestly listening to His commandments? I have to confess, that deep down in my heart, I am not free of such ideas. There is still a strain within myself that tends towards earthly values. There is still a tendency in some areas of my soul that aims at egoistic satisfaction. And I am afraid, that these temptations will not stop or end as long as I live in this body and on this earth.

That is why confession and absolution is a blessing for those who really wish to live as Christians. We are reminded of our shortcomings and of what we still lacking in terms of perfection, but at the same time, we are reassured of God's abundant willingness to strengthen our faith and trust in Him, and moreover, we are forgiven our failures and the

relapses into old behaviour, and encouraged to continue with our effort to live a God-pleasing life. Over and over again, whenever we approach to the altar to fall on our knees, over and over again, whenever the pastor by laying oh his hands speaks us God's forgiveness, such encouragement takes place. Over and over again we are restored to be freedmen of the Lord, whenever he says to us: "Your sins are forgiven." Amen

© Prof. Dr. Werner Klän, Lutheran Theological Seminary Oberursel/Germany, 2015-09-13