

The Self-Identity of Paul

The Apostle Paul wrote many letters. Each of his letters usually began with his name and a self description. If you had to follow that pattern, what would you call yourself in your letters? I think it is a good thing to examine these identities to try and discover why in this one instance Paul called himself a “*prisoner of Christ Jesus.*”

1. Romans – Paul, a **servant** of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle...
2. 1 Corinthians – Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus *by the will of God*...
3. 2 Corinthians – Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus *by the will of God*...
4. Galatians – Paul, an apostle, *not by man but by Jesus Christ*...
5. Ephesians – Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus *by the will of God*...
6. Philippians – Paul and Timothy, **servants** of Christ Jesus
7. Colossians – Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus *by the will of God*...
8. 1 Thessalonians – Paul, Silas, and Timothy
9. 2 Thessalonians – Paul, Silas, and Timothy
10. 1 Timothy – Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus *by the command of God*...
11. 2 Timothy – Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus *by the will of God*...
12. Titus – Paul, a **servant** of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ...
13. Philemon – Paul, a **prisoner** of Christ Jesus...

Apostle (1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1&2 Timothy)

Why did Paul call himself an apostle? Why such an emphasis? 1 & 2 Thessalonians were written from Corinth as early epistles before there were accusations against Paul as an apostle. Later, especially in Corinth there arose false teachers that accused Paul of not being a genuine apostle. The word “*apostolo*” meant a “sent one” a messenger, an ambassador, hand picked and selected, to be a representative of the King. Some ships were called “apostolos” because they were dispatched with a specific purpose and destination. There were 12 hand picked disciples. Judas fell and Matthias was selected as his substitute in Acts 1:15-26 by the remaining disciples. An apostle had to have been selected directly by Jesus. For this reason some think Peter’s suggestion to elect Mathias was a mistake, done by Peter’s impetuous nature. Paul seemed to think that too. In 1 Corinthians 15:7-8 he says, “*Last of all he (Jesus) appeared to me also, as one of untimely birth...*” Paul’s defense of his apostleship was based on the powerful encounter he had with the resurrected and glorified Savior on the Road to Damascus. (see Acts 9:15 and 22:14-15) We know this because of his emphasis on being selected by the Lord, not man.

Slave/Bondservant (Romans, Philippians, Titus)

The word for servant (*doulos*) in the New Testament is often misunderstood and mistranslated as servant when in fact is almost always referred to a *bondslave*, not a waiter or employee. There were millions of slaves in the Roman Empire. It is estimated that 1/3 of Rome’s population were slaves. Some were educated slaves, captured in war and enslaved to serve in Rome. Others were gladiators, foreign soldiers trained in hand to hand combat to entertain in the arenas. Others were of many different skills and education, but ALL WERE SLAVES, people completely owned by their master. Roman masters were at liberty to treat their slaves as chattel, property, and do with them as they

chose. Paul used this word to identify himself and his relationship to Christ. He was apprehended of Christ (Philippians 3:12-14), bought with a price of the blood of Jesus, and totally surrendered to Jesus as LORD.

Not as though I had already attained, neither were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Perhaps Paul had in mind the Old Testament passage that instructed a willing slave in Exodus 21: 5-6.

Exodus 21:5-6

And if the servant shall plainly say, I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free: 6 Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him for ever.

Paul begins his letter to the Romans with this identity, “Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus.” And later in the letter he compares slavery to sin and slavery to Christ. This is not accidental for we know that in 1 Corinthians he says a similar thing, “You are not your own, you are bought with a price.” Paul was teaching that every believer was indebted to Christ who captured him and set him free from his sins.

Prisoner (Philemon)

Here in Philemon we have the only occasion in which Paul identified himself as “a prisoner of the Lord.” He did not say, “I am a prisoner of Rome, or prisoner of Nero, or prisoner of the Jews.” No, he was in his mind, “a prisoner of the Lord.” He did not mean, “I am a prisoner FOR the Lord.”

The word prisoner in Greek is *desmios*, which means a captive, or one in bonds. He repeats it twice, verse one and verse 9. The word for chains is interesting. Paul mentioned his chains in verse 10, my bonds, *desmon*, from which we get the word for prisoner. It comes from the word *deo*, to fasten, bind, or chain.

The word Paul used in Philippians 3 for “apprehend” in Greek is *lambano*, to be caught, captured or seized. It has the idea of being caught and captured or grasped in the hands of another. This is significant because it indicates a direct relationship with the Capturer. As once he was a prisoner to his inferior body, and as once he was a prisoner to his old nature, so now he is a prisoner of a new Master. I am a prisoner of the Lord. Let’s consider those three pictures of Paul’s being a prisoner.

Romans 6:16-23

Slavery to Something or Someone

16 Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey--whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. 18 You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. 19 I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. 20 When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. 21 What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! 22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

John 8:32-36

The Slavery of Sin

32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."
33 They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" 34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."