

## Paul's Metaphors

Paul was a brilliant communicator as well as having many other excellent qualities. The Lord surely used great wisdom in selecting him to work as an Apostle. One of the features of Paul's epistles and treatises is their richness of imagery. Paul finds examples in life to use to make precious spiritual lessons for his readers. One such metaphor that Paul used, for example, one that's brief, is we don't muzzle an ox who's working, illustrating that Paul was entitled to financial support from the churches. Another example is the soldier's armor in Ephesians 6, referring to how we conduct spiritual warfare. We can't look at all of the metaphors and analogies that Paul used in his writings, but following are a half-dozen or so of them to further illustrate my point as well as to emphasize Paul's radical teaching.

**Slavery.** In Romans 6, Paul used the institution of slavery to illustrate our bondage either to sin or to righteousness. The deeper idea is obedience. A slave is (must be) obedient to his master. We all – *everyone* – yield control to some master. There are only two masters in this cosmos. So we either are controlled by, that is, obeying, sin, or we're controlled by, that is, obeying the Spirit and we're doing righteousness. There are only those two, and we're necessarily slaves either to the one or the other. Paul adds a layer of seriousness to it by pointing out that slavery to sin is death. But to be a slave to God leads to eternal life, through Jesus. This is exceedingly important! We're so imbued in America with the sense of freedom that we can't identify with being a slave, yet that's what we must do if we seek eternal life. Supposing that, because of grace, we're free to live as we please, indifferent to God's revealed will, is really the heresy of antinomianism. Obeying God's will (that is, Christ's teachings and commands) is – get this! – an essential aspect of being a Christian. Salvation is a personal relationship, a gratuitous one offered by a condescending God out of love and goodness; but for it to be maintained requires obedience on our part, faithfulness on His part. Obedience isn't merely an option for individuals who desire to go “deeper,” as certain evangelicals falsely believe and teach. No one in his right mind would believe that willful, knowing disobedience is just something else a loving God forgives because of Jesus' atoning death on the cross. Disobedience is rebellion against God! It means there's no trust, no faith.

**Marriage.** In Romans 7 Paul used a married woman's freedom when her husband dies to illustrate our freedom from the Law, so that we can then be “married” to Jesus. As we think about this particular metaphor, we should realize that embedded in it is the concept of transfer of loyalty: We were at one time . . . [bound to the Law, to sin and to self], but a major crisis occurs [faith, regeneration] so that now we're . . . [something far better, in Christ and indwelt by the Spirit]. For a believer in Jesus, the old way of life is over. We repudiate that old life. It's done, dead. The new life is one of good works, of righteous living, of imitating Christ's character, of serving God as He commanded, of glorifying God. The prevalent notion that we've got forgiveness of sins with the assurance of eternal life and so we may continue living as before we believed is a modern-day heresy. “Born again” is thrown around in evangelical circles, casually, like a slogan. But it's the most serious issue in Christianity, because someone not regenerated, regardless of his/her profession of faith, does not have eternal life.

**Olive Tree.** In Romans 11, Paul compares Israel to a cultivated olive tree into which Gentiles are “grafted.” The entire O.T. story of Israel is the basis of Gentiles being saved. Paul would reference Israel's history in the Scriptures when teaching the Gentile churches because those Gentiles knew they were fundamentally being inserted into or added to God's program for Israel. “Do not be arrogant, but be afraid” Paul warns, because what was grafted in can be cut out. God has not entered into any covenant with the Gentiles, only with Israel. Gentiles must “continue in God's kindness,” which means we have to be careful to be faithful, obedient, committed, loyal, etc. Or else. Christ-like humility is essential for this. Gentiles have now, in this era, the privilege of bearing testimony to Israel's God and Messiah/King to the nations of the world, what Israel was supposed to do but didn't (but *will* do at their restoration). We believers in Jesus are not passive trophies of grace, but active servants doing God's will.

**Building on Fire.** In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul likens our works to a building that will suffer conflagration. The “building” is what we do for Christ with our life. The “fire” is Christ's future judgment of our works. A Day is coming when Jesus will evaluate every believer's life, and rewards will be distributed for the life that exalted Christ. Of course, that judgment will take into account the light we've received and the opportunities given us to respond to the light. God is just. But Paul anticipated that not every believer would make his (or her) life count for Christ. Such persons would still be saved, but at the cost of a wasted life and loss of some kind of highly desirable reward (not stipulated in Scripture). Those people have their reward, such as it is, in this life, rather than what God has to offer. Paul says here that he laid the foundation, referring to his teachings about Jesus. We're to take those teachings and put them to work, carrying out as faithful servants Jesus' revealed will for His followers. Whatever sacrifices we make, whatever losses we suffer – all will be recompensed on that Day. We need to get this: Judgment of what we do with the freedom given us to make choices

in this life is morally absolutely necessary. We're saved by faith, yes, but we're accountable for our works. By the way, later in this Letter, Paul will point out that God's judgment on us sometimes comes in *this* life; that may be why some believers remain confirmed in immaturity, as passive spectators of church programs.

**Human Body.** In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul compares the body of Christ to a human body. Although the body is made up of parts, eyes, ears, feet, hands, it is really one unit. "So it is with Christ," Paul states. We all are one body, even though some have black skin, some are Asian, some are pygmies. Some hold to congregational type of church governance, some to a board of elders. Some expect a coming millennium, others don't. Some are Jews, others Gentiles. Some are professional people, others day-laborers. Some speak with an accent, other hold to strange customs. Every member is there by election, that is, God chose each and placed each in the body. Every member has an indispensable role to fill. Each member should care about the others. "So that there should be no division in the body" (v. 25) is the lesson. No bigotry, no proud self-boasting, no contempt for others allowed. We are all brothers, we are all equal; we are all to love each other, pray for each other, help each other, encourage each other. What a concept! If only. Let's understand this: Our fellowship and love for each other, and being at peace with each other in the here and now is proleptic of the *koinonia* in which we'll participate some future day when in the presence of the Persons of the Godhead.

**Clay Pots.** Paul refers to our bodies as "jars of clay" (NIV) in 2 Corinthians 4. It's a brief analogy, but vivid. A clay pot is easily broken. So it is with us. In this pot is the Gospel. If we're a follower of Jesus, we will suffer persecution or some other forms of personal loss or sacrifice and may have to lose our life even, for carrying out Gospel ministry. We're vulnerable. But that's so that God may empower us, protect us, use us according to His will. We're here – *we need to understand this!* – to be servants of Christ, and just as Jesus had to rely on the Spirit for His ministry, so must we. And if the Spirit leads us to a martyr's death, we have resurrection and great reward waiting for us. Fear of taking risk, of suffering personal loss, of being shamed or hurt, must never characterize a believer; sadly, it too often does exactly that. The life of Jesus will only be revealed in us if we acknowledge that serving Jesus risks serious consequences, but we're willing to suffer them for Jesus' sake. Paul's expectation should be ours: We serve Jesus fully aware that we may suffer being put to death for doing it, but we accept that because sharing the Gospel with others is of vastly, immensely, greater importance.

**Soldiers, Athletes, Farmers.** Paul's last letter, to Timothy, encourages him to be strong in the Lord. This theme runs throughout the letter. Paul was not going to allow Timothy to retreat into some inner world of make-believe after Paul's death and so evade commitment. Nor us. So in Chapter 2 of 2 Timothy, Paul says we're to endure hardship like a soldier. We're to compete like an athlete. And we're to work hard like a farmer and get our share of the harvest. In each case, a soft, easy, safe, painless life is deliberately eschewed. In each case, there's a reward to be gotten: the soldier receives the commendation of the commanding officer; the athlete wins the victor's crown; and the farmer receives crops. There's more, though, than just the idea of reward, which is why Paul invites Timothy (and us) to reflect on this for insight into his analogies. A soldier obeys the orders his officers give him. Obedience to Christ is so essential that, without it, it's doubtful a person is even saved. An athlete trains for the competition, and the training program is so rigorous, so demanding, that extreme self-discipline is necessary to be able to go through it. Self-discipline is necessary for us if we're going to mature in the faith. We must be self-controlled so as to be able to put the demands of God into practice. And the farmer? Farmers work hard, but so do other laborers. Farmers know however that their hard work is necessary or else there's no harvest! If no hard work, it's all waste. But they put seed into the ground and they harvest a hundred-fold of crops. What's the point for Timothy and for us? Hard work is needed to bring others into the Kingdom. If we're lax, indifferent, our lives are wasted. Our goal is reproduction. And that means effort on our part, *great* effort. What should characterize us? Obedience, self-discipline, and working hard to call people into and prepare them for the Kingdom. Isn't what Jesus did (and will yet do) for us worth suffering whatever loss or personal sacrifice is necessary for His glory?

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We need to radically re-think Christianity. If it's not what comes out of Scripture, it's something else, such as an idolatrous religion. More to the point, we need to radically re-think our own beliefs and commitment. Believing in Jesus is life-changing, or it's not biblical belief. Our commitment to Jesus needs to be whole-hearted and deep, so that we adopt and live the kind of life that Scripture describes, or we're simply playing a religious game. It's not just the professionals of the Church who are expected to manifest the life of Jesus, it's everyone who names the name of Jesus. God holds us to the responsibilities that come with the privileges. Great care is needed because we pursue life before God's face. We therefore must, *must*, be faithful to our calling.