

Change of Legal Status

In the name of him who was born under the law to redeem those who were under the law, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: I'd like to begin by asking you to consider a couple of questions. First, raise your hand if you think all people in this country are *equally* under the law – or, say it another way, is there anyone to whom the law does not apply – at least, not in theory? There's not, is there? The law of the land applies to everyone. Okay, now raise your hand if you think all people in this country are considered *equal* under the law. They're not, are they? No, *how* the law applies to you depends on your legal status.

For example, if under the law you are considered a minor, then you are not allowed to enter into a binding legal contract. If you do, it's unenforceable. Likewise, minors – as a rule – are not subject to the same penalties for violations of the law that adults are. A nine year old who commits a murder isn't going to be sentenced to life in prison. An adult who commits the same crime could be.

Another example: if under the law you are considered married, then you enjoy certain tax, joint property, and inheritance benefits. You also cannot be compelled to testify against your spouse in a court of law.

Some more: citizens of this country 18 years and older have the right to vote. You don't get to vote if you're an alien – a citizen of a different country here legally or illegally – or if you're a convicted felon, or if you're declared legally incompetent. If you are a foreign diplomat you might enjoy certain immunities under the law. If you commit a crime you can't be prosecuted. All we can do is kick you out and send you back to where you came from.

The big controversy about the inmates being held at Guantanamo Bay centers on the question of their legal status. What exactly are they? Which laws apply to them? Are they enemy combatants and therefore prisoners of war subject to the treaties that apply to such things? And if so, what nation are they fighting for? Or are they accused criminals subject to other international laws? The trouble is that we really don't have a category of legal status that fits them. That's why we keep them at Guantanamo. We don't know what else to do with them.

All right, hopefully I've made the point: *how* the law applies to you depends on your legal status. And, of course, your legal status can change. Minors become adults at a certain age. Single people can get married. Married people, sadly, sometimes get divorced. Aliens can become naturalized citizens. And so on.

The reason I mention all this is because it's what Paul is talking about in today's Epistle: changing legal status. But to help you fully grasp the idea he's stressing, I've got to explain a few categories of legal status that existed in the ancient world for which we no longer have equivalent today. In Paul's time, there were three basic divisions. You were either a Roman citizen, a citizen of a nation that had been conquered by Rome, or you were a slave. And the law treated you differently depending upon which one you were. Roman citizens had it best. They enjoyed a wide array of rights and privileges. They were exempt from most taxes. If accused of a crime and put on trial, they had the right to have their case judged by the Emperor himself. And if convicted of a capital crime, one that demanded the death penalty, they could not be crucified. They were given a swifter and more merciful end.

Citizens of subject nations enjoyed far fewer rights and had many more obligations. They were taxed heavily. The law and its penalties were far more severe on them, and they weren't allowed the same legal protections. They could be compelled to perform certain forms of manual labor by any Roman citizen or soldier. And, of course, they could be crucified if convicted of a capital crime. In fact, crucifixion was a Roman terror weapon used to keep their subject peoples in line.

I don't need to tell you that slaves had the fewest rights of all and that the law was especially hard on them. But we tend to see slavery through the lens of how it worked in our country up until the time of the Civil War when it was unquestionably a great social evil: people being captured and forced into slavery only on account of the color of their skin. It was different in the ancient world. Slavery was far more common and generally more humane. And anyone might become a slave under the law. It was, for example, a common form of punishment for criminals. You break the law? We don't send you to prison for you to sit on your tush while you read magazines and watch TV. We make you a slave. You lose your rights and you work. Hard. If you misbehave, your master beats you. And if you escape and you're caught, we kill you – kill you in some horrible way that reminds all the other slaves not to try what you did. That was one way to become a slave, by breaking the law. Most of those who became slaves, however, got that way on account of debt: they owed more than they could pay. They were sold into slavery in order that their creditors might recover a portion of what they'd lost. And you have to admit, it would be a powerful incentive to keep you from overspending and to make sure you paid your bills on time.

But just as you could get into slavery, you could also buy yourself out of it. Some masters let their slaves work for wages and let them keep part of their earnings. And many slaves were skilled craftsmen. Others were doctors, teachers, writers and engineers. They could make a lot of money. But however they got it, if they saved enough, they could buy their freedom. Sometimes too, a slave might marry woman who was also a slave. And after buying his own freedom, he could work on buying his wife out of slavery. Again, your legal status could change – for better or for worse – even with regard to Roman citizenship. It too was available for a price.

Okay, with all this in mind we turn to today's Epistle. Paul writes how Jesus was born "to redeem those who were under the law." That's us. He's saying that we were on the lowest level of legal status: slaves, whether through debt or criminal conviction, it doesn't make any difference because both apply. We are sinners who have offended Almighty God by our many misdeeds, our wicked thoughts, our evil speech, and for failing to do the things we know we should have done. We are also debtors who have squandered the resources the Lord has entrusted to our care. We've run up a staggering debt, each one of us, which dwarfs the current national debt of the United States. On account of these things we've come under the law: we are now subject to its curses and penalties. We labor futilely amid the thorns and thistles. We get sore. We get sick. We get old. We die. Then comes the judgment which is even worse for us – sentenced to a place of eternal suffering made for Satan and the evil angels who rebelled against God. And there's no way we can buy our freedom. Each day we commit more crimes and waste more resources. As slaves under the law for us it's like that old song:

*You load sixteen tons, and what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt.
St. Peter don't take me 'cause I can't go:
I owe my soul to the company store.*

Except it isn't the store you owe your soul to. It belongs to hell. That's your legal status.

And it's from that legal status that Jesus was born into this world to redeem you, that is, to buy you back. How? By changing his own legal status – several times, actually. First, like Moses who once stepped down from his exalted position as a member of the royal family of Egypt to take a place among the Israelite slaves, Jesus does the same – except on a much grander scale. Paul writes, "... [he was] born of woman, born under the law." That is, he leaves behind the glory to which he is entitled as the only-begotten Son of the Father God Almighty to take a place among God's creatures *as one of God's creatures* – with all our human limitations—and under the curse of the law to which we are subject. Even though he was sinless himself, he put himself under the same conditions we must endure. I sometimes run into people who imagine that Jesus never got sick or suffered from a toothache. No. The account is clear: he got tired. He got hungry. When he fell and scraped his knees, he bled.

But even though he was subject to the curse of the law as the rest of us lawbreakers, he never sinned himself. Instead he lived a perfectly righteous life before God and man. No fault was found in him, not even when he went to trial before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate. They couldn't make a single charge stick. But that didn't stop them from changing his legal status to convicted felon condemned to death. Thus they nailed him to the cross. There he suffered infinitely for the eternal debt of sin we owed. And then he changed his legal status once again. He died.

That too is a legal status. That's why when someone dies you need a death certificate to settle their estate. You're not officially dead until the law says you are. And the thing is, once you're dead, it's permanent. No more changes in legal status are possible. But that's where Jesus is different. Because on the cross he paid the entire debt of sin against the human race, death lost its power. It no longer had the authority to hold him. It had to let him go. Thus on the third day, he changed his legal status yet again: he returned to life. He showed himself to his startled disciples. And forty days later he changed his legal status once more, reclaiming the glory, power, and authority at his Father's right hand that he had set aside in his mission to redeem us.

And from that throne of authority he lives to change our legal status – not once, but twice. First, because he died to pay the entire penalty of our sin, death can no longer hold us captive either. But we don't know this. We're still born in the dark, surrounded by all the evidence of the curse of sin around us. We need to be told this good news. We need to be brought into the light. So Jesus sends us his Word – the truth about our situation and what he's done to redeem us. And because we could never believe it on our own, he sends us also his Holy Spirit to illumine our hearts and to empower us to trust in who Jesus is and what he has done. When someone hears the Good News and the Spirit creates faith in them, they too are freed from the curse of death. They're set free. They pass over from death to life. Their legal status changes. Even when their bodies die, they are not officially dead. Though dead, yet they live. And like Christ, they will rise again.

But that's only half the Good News. As Paul says, we're not just raised in Christ to be God's well behaved human subjects, second class citizens of his Empire. No, we're raised to be his sons and daughters by adoption through Jesus. That's the second change in legal status we undergo in Christ. We officially become the children of God. In fact, Paul writes that the Spirit we have received is the Spirit of God's Son, who through our mouths cries out "Abba, Father". That is to say, because we have the Spirit of God's Son, when we pray to our heavenly

Father, he hears and says, “Oh, I recognize that voice. It’s the voice of my beloved Son. Yes, what may I do for you? Ask and you shall receive.”

Receive what? Anything that God would be pleased to give his Son. Anything that might help or benefit his children – because, after all, if you a child, then you are an heir. All things your Father owns belong to you in Christ Jesus. And interestingly enough, all this came to you through a legal transaction – one that forever changed your legal status. Somebody help me out here. What was it? Baptism, that’s right. That’s when you died and were raised with Christ. That’s when you received the Spirit. That’s when you became a child and heir of God through Jesus. And that’s what we celebrate in the Christmas season: that Jesus’ birth of a woman, under the law, makes possible our rebirth as the children of God.

We have received this rebirth. Our legal status has been changed. And since God has made us his children in Christ Jesus, let us ask him also to give us the grace to live as his children in time and eternity, for he is pleased to do it. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!