

From Slaves to Servants

Drash on Parashah 19; Mishpatim

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Isra'el has just been rescued from Egypt where they had been slaves all their lives. In fact, their parents were slaves, their grand-parents were slaves, and so on for 400 years. One might think that after God brought them out of Egypt into the wilderness, and get them the Ten Commandments, the next thing He would do would be to go back to the first, well technically second, commandment about no other gods but God, and have Israel build His sanctuary. This would facilitate God dwelling in their midst and the enriched relationship with God through the office of the priests, right away. However, we have a couple of weeks yet on our parashah schedule, before we get to those instructions. No, instead God starts out instructing them about slaves.

"These are the rulings you are to present to them: "If you purchase a Hebrew slave, he is to work six years; but in the seventh, he is to be given his freedom without having to pay anything. If he came single, he is to leave single; if he was married when he came, his wife is to go with him when he leaves. But if his master gave him a wife, and she bore him sons or daughters, then the wife and her children will belong to her master, and he will leave by himself. Nevertheless, if the slave declares, 'I love my master, my wife and my children, so I don't want to go free,' then his master is to bring him before God; and there at the door or doorpost, his master is to pierce his ear with an awl; and the man will be his slave for life.

[Sh'mot/Exodus 21:1-6]

These people who had been slaves for so long, were now not only free, but they were in a place where they could have slaves of their own. It is interesting that God does not forbid slavery in Israel. With our modern notions concerning slavery, we would think that he would. Instead, he regulates slavery. Even in the New Covenant, slavery is still regulated, rather than outlawed.

Slaves, obey your human masters with the same fear, trembling and single-heartedness with which you obey the Messiah. Don't obey just to win their favor, serving only when they are watching you; but serve as slaves of the Messiah, doing what God wants with all your heart. Work willingly as slaves, as people do who are serving not merely human beings but the Lord. Remember that whoever does good work, whether he be a slave or a free man, will be rewarded by the Lord. And masters, treat your slaves the same way. Don't threaten them. Remember that in heaven both you and they have the same Master, and he has no favorites. [Ephesians 6:5-9]

It is important as we read Scripture to leave our attitudes and modern day concepts of right and wrong at the door and accept what we read for what it is. We do not have slavery today in America and most places in the world, and for good reason. The concept of one person being owned by another, though distasteful in our minds, had an important function in the economy of Biblical cultures, including Israel. It was essentially the welfare system of the day. Even today, those of us who need government assistance for various needs give the government a certain amount of control over the way in which we live our lives. Companies today which are being “bailed out” of their economic problems may come to regret the help when the government begins to tell them how to run their businesses and they have to comply because they exist on government assistance. Those who join the military also become slaves of the government, where they “serve” their country and follow orders whether they want to or not. The only difference in Bible days was when someone fell into hard times, they could sell themselves or be sold as a slave to a wealthy family rather than the government. God did not see the need to outlaw this system, but did see the need to regulate it to keep slaves from being mistreated, hold slave masters responsible for the treatment of their slaves, and provide a distinction between slavery in Israel and that of other nations.

These were people who had been blessed with the riches of Egypt. Did that apply equally to everyone? Probably not. There were also Egyptians with them. What was Israel to do with them? A social structure would have to be instituted quickly for there to be order in the nation. Some structure was put into place with the system of hierarchy that was established through Yitro. This hierarchy was primarily for judging disputes, but I see the same structure being useful for leadership of the people as well as communication. In order for all people to be properly taken care of, some would become slaves and others masters. It was not a bad thing. It was a matter of survival. If kept within its intended purpose and according to God’s regulations, it would continue to be a good thing. It also becomes a picture that Paul would use later to describe the Believer’s relationship with God. We are in fact His slaves, bought with the blood of His own Son. Our lives are not our own. We all belong to Him.

For sin will not have authority over you; because you are not under legalism but under grace. Therefore, what conclusion should we reach? "Let's go on sinning, because we're not under legalism but under grace"? Heaven forbid! Don't you know that if you present yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, then, of the one whom you are obeying, you are slaves – whether of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to being made righteous? By God's grace, you, who were once slaves to sin, obeyed from your heart the pattern of teaching to which you were exposed; and after you had been set free from sin, you became enslaved to

righteousness. (I am using popular language because your human nature is so weak.) For just as you used to offer your various parts as slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led to more lawlessness; so now offer your various parts as slaves to righteousness, which leads to being made holy, set apart for God. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in relationship to righteousness; but what benefit did you derive from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end result of those things was death. However, now, freed from sin and enslaved to God, you do get the benefit – it consists in being made holy, set apart for God, and its end result is eternal life. For what one earns from sin is death; but eternal life is what one receives as a free gift from God, in union with the Messiah Yeshua, our Lord. [Rom.6:14-23]

This is another passage, which is often taken out of context and misinterpreted. Many will come to the end, which says that eternal life is a free gift from God for those in union with the Messiah Yeshua, and completely forget that Shaul just spent the last half of the chapter explaining why Believers ought to follow Torah. Keep in mind that in Scripture, sin is defined as transgression of Torah (1Yochanan/1John 3:4) and righteousness is obedience to Torah (Rom.2:13). If you go back and re-read the passage above, substituting “transgression of Torah” for sin and “obedience to Torah” for righteousness, you will get an entirely different meaning from what you have possibly understood before. How does this relate to the teaching Shaul ends with that eternal life is a gift from God? For this, we have to go back to the relationship between the Master and his slaves. The sole responsibility of the slave is to obey the Master. The slave does nothing to and can do nothing to provide for his or her own needs. The responsibility of the Master is to treat the slave justly and fairly (Col.4:1). The Master was obligated by Torah to take care of the needs of his slaves. God is our Master and we are His slaves. Our obligation is to obey Him. His responsibility is to take care of our needs. Our greatest need is to have a relationship with Him. Since our obedience does not serve to satisfy our own needs, our obedience has nothing to do with our ability to have a relationship with Him. God has provided for that through the death and resurrection of His Son. This is grace and a free gift, however, it does not nullify our need to obey God. This free gift is given to His servants. If we are serving other gods or our own desires, is He our Master? No.

This is only part of the lesson. What was God teaching His people in our parashah this week? Rather than having them build Him a sanctuary where they could serve Him, He gave them tools to help them better serve one another. We already have seen the condition of their heart when the first thing they see when they get across the Red Sea is starvation and death, rather than freedom and thankfulness. Their focus is inward. Two million selfish people living in a desperate situation is not a good combination. If God wanted them to build a sanctuary, they were more likely to kill

each other first. Their immediate need is unity amongst each other. In the midst of such unity, God could dwell and do His work, regardless of whether there was a tabernacle or not. He had to teach them what to do when they wronged one another. God does not care about donkeys or oxen, but if one person steals or kills one that belongs to someone else, He cares about the human conflict and the related effects of the lost animal to the life of the owner. Such loss needs restoration in its full value, which is more than the value of the animal. The work the animal did has to be taken into account as well. If one person injures another person either accidentally or intentionally, there has to be punishment for the guilty and compensation to the injured. Overall and system of fairness and justice, the backbone of righteousness, is established.

The result of this system, is that those who have been slaves become servants of each other. They already belong to God, now they need to learn to belong to each other. They need to consider the needs of their neighbor, not just their own. They have to respect the property of their neighbor as if it were their own. In the wilderness, life would be hard, even with God taking care of them. They would need to rely on one another and be able to trust in one another. Lies, deceit, murder, and general selfishness would never accomplish this. Only by serving one another would they truly be free.

This concept of unity is just as important today as it was then. Yeshua shows us the value of unity toward the end of His life on earth.

"I pray not only for these, but also for those who will trust in me because of their word, that they may all be one. Just as you, Father, are united with me and I with you, I pray that they may be united with us, so that the world may believe that you sent me. The glory which you have given to me, I have given to them; so that they may be one, just as we are one – I united with them and you with me, so that they may be completely one, and the world thus realize that you sent me, and that you have loved them just as you have loved me. "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am; so that they may see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you, and these people have known that you sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will continue to make it known; so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I myself may be united with them." [Yochanan/John 17:20-26]

As we learn to live by the entire Word of God, we go from being slaves of darkness to being slaves of the Light and servants of each other. The unity this brings leads to holiness and a testimony to the world of the power of God and His love.