

Deuteronomy 15:12-18

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“If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you [i.e., sells themselves into service to pay off a debt], then he shall serve you six years [limiting the duration of service], but in the seventh year you shall set him free.¹³ “When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed.¹⁴ “You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat [i.e., give him resources to succeed on his own]; you shall give to him [generously] as the LORD your God has blessed you.¹⁵ “You shall remember [זָכַר *zakar* – remember, recall to mind; cf. Deut 5:15; 7:18; 8:18; 9:7; 16:3, 12; 24:9, 18, 22; 32:7] that you were a slave in the land of Egypt [as a servant to others], and the LORD your God redeemed you [purchased their liberation]; therefore, I command you this today.¹⁶ “It shall come about if he says to you [of his own volition], ‘I will not go out from you,’ [i.e., chooses to stay] because he loves [אָהַב *aheb* – to love] you and your household, since he fares well with you [and seeks the security that another provides for him];¹⁷ then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door [marking him for others to see], and he shall be your servant forever [עֹלָם עֶבֶד - *ebed olam* – a voluntary servant for life]. Also, you shall do likewise to your maidservant.¹⁸ “It shall not seem hard to you when you set him free [assuming he/she does not choose ongoing servanthood], for he has given you six years with double the service of a hired man; so the LORD your God will bless you in whatever you do [as a reward for generously blessing the departing servant].

Observations:

In this pericope, Moses addresses the subject of voluntary slavery in Israel, where a man or woman committed themselves to a period of service in order to pay off a debt. In this situation, the master could not require more than six years of service and was directed to release the slave from his/her debt in the seventh year. Furthermore, the wealthy were required to send the servant away with a generous supply of resources—a severance package—to help jumpstart their freedom and personal success.

Moses opens this section, saying, “If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free” (Deut 15:12). If a person owed a debt to another Israelite that he/she could not pay, the Mosaic Law granted that person the right to commit themselves to six years of contractual servitude in order to pay off what they owed. This allowed for economic integrity in the community in which a person could and should pay off their debts. However, God limited the servitude to six years, and in the seventh year, the servant was required to be set free from the mutual contract agreement. This verse shows that poor slaves had rights under God’s economy. This seven-year agreement is different than the seven years mentioned in Deuteronomy 15:1-11. Here, the seven-year agreement begins when the contract starts.

Furthermore, God obligates the master to set his servant free with a generous severance package. Moses wrote, “When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. ¹⁴ You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you” (Deut 15:13-14). The liberal distribution of resources was a severance package of animals, grain, and wine, all intended to help kickstart the former servant’s own economic independence. Warren Wiersbe states:

Servants were to be released after six years of service, whether the seventh year was the Sabbath Year or not. This law assumes that the man’s six years of service without a salary had adequately repaid the loan. But once again, the Lord commanded generosity, for the masters were to send their servants away bearing gifts that would help them start life over again, including livestock, grain, and wine. After all, when the Jews left Egypt, they received expensive gifts in return for their years of enslavement (Ex 11:2; 12:35-36), so why shouldn’t a Jewish brother be rewarded for six years of faithful labor to a fellow Jew?¹

Here, we see economic integrity being preserved, as a person was given the option to pay off debts by means of selling himself into service to another. But we also see the principle of love and generosity in Moses’ words. Such love and generosity was consistent with the character of God as well as His past actions toward the nation as a whole. Moses wrote, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore, I command you this today” (Deut 15:15). The word *remember* translates the Hebrew verb זָכַר *zakar* means to *call to mind*, and implies intentionality. God’s people were commanded to remember their past servitude in Egypt, as that memory was to have a direct influence on how they treated others who were less fortunate than themselves. God loved them, liberated them, and pulled them out of Egypt with much silver and gold (Ex 12:35-36). This wealth enabled Israel to jumpstart their own economy when they entered into Canaan. Likewise, God’s people were to model God’s generosity and help their fellow Israelite succeed. Eugene Merrill states:

The rationale for this was the comparable situation in which Israel had found itself in Egypt. There they had been pressed into slavery, cruelly mistreated, but at last delivered by the redemptive grace and power of God. But even the Egyptians had sent them away with provisions to tide them over until they could stand on their own feet (Ex 12:35-36). If this mighty act of redemption was carried out by the Lord on Israel’s behalf, how much more should the beneficiaries of that goodness

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 104.

be quick to exercise it on behalf of their financially oppressed brothers and sisters (Deut 15:14b-15).²

But there was another possibility open to the master and servant. Moses said, “It shall come about if he says to you, ‘I will not go out from you,’ because he loves you and your household, since he fares well with you; ¹⁷ then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also, you shall do likewise to your maidservant” (Deut 15:16-17). In this situation, the master proves to be a good man who loves the Lord and honors His Word and cares for those in his service. The servant recognizes the one he serves is a good man who cares for him and meets his needs. As a result, the servant feels loved and loves in return. In this relationship, the servant voluntarily offers to remain in service to his master for the remainder of his life, surrendering his independence, believing he will be loved and cared for until the end of his days. If the master agreed, then the two would seal the arrangement with a ceremony in which the servant would have an awl driven through his ear in front of God and others. The hole in the ear—or maybe an earring—served as a public statement that this master and servant saw each other’s value and freely consented to a lifetime of work together. And this would be initiated by the servant because of his love for the one he served. Warren Wiersbe writes:

During those six years of service, the debtor might come to love the host family and want to stay with them. Or, he might have gotten married during that time, have a family, and want to remain with them. If that was the debtor’s choice, he would be taken to the judges where his decision would be officially recognized. Then his master would bore a hole in his ear to mark him as a willing servant for life. A female servant could make the same choice, but see Exodus 21:7-11 for special provisions.³

Moses, returning to the original scenario, in which a servant would be set free with a generous severance package after six years, states, “It shall not seem hard to you when you set him free, for he has given you six years with double the service of a hired man; so the LORD your God will bless you in whatever you do” (Deut 15:18). When it came time for the master to release his servant after six years of service, he was to be motivated by two factors: first, he had benefitted from the servant’s labor that would have cost him twice as much if he’d hired someone to perform the same work. Second, God promised to bless him for obeying His directive, a theme of blessing God had promised to others if they obeyed (see Deut 15:4, 6, 10).

² Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 246.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 104.

Present Application:

Freedom is God’s ideal for humanity. Slavery is a deviation from God’s original design. The first humans enjoyed life and freedom in the garden of Eden. God created them and their world, and He endowed them with the capacity to exercise responsible dominion over the earth (Gen 1:26-28). He also created the garden of Eden, placed them in it, and gave them the task “to cultivate it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). He assigned them to function as theocratic administrators. God’s directives provided the framework within which their environment and freedom was maintained. Adam and Eve forfeited their freedom and blessings when they disobeyed God and followed Satan’s directive (Gen 2:19-20; 3:1-7). Satan’s kingdom of darkness was expanded to include the earth at the time when Adam and Eve fell into sin. Subsequent to the historical fall of Adam and Eve, all people—excluding Jesus—are born “slaves to sin” (Rom 6:6), under “the dominion of Satan” (Acts 26:18), who reigns over his “domain of darkness” (Col 1:13). Spiritual slavery became the norm for Adam and Eve, and new forms of slavery followed.

Human slavery has been around for thousands of years and practiced by the ancient Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. It continued throughout history in regions such as Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Comanche Indians were known to attack and kill other tribes, steal their land, and enslave some.⁴ Slavery was practiced for centuries in Europe, but was formally abolished in Brittan in 1833 and France in 1848. Thankfully, slavery in America was abolished in 1865 with the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. However, slavery continues today with more than 40 million victims worldwide and is practiced in countries such as Afghanistan, Africa, Cambodia, Iran, South Sudan, and Pakistan, just to name a few. The highest concentration of slavery today is found in North Korea.⁵ Illegal human trafficking still exists in the U.S. with numbers ranging from 18,000 to 20,000.⁶ Modern slavery represents a relational power structure between individuals and groups, as one seeks to control the other for personal gain, and this by means of force. The subject of slavery is extremely complex when one considers it throughout history, as not all slaves were treated the same. Even in America, some slaves gained their freedom, attained relative success, and then purchased slaves themselves. One example was William Ellison, a black slave owner who “was one of about 180 black slave masters in South Carolina at the time, most of whom were former

⁴ Native American History, *Comanche War Raids*,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGA_18W1U0Y

⁵ Helen Gibson, *Modern-Day Slavery by the Numbers*,
<https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/02/07/modern-day-slavery-by-the-numbers/>

⁶ The Women’s Center, <https://www.womenscenteryfs.org/index.php/get-info/human-trafficking/statistics>

slaves themselves.”⁷ Often, we hear the ancient horror stories of forced labor in grueling conditions, rape, and early death. These stories are terrible and true. However, in some instances, slaves enjoyed protection within a family unit, married and raised children, engaged in business, and could purchase their freedom. In certain contexts, slaves had more privileges and benefits than many who were free and poor. Bartchy states:

Under Roman, Greek, and Jewish laws, those in slavery could own property, including other slaves! Some well-educated slaves bought children, raised and educated them, and recovered the tuition costs when selling them to families needing tutors. A slave’s property was entirely under the control of the slave, who could seek to increase it for use in purchasing legal freedom and in establishing a comfortable life as a freed person.⁸

In the ancient world, some became slaves when defeated in war, others were illegally kidnapped and made slaves, and many were born slaves. Again, sometimes these served in terrible conditions, whereas others were protected and cared for. In most societies, slaves were purchased to meet household needs, such as making clothes, preparing meals, tilling land, and housecleaning. More educated slaves served as tutors to household children, helping prepare them academically and teaching them social etiquette. It is historically noted that some sold themselves into slavery, and this to secure immediate clothing, shelter, and food, as well as the prospect of future freedom and social and economic advancement. Bartchy states:

Large numbers of people sold themselves into slavery for various reasons, above all to enter a life that was easier and more secure than existence as a poor, freeborn person, to obtain special jobs, and to climb socially...Many non-Romans sold themselves to Roman citizens with the justified expectation, carefully regulated by Roman law, of becoming Roman citizens themselves when manumitted. The money that one received from such a self-sale usually became the beginning of the personal funds that would later be used to enter freedom under more favorable circumstances, e.g., with former debts extinguished. Greek law also recognized the validity of self-sale into slavery, often with a contract limiting the duration of the enslavement. Such sales were frequent in the eastern provinces in imperial times. Temporary self-sale had been known in Jewish circles for centuries. Because of the reputation of Jewish owners for honoring Jewish laws calling for good treatment, many Jews who wished to sell themselves often could not find a Jewish purchaser.⁹

⁷ University of Richmond, *Blacks Owning Blacks: The Story of William Ellison*, <https://historyengine.richmond.edu/episodes/view/6699>

⁸ S. S. Bartchy, “Slavery,” ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979–1988), 544.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 543.

In the OT, slavery was practiced long before Israel became a theocracy after their exodus in 1445 B.C. Joseph was sold by his brothers to Midianite traders (Gen 37:27-28), who sold him to an Egyptian named Potiphar (Gen 37:36). Israel, as a nation, became slaves to the Egyptians (Ex 13:3, 14). Eventually, God liberated His people from their Egyptian captors (Ex 20:2; Deut 6:12; 7:8). But slavery was never abolished as an institution in the ancient world, and Israelites were permitted to purchase slaves from other nations. Moses wrote, “As for your male and female slaves whom you may have—you may acquire male and female slaves from the pagan nations that are around you” (Lev 25:44). Unger states, “The Mosaic economy did not outlaw slavery, which was a universal institution at the time. It did, however, regulate and elevate it, imbuing it with kindness and mercy and, like Christianity, announcing principles that would ultimately abolish it (cf. Lev 25:39-40; Deut 15:12-18).”¹⁰

Moses addressed a form of slavery in Deuteronomy that refers to a voluntary servitude in which a person worked for a period of six years to pay off their debt (Deut 15:12-18). In this situation, Israelites could sell themselves into the service of another for a period of time to pay off their debt. In addition to their freedom, they were to receive a generous severance package of livestock, grain, and wine, which was intended to jumpstart their own economic independence (Deut 15:12-14; cf. Ex 21:5-6). However, some made the choice to become a lifetime servant, and this occurred from a motivation of love, because their employer had been good and cared for them (Deut 15:16-17). The common Hebrew servant who surrendered his/her freedom to serve another was limited to six years labor and was guaranteed freedom in the seventh year (Deut 15:12-14; cf. Ex 21:1-2). And there were laws that protected slaves. For example, kidnapping for slavery was punishable by death under the Mosaic Law (Ex 21:16; Deut 24:7). If a slave was injured by his owner, the law demanded he be set free (Ex 21:26-27). This law would naturally limit abuse. And the Mosaic Law allowed for an Israelite slave to be redeemed by family (Lev 25:47-49a), or he could redeem himself if he acquired the means (Lev 25:49b-53). Lastly, Israelite slaves would automatically go free in the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:10, 40, 54).

Slavery continued into NT times. There were Christians who were both slaves and slave owners (Eph 6:5-9). Paul wrote, “Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that” (1 Cor 7:21). He then stated, “he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman; likewise, he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave” (1 Cor 7:22). All Christians in the early church, whether slave owners or slaves, were to regard themselves as slaves to Christ. Writing to slave owners at the church in Ephesus, Paul instructed them to “give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him”

¹⁰ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN., AMG Publishers, 2002), 130.

(Eph 6:9). Paul told Philemon to regard his slave, Onesimus, “no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother” (Phm 1:16).

Biblically, God does not call for Christians to reform society. This does not mean that societal transformation is not a concern for Christians. It is a great concern. However, we realize true and lasting transformation must occur from the inside out, as people are regenerated through faith in Christ and mature spiritually through learning and living God’s Word. Where Christianity prevails in a society, institutions of slavery will naturally dissolve, and freedom will be maintained by a moral and just people. John Adams knew this very well and said, “Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” Sadly, we know from Scripture that the majority of people in the world will not accept Christ as Savior (Matt 7:13-14). Therefore, they will choose to live as slaves in Satan’s world-system where his philosophies and values will predominate until Christ returns and establishes His kingdom on earth. As Christians, we are called to share the Gospel that people might receive new life and be liberated from Satan’s slave-market. If a person rejects Jesus as Savior, then that person chooses to continue as a slave to Satan and his world-system. It’s unfortunate, but it’s their choice, and it must be respected. We cannot force them to be free.

Slavery to sin is both a positional and experiential reality. Positionally, it means unbelievers belong to Satan and are referred to as his children (Matt 13:38; John 8:44; Acts 13:10; 1 John 3:10). Experientially it means unbelievers are slaves to Satan’s philosophies and values which predominate in the world, as well as being in bondage to the sinful passions that spring from the fallen nature. Passions born of the sin nature can lead to various forms of bondage such as alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling addiction, power-lust, approbation-lust, etc. Ultimately, unbelievers who reject God’s offer of salvation through faith alone in Christ alone (John 3:16; Acts 4:12; 16:31; Eph 2:8-9; Tit 3:5) will spend eternity with Satan and his angels in the Lake of Fire (Matt 25:41; Rev 20:10-15). Sadly, believers, who belong to Christ, can also fall victim to the passions of their sinful nature (Rom 13:14; 1 Pet 2:11; 1 John 2:15-16). Though believers are saved forever (John 10:28-30), they can forfeit their eternal rewards (Matt 5:19; 2 John 1:8). Those who are born again are saved the penalty of sin (John 5:24; Rom 6:23; 8:1), the power of sin (Rom 6:11; 8:13; 2 Cor 5:17), and ultimately the presence of sin (Phil 3:21; 1 John 3:2).

The reality is we are all born into Satan’s slave-market of sin and helpless to liberate ourselves (Rom 5:6-10; Eph 2:1-3). But God desires our freedom from Satan’s domain, and He sent Jesus into the world to be our Liberator. Jesus was born without sin (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1 John 3:5), which meant He was born free. Furthermore, He maintained His freedom from Satan’s domain by living righteously in the Father’s will (Matt 5:17-18; Heb 10:5-8). Finally, Jesus willingly went to the cross and died a death He did not deserve. Jesus said, “For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to

give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He willingly shed His blood on the cross as payment for our sin-debt. Jesus purchased our freedom. Paul told the Christians at Corinth, “You have been bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20a; cf., 1 Cor 7:23a). Peter said our redemption was not “with perishable things like silver or gold...but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Pet 1:18-19). We can be free from Satan’s tyranny if we accept Jesus’ payment for our sin, believing He died for our sins, was buried, and raised again on the third day (1 Cor 15:3-4). Our salvation and entrance into the family of God introduces us to the possibility of greater freedoms and blessings, but only if we make good choices according to God’s Word and advance to spiritual maturity. Our freedom is protected and maintained when we possess and live morally as God directs.