

Text: Exod. 21:1-11

Title: "Israel's civil law: masters and slaves"

Time: 9/5/2021 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: The first African American man to address Congress was the pastor of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D. C. He was a former slave named Henry Highland Garnet, and he titled his sermon that day, "Let the Monster Perish." He preached it to the 38th Congress on Sunday, February 12, 1865, just days prior to their adoption of the 13th amendment to the U. S. Constitution, which bans slavery in our nation: "Section 1 - Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction. Section 2 - Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation."

The monster Garnet decried was slavery, and his text was Matt. 23:4, "For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers." He spoke forcibly about the incompatibility of American freedom with this American original sin.

Garnet explained that the racist chattel slavery, which his nation was still fighting a bloody war to end, was a violation of God-given human dignity. He told Congress on that day: "Great God! I would as soon attempt to enslave Gabriel or Michael as to enslave a man made in the image of God, and for whom Christ died. Slavery is snatching man from the high place to which he was lifted by the hand of God, and dragging him down to the level of the brute crea-

tion, where he is made to be the companion of the horse and the fellow of the ox.

“It tears the crown of glory from his head and as far as possible obliterates the image of God that is in him. Slavery preys upon man, and man only. Why? Because a brute has not reason, faith, nor an undying spirit, nor conscience. It does not look forward to the future with joy or fear, nor reflect upon the past with satisfaction or regret.

“Our poor and forlorn brother, whom thou hast labeled ‘slave,’ is also a man. He may be unfortunate, weak, helpless, and despised and hated; nevertheless, he is a man. His God and thine has stamped on his forehead his title to his inalienable rights in characters that can be read by every intelligent being. Pitiless storms of outrage may have beaten upon his defenseless head, and he may have descended through ages of oppression; yet he is a man. God made him such, and his brother cannot unmake him. Woe, woe to him who attempts to commit the accursed crime.”

This preacher knew slavery was wrong because he knew his Bible. He knew that God has created man in His own image, and that there is a form of slavery that treats man like an animal rather than what God has made him, a human. He knew that humans are not animals, and he was taught so by the God who begins His legislative provisions for the nation of Israel with protections for its poorest and lowest class, the Hebrew slave.

Exodus is about the way out, about redemption, about deliverance. The first four chapters speak of Israel’s need for deliverance as slaves in Egypt and God’s provision of a deliverer. Beginning in chapter 5, we read about the miracles Israel’s God accomplished to deliver His people from slav-

ery. And now in the end of the book we read about what the life of the delivered should be. The redeemed life is a covenantal relationship with the Redeemer (chapter 19); the redeemed life is a lawful life (chapters 20-24); and the redeemed life is a worshipful life (chapters 25-40).

So that is the context for the Lord's instructions concerning masters and slaves in our passage. Other passages concern taking slaves as part of a national defense strategy, but this passage is focused on taking a fellow citizen of the commonwealth of Israel as a slave (v. 2). The reason a Hebrew could find himself in this situation is an economic one. When poverty-stricken and unable to pay their debts, God's people never sat at home hoping their president borrows another stimulus check from their grandkids to send to them. No, Hebrews were given the opportunity to work off their debts under the provisions outlined here.

What is remarkable about these provisions is the way they recognize the dignity of humans made in the image of God. This morning, I want us to see four truths these directives teach us about human dignity.

I. The dignity of humans means their rights come from God (v. 1).

Illustration: You may have read the article titled "Are My Rights Being Violated?" in the August edition of the *New Boston Beacon*. In that article the author asked an important question, but her answer fell woefully short. She asked: "In determining whether someone's rights are being violated, the first question is, what is the right, and where did it come from?" That is a very good understanding of the first question. But here is the insufficient answer the author provided: "We have certain rights granted by the United States

Constitution, others granted by the New Hampshire Constitution, and others passed by the United States Congress and the New Hampshire Legislature.”

Tragically, that is the wrong answer. That is not where our rights come from. She concludes from this wrong answer this: “In none of these documents do we find a grant of a ‘right’ to not wear a mask.” I do not want this message to be about wearing a mask, but I think we fairly see a difference between this author’s view of where our rights come from and the answer our passage gives to this question.

Application: Our passage teaches that it is foundational to human dignity to understand that our rights come from our Creator, not other creatures and the documents they author or the laws they pass. In fact, our nation’s founding documents were designed to limit government law-making so that our God-given rights could be secured. They were not written to give us our rights.

The word translated *judgments* in verse one is a word that speaks of the legal rights God was giving His people when it came to masters and their slaves. God is the one speaking to Moses in verse one. These rights are coming from Him. And the fact that these rights come from Him is good news for masters and their slaves. Israel never had an institution like the American chattel slave market. 19th century Bible scholar, Gustav Oehler, explains why: “The Old Testament, in ascribing to man the nature and dignity of one made in the image of God as his inalienable and fundamental characteristic, --in teaching, further, the descent of all mankind from one blood, and so representing them as a race of brethren, --pronounces in advance a condition without personal rights, such as is seen in slavery among the heathen, to be inadmissible” (*The Theology of the Old Testament*, 239).

This equality before God, the giver of human rights, kept Hebrew masters in line. Job had manservants and maidservants. Listen to his understanding of their rights: "If I did despise the cause of my manservant or of my maidservant, when they contended with me, what then shall I do when God riseth up? And when he visiteth, what shall I answer him? Did not he that made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?" (31:13-15).

In Deuteronomy 15, the procedures of our passage are repeated, and the Lord explains why He gives them there this way: "And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee: therefore, I command thee this thing today" (v. 15).

Lev. 25:55, "For unto me the children of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." Paul taught the same truth: "Ye are bought with a price; be not the servants of men" (1 Cor. 7:23). The dignity of humans means that we are all responsible first to be servants of God. Our rights come from Him, whether our fellow citizens still believe that or not, or our government officials still secure those rights or seek to take them away. This makes them inalienable. Governments and their documents could never give humans inalienable rights, because governments and their documents can be changed to say the opposite. In the words of Garnet, "His God and thine has stamped on his forehead his title to his inalienable rights in characters that can be read by every intelligent being."

II. The dignity of humans means they should be free (v. 2).

Application: Clearly, an important limit is placed on the arrangement between masters and slaves outlined here. The situation is treated as a necessary evil that must be only

temporary. There is an agreed upon start date and a definite end date. The Lord had worked mighty miracles to make Israelites free. He wants them to stay that way.

The Deuteronomy 15 passage includes the detail that when the master frees the slave, he is also supposed to give him provisions so that he can get started on a new life of freedom and prosperity: "And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty: Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress: of that wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him" (vv. 13-14). Economic freedom is a blessing from God that is necessary for living free. Socialist systems destroy this freedom.

III. The dignity of humans means their families are precious (vv. 3-4, 7-12).

Applications: These verses raise some questions that I am not going to have time to address in this message. Respect for the family is clear in verse 3. Verse 4 has some complex translation issues associated with it, which I cannot get into this morning, but let me say simply that what we conclude about this verse must account for the fact that after seven years women as well as men were allowed to go free (Deut. 15:12). No female slave was stuck with her master beyond seven years.

My interpretation of the verse, after some adjusting of the translation, tells me that a master could give a wife to a slave, and it was possible that part of that marriage arrangement could be that any children born to the couple would belong to the master. In that case, the slave would depart without their children. Whether the wife stayed was up to her. Slaves would rarely agree to these provisions and

simply wait for both their freedom and that of the potential wife's to be married. Marriage would be discouraged thereby so that slaves could attend to their master's business.

Verses 7-12 deal with the special case of female slaves who are eligible for marriage. In that case, the summary of these provisions is that masters were not to hinder their opportunity to marry a son of Abraham rather than a foreigner.

The bottom line of all of these provisions is that they are designed to protect the family because the dignity of humans means their families are precious and must be carefully accounted for. One important application is the truth that families are responsible for educating their children before the Lord. State educators do not always respect that truth. I have seen signs around town that say, "My kids, my decision," when it comes to our school's decision to have kids wearing masks in school. Well, government schools cannot operate that way, and if you send your child to one you will find this out before long. Their approach has to be "everyone's kids, elected officials' decision."

IV. The dignity of humans means they can love (vv. 5-6).

Application: Oehler explains the signification of this ceremony: "As the meaning of the ceremony in general is obligation to permanent obedience, the symbolic act is applied to the organ of hearing, and that by a sign which remains forever. The affixing the ear to the door-post, caused by piercing, denotes that the servant is bound permanently to the house" (*The Theology of the Old Testament*, 242).

Love is the greatest characteristic of the image of God in mankind. God is love. We have the ability to love by virtue of our being made in the image of the God who is love.

Even a slave can display the glory of this part of his being, as he loves his master, loves his wife, loves his children, and acts sacrificially on that love. We must never forget in our battles for the blessings of human dignity, that the greatest of these dignities is love.

Conclusion: I want us to see how the love of the slave of our passage corresponds to the love of our Savior, to whom every passage of Scripture points. God's Son became a slave to pay our unpayable debt of sin. He loved His master, God the Father, and willingly did all His will. He forfeited His personal freedom, allowing the Father to nail Him to the doorpost of our house, the cross of Calvary. He did it to be with the church His corporate bride, and each of us as believers this morning, as His offspring individually. Even this morning, Jesus is still with us, who once was pierced that we might be with Him. What wondrous love is this? Do you know the Slave who was pierced for you? Now that you know what He has done, would you turn Him away, after all He has sacrificed for you?

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*