

The Love Slave

“I Love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go free” (Ex. 21:5.)

A remarkable contrast between law and love is given in the Bible immediately after the Ten Commandments. As despicable as it seems today, the Law did make provisions for slavery. The word translated as “servant” in this passage is the Hebrew word “ebed.” This is precisely the same word translated as “slave” in Jer. 2:14. The “law slave” was his master’s property. The master could do with him, or her, as he pleased. There were only a few restrictions. He could beat his servant but could not knock out an eye or a tooth (Ex. 21:26-27.) He could not beat his servant to death, but he could beat them so severely that they would die in a day or two (Ex. 21:20-21.) At the end of six years, the “law slave” was to be set free (Ex. 21:2.)

At the same time we are told about law and slavery, we are exposed to another type of slavery which was far more demanding. At the end of six years the Hebrew servant was to be set free. They could, however, renounce that freedom. They could choose to be a slave without the protection of law. If they loved their master and wanted to remain in his service, they could become his slave forever. At the end of six years they would not go free. If their master knocked out an eye, or a tooth, they could not appeal to the law to gain their freedom. They were slaves forever. The impetus responsible for such self denial was not law, it was love. Only if the slave loved his master enough would he be willing to deny self and become a slave forever.

The permanent nature of this commitment was to be marked by a public ceremony. The master and slave would come before the judges to authenticate the decision. At this time the master would bring his slave to the door, or door post, and bore his ear through with an awl, and the slave would serve him forever (Ex. 21:6.)

The Greek word for slave is “doulos.” This is the word used to describe the condescension of Christ. Paul wrote to the Philippians that though Christ was God, He did not consider His role as God something to be clutched at. In this remarkable passage we are told that Jesus emptied Himself and took the very nature of a “slave” (Phil. 2:7.)

Slavery was an integral part of the Roman world. Gibbon estimates the number of slaves under the reign of Claudius to be no less than one-half the entire population. Schaff, the historian, points out that between the conquest of Greece in 146 B.C., and the reign of Alexander Severus (A. D. 222-235) the ratio was three slaves for every freeman. The point is that citizens in the Roman world immediately understood the profound implications of “God” becoming a “slave.”

The designation of “doulos” or “slave” was not just used of Jesus. It was a common way to describe all Christians. It was used of Paul (Rom. 1:1;) Epaphras (Col. 2:14;) Timothy (II Tim. 2:24;) James (James 1:1;) Peter (II Pet. 1:1;) Jude (Jude 1:1;) and John (Rev. 1:1.) The Scriptures admonish us to have the mind of Christ. We are to think like Jesus thought. If Jesus gave up His role as God to become a slave, what excuse do we have?

The book of Romans puts it like this: **“Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey-- whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. (Rom 6:16-18 NIV)**

Certainly it is not wise or judicious to become slaves to sin. The smartest thing one will ever do, however, is to become a slave of Jesus Christ. Paradoxically, in this type of “slavery” we find true freedom.

Jesus is our Leader and Example. He has been exalted to the highest place of honour in the universe and if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed (John 8:36.)