

## The New Testament and Roman Slavery

Slavery in the both the Old Testament and New Testament was never based on race. While there were no known slave markets in ancient Israel, they were plentiful during first century Rome.

### 1. Slavery was a Roman Commercial Institution

- We do not know when Rome officially became a “slave society” but many historians trace it back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.
- As the Roman Empire grew, so did the demand for resources, labor and land.
- The Roman *Law of the Nations* declared that anyone who had not entered a treaty with Rome was an enemy (having no rights); anyone captured could be forced into slavery.
- Rome created the largest slave society in history. Depending on the city or province, anywhere between 15-30% of the residents were slaves.
- Some historians believe that 100,000 new slaves were needed annually to meet the demands of the growing Roman Empire in the first century.
- In order to meet that demand, Rome would have to conquer territories (forced slavery) and have natural reproduction within slave families.
- How did someone become a slave? By birth or by an event/circumstance.
- Any injury a slave would receive from his master would be viewed as tort.
- Slaves had to create enough capital for their master to justify keeping them alive; if slaves were paid a wage, their wage would be after their master deducted whatever he thought was necessary to keep them alive.
- Masters would often times give slaves incentives to increase production (manumission, “gang” leader, oversight of property, etc, etc).
- Not all slaves worked agriculture/mining. There were many who were bankers, merchants, artisans, and blacksmiths. The skillset of the slave and the needs of the master determined the slave’s lot in life.

### 2. Slave, not Servant

- The Greek word for slave (doulos) is used over 130 times in the NT yet rarely translated as “slave.” It is often times translated as “servant” or “bondslave/bondservant.”
- Many Bible translators did not like the negative connotation that accompanies slavery, so in many translations, where the Greek word should render “slave” it is “servant.”
- The apostles and disciples knew of the cultural implications of slavery (comprehensibly worse than American slavery) and still chose to identify themselves as a slave of Christ (Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1).

- The audiences of those letters would have known exactly what they meant and were not offended.
- A slave was owned; he was completely and utterly committed to his master. His obedience was singular, and he lived to please him. The slave knew what pleased his master and did everything in his power to do it. The slave was a one-track/single-minded man. Obedience to his master always took precedence. He received all praise and reward from his master, as well as all discipline and punishment.
- Christians are not servants in regard to their obedience; servants can quit if a job was too tough. A servant could be part-time. There is independence for the servant ... he can come and go. Not for the slave; he is owned and he has given up his self-autonomy.
- A slave was known by his master and his master was known by his slave.
  - A complaining slave would show others around him that his master was not good to him.
  - An anxious slave would damage the reputation of his master; a worrying slave who had a master that provided for all of his needs would bring unfounded reproach on him.
  - A disobedient slave would communicate to the master and those around that he did not love or fear him.
  - The master would corporately be known by how the slave speaks of him.

### 3. External Law to Inward Heart

- Fear and love towards a master produced obedience; mere profession is not proof of love. Obedience is a matter of love and disobedience is a failure to love (John 14:15).
- The Christian must be fully committed to his Lord not because the Law demands it, but because his heart desires it. The Christian says "not my will, but yours."
- The Law only condemns (Romans 8:3) but the Spirit of God makes the unwilling sinner who hates God supernaturally willing to adore, cherish and follow Christ.
- The Lord Jesus Christ, who had no need of us, chose to save us and redeem all those who commit their lives to Him.
- Unlike the harsh masters of first century Rome, our God is also our Father (Ephesians 1:17) and our husband (Ephesians 5:25). We are co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17) and also a slave (Matthew 6:24). Willing and joyful obedience proceeds from regeneration.
- God changes the heart before he changes the culture which is why the abolition of slavery was a gospel narrative, not secular.