

Truths that are out of fashion Bondservice

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Putting the record straight from God's point-of-view

Bondservice means being enslaved to a master, which was never what God originally intended for any person, man, woman, boy or girl. This form of servitude was a result of sin entering into God's creation and it was never condoned by Him in Scripture. In fact, enslavers, or slave traders, that is, those who capture someone in order to sell that person into slavery, are condemned along with other gross sinners listed by Paul in 1 Timothy 1:9-11.

"The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted."

Bondservice in Scripture

According to one Bible Dictionary,¹ the origins of slavery are obscured in the mists of antiquity, and it appears that virtually all ancient societies practised slavery in some form or another. The word 'bondservice' doesn't actually appear in Scripture. But Scripture is permeated with the idea in its many references to bondservants. There are 800 direct references (over 714 verses) to 'ebed' the Hebrew word for bondservant in the Old Testament. There are 125 direct references (over 118 verses) to bondservants in the New Testament. The Greek word 'doulos' for bondservant means 'one who is subservient to, and entirely at the disposal of, his master; a slave.' Some Bible translations simply use the word 'slave', others 'servant'. In New Testament times, the term bondservant could refer to someone who voluntarily served others. But it usually referred to one who was held in a permanent position of servitude. Under Roman law, a bondservant was considered the owner's personal property. Slaves essentially had no 'human rights' and could even be killed with impunity by their owners.

Scripture simply uses the fact that they've existed throughout history to teach many valuable lessons of spiritual life. In the same way that God used adultery and prostitution to demonstrate to Israel their frequent unfaithfulness to Him (see, for example, the book of the prophet Hosea). So for Christians, bondservice is a metaphor of willing, loving submission to God and the Lord Jesus, whose service is perfect freedom.

Are believers actually bondservants of Christ?

We can't just ignore Bondservice because it's considered 'out of fashion.' The Lord Jesus himself was a bondservant, and He said,

“A servant is not greater than his master” (John 13:16).

That we're His bondservants is a basic fact of Christian discipleship! The Lord made this clear in the parables He taught, especially in Matthew's Gospel in His 'The kingdom of heaven is like...' parables where the analogy of the relationship between master and servants is applied to the rules of life in the kingdom of God. Moreover, the apostles Paul, James, Peter, Jude and John all declared that they were His bond servants (Romans 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; Jude 1; Revelation 1:1). Therefore I want to consider bondservice under three main headings:

1. What bondservants were, and what is meant by bondservice, in Scripture.
2. The Lord Jesus, God's perfect Bondservant.
3. Practical implications for us Christian believers living in the twenty-first century, although there's some practical exhortations in the first two sections.

All Scripture quotations will be from the ESV, but sometimes I'll substitute the word 'bondservant' for 'servant' or 'slave' to emphasise our subject.

1. What bondservants were, and what is meant by bondservice, in Scripture

Bondservants are usually called 'servants' [Hebrew: ebed] in the Old Testament. The first mention is in Genesis 9:25. [Noah said about his grandson Canaan:](#)

[“Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers”
\(cp.vv.26-27\).](#)

Abraham is the first recorded person to have servants (Genesis 12:16). Several times in the prophets, Messiah is called Jehovah's Servant (e.g., Isaiah 42:1, 52:13 & 53:11; Zechariah 3:8). The last-mention of bondservants occurs in Malachi 4:4. In the New testament, the Greek word for 'bondservant' is 'doulos' and is first mentioned in Matthew 8:9 with the last in Revelation 22:6. Frequently in the New Testament, when it applies to believers, doulos indicates subjection without the idea of bondage.²

Throughout Scripture, a bondservant was essentially a slave who entirely belonged to another person. Bondservants did not have any 'human rights' of their own, they were the property of the person who owned them, generally the one who had purchased them. In the Old Testament, there were certain nuances applicable to certain situations. However, although the Mosaic law recognised servitude it provided necessary 'checks and balances' for the protection of bondservants which benefited them with its righteous rules. But basically if you were a slave in those days, you remained a slave for your entire life. If you had a spouse and children, they also were your master's property. In general, there was no 'get-out clause', although in Israel the Mosaic law provided means for your release and redemption. Your life consisted of doing (and believing) whatever your master (or mistress) said and believed. This is the fundamental idea of Bondservice, which forms the basis of all Scripture teaching on the subject and is applicable to believers of any dispensation. For Christians, Bondservice means that God owns us and controls us. We must do His will in every aspect of our lives. Everything said or done must be to serve Him, and for His glory; and that of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bondservice in Scripture: was it abject slavery?

Before moving on to my second heading, I want to stress that Scriptural teaching about Bondservice does not convey any idea that it's abject slavery, one in which slaves are brow-beaten into serving a cruel tyrant without possessing any quality of life. No, it's rather that as Creator and Redeemer, God made us and bought us for His own purpose and pleasure. There are blessings and benefits both now and in the future for the Lord's bondservants. As the hymn puts it, "There is no peace, no joy, no thrill like walking in His will." In Luke 12, the Lord Jesus described

the rewards He'll give to His faithful servants, who are attentive to their Master's requirements whilst waiting for His return:

"Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them" (v.37).

When Peter asked the Lord, "Are you telling this parable for us or for all?" the Lord replied that it applied to all His servants whom he finds doing His will when He comes. But He also warned that some, who claimed to be doing His service but were ignoring His instructions, will be found wanting and will suffer banishment from His presence" (vv.41-48).

We also must take on board the Lord's warning not to have high hopes for what we think our own rewards should be:

"Will any one of you who has a [bondservant]...say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank the [bondservant] because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded [by me], say, 'We are unworthy [bondservants]; we have only done what was our duty'" (Luke 17:7-10).

From Matthew 19, we learn these solemn truths about rewards for bondservants: that the Lord chooses the work for us to do, whether it's to bear 'the burden of the day and the scorching heat' or some task. He said that He's generous and we should be content with that knowledge. He's decided:

"So the last will be first, and the first last" (v.16).

2) The Lord Jesus Christ God's perfect Bondservant: Isaiah's four Servant Songs

In Isaiah, God calls attention to His perfect Bondservant in four Servant Songs which describe what perfect servitude is.

First Servant Song

The first song is 42:1-8.

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him" (v.1).

And highlights the perfect Servant's character: He understood that His service was for God's glory:

"I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness. ...I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other" (vv.6-8).

In His service, Messiah relied entirely upon God, who promised, "I will take you by the hand and keep you" (v.6b). Jesus always avoided being a public spectacle. He wasn't 'showy', even though He did miraculous deeds which caused people to wonder. Matthew quoted Isaiah 42:1-3 in ch.12:18-21 of his Gospel as the reason why Jesus ordered the people He'd healed not to publicise Him. He was also gentle and compassionate:

“A bruised reed he [did] not break, and a faintly burning wick he [did] not quench He [did] not grow faint or [was] discouraged” (Isaiah 42:3-4).

He pursued His Father’s will even to death.

Adding these last three points together, I’m reminded of Paul’s words in Philippians 2:5b-8:

“Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a [bondservant], being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Paul applied this truth to the Philippian church, because there were some personal disagreements within the fellowship. His exhortation was:

“ So if there is any encouragement in Christ...[be] in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (2:1-5a).

His exhortation is just as needful today for every church, as we all know from personal experience!

Finally, God’s Servant is righteous and He will faithfully establish justice in the world, when He reigns the nations in the Millenium.

Second Servant Song

The second Servant Song is in 49:1-7 and shows that Messiah understood His terms of service, which were to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; and to be a light for the Gentile nations, so that God’s salvation reached the entire world. Paul recognised the full ‘job description’ of God’s Bondservant in Romans 15:8-9:

“Christ became a [bondservant] to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.””

Messiah also understood:

- That the LORD formed, called, and named Him from His mother’s womb (Isaiah 49:1, 5).
- That the LORD made His mouth like a sharp sword and a polished arrow for God was His strength (v.2).
- That He was the LORD’s servant, who would glorify God (v.3).
- That although He would feel that He had laboured in vain and spent His strength for nothing and vanity, He would be recompensed by God (v.4).
- That He would be honoured by the LORD, even though He was deeply despised, abhorred by Israel and its rulers:

“Thus says the LORD...“Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves [before You] because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel...has chosen you” (vv.7-8).

Third Servant Song

The third Servant Song is in 50:4-9, in which Christ prophetically described himself as the One who relied upon His Master’s daily guidance and who was totally obedient to His Master’s will:

“The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. But the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint,⁴ and I know that I shall not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. ...Behold, the Lord GOD helps me.”

From these words, we learn that to be true bondservants we must be in daily prayerful communion with our Lord and Master, listening to His voice by reading His word. The Servant’s commitment, “I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. I gave...”, etc. (vv.5-6) are reflected in these words of the Lord Jesus:

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10: 45).

He preceded this statement by reminding His disciples that,

“Whoever would be [considered] great among [believers] must be... slave of all” (vv.43-44).

Fourth Servant Song

The final Servant Song is in 52:13-53:12, the song of the Suffering Servant, which rejoices in His exaltation and in His rewards for His suffering, when He poured out His soul to death. This oft-quoted prophecy refers to Christ’s vicarious sufferings for us. Whilst most of this familiar Scripture applies uniquely to Him, the Suffering Servant, here are some points from it we should consider as we would seek to be His faithful bondservants.

1. Jesus’ submission to God’s will was likened to a lamb being led to slaughter, and a silent sheep before its shearers (v.7) because He appreciated that it was the LORD’s will to crush Him (v.10). Christ invites us to similar bondservice:

“Come to me...and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29).

2. Being God’s bondservants may include us being mis-understood, wrongly accused, despised and rejected by mankind, even by religious people! As the Lord said in John 15:18-21:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also perse-

cute you. ...But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.”

3. Being God's bondservants will include much sorrow because our Master, Christ was a Man of sorrows (Isaiah 53:3). It may also may include suffering, and even death, for His name's sake. In the song of the Suffering Servant, Christ is said to have suffered at the hands of men. He suffered physically in His body, which was roughly abused by them. He suffered in His soul, when the religious leaders of Israel concluded that He was an impostor and thoroughly deserved severe punishment and death. He was afflicted, browbeaten, and intellectually intimidated in His spirit, before and after they'd nailed Him to the Cross.

Are we prepared for facing these kinds of opposition from the world of unbelievers?

3) Practical implications for us Christian believers living in the twenty-first century

“The kingdom of God is...a matter of...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men” (Romans 14:17-18).

“Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient [bondservants], you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once [bondservants] of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become [bondservants] of righteousness. ...For just as you once presented your members as [bondservants] to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as [bondservants] to righteousness leading to sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become [bondservants] of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:16-23).

But whose bondservant are you?

These verses explain that everyone is enslaved to either one of two master's: to sin or to God. You and I know that we're Christians because we believe the Gospel. More accurately, we obeyed it by faith (see 1:5; 10:16; 16:26). Romans 6:16 states that we not only obeyed it, but we committed ourselves to practise the faith, called “ the standard of teaching”, which has set us free from master sin, the ruler of the world to become God's bondservants. We've signed the contract, so to speak.

We must say:

- “No!” to the demands Master Sin makes upon us each day of our lives.
- “No!” to the law [rule] of sin (Romans 7:8-25).
- “No!” to mammon, that is, material possessions and wealth (Matthew 6:24).
- “No!” to self, my Ego (Galatians 2:20, Colossians 3: 9-10).
- “No!” to various passions and pleasures, malice, envy, and hatred (Titus 3:3).
- “No!” to worldliness the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1 John 2:16).
- “No!” to idolatry in all its present-day forms (Galatians 4:8-9, Colossians 3:9-10).
- “No!” to religious bigotry and legalism (Colossians 2:20-23).

But “Yes” to God because we have been freed to become bondservants of righteousness. God demands complete control over our minds and bodies, over what we fill our minds with and what we do and where we go; and that we serve Him. Jesus said we cannot serve two masters (Luke 16:13). We either serve the Lord or we serve sin!

There’s no get out clause: the injunction is, “Serve the Lord” (Romans 12:11)

To recap, all believers are bondservants to their Lord and Master. In the Upper Room discourse (John 13-17), the Lord taught the disciples that they were all bondservants because He was a bondservant; and that He was their example to follow (13:1-17). He was their Master, who they must obey. We can’t ignore the truth of bondservice because it’s considered to be ‘out of fashion.’ Rather, as those who have been captured by His great mercy, love and grace, we should surrender ourselves to His cause and commit ourselves to serve Him wholeheartedly.

Let’s be like the Hebrew bondservant, who truly said:

‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free
(Exodus 21:5).⁴

Verse 6 records,

“Then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his [bondservant] forever.”

Likewise, there’s no get-out-clause for us. Christ our Master: we’re to serve Him forever!

So then, am I a bondservant of the Master?

- Scripture states that I am, or I should be!
- “Our only Master and Lord [is] Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).
- “Ye serve the Lord Christ (Colossians 3:24, KJV).

Prayer

Not I, but Christ, be honoured, loved, exalted;
Not I, but Christ, be seen, be known, be heard;
Not I, but Christ, in every look and action;
Not I, but Christ, in every thought and word.

Not I, but Christ, to gently soothe in sorrow;
Not I, but Christ, to wipe the falling tear;
Not I, but Christ, to lift the weary burden;
Not I, but Christ, to hush away all fear.

Not I, but Christ, in lowly, silent labour;
Not I, but Christ, in humble, earnest toil;
Christ, only Christ! no show, no ostentation;
Christ, none but Christ, the gatherer of the spoil.

Christ, only Christ, ere long will fill my vision;
Glory excelling, soon, full soon, I'll see -
Christ, only Christ, my every wish fulfilling -
Christ, only Christ, my All in all to be.⁵

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk 'Bondservice', talk number T1413 in our series entitled 'Truths that are out of fashion'. There is a fuller exposition of the subject in the transcript on the Truth for Today website.

Postscript on Bondservice: is it identifiable with the slave trade of 18th and 19th centuries?

I suppose that of all of the subjects in this series, the idea of being anyone being a bondservant does not sit well in twenty first century UK culture. Generally people equate bondservice with the slave trade of 18th and 19th centuries consisting of forced labour of, and vile cruelty to, these human beings, which everyone these days agree were utterly abhorrent and therefore forthrightly condemn! As an aside, within walking distance of my house is Wilberforce House, the headquarters of the Christian Institute set up by the late Colin Hart and John Burns. It is named in honour of William Wilberforce. In 1780, he became member of parliament for Hull but later represented Yorkshire. His conversion to Christ completely changed him, and in 1790 he joined the Clapham Sect. His newly-found Christian faith caused him to become a social reformer, particularly with respect to improving factory conditions in Britain. For 18 years he regularly introduced anti-slavery motions in parliament, which eventually led to the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act of 1807; and then the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, giving freedom to all slaves in the British Empire. So we see it was Christians who first acted to highlight the immorality of and outlaw such practices. But is there any hope of forgiveness and redemption for slave traders, past or present? The Christian Institute also has a second building called The John Newton Centre. That stands as a testimony to the saving power of God, who is able to change sinners through the Gospel. Even sinners such as this notorious slave trader, John Newton, writer of the hymn Amazing Grace and preacher of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!⁶

Footnotes

1. New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology, IVP, Leicester, 1995.
2. "Servant No.1 DOULOS" , p.1029, W E Vine's Dictionary, Macdonald, Virginia.
3. Cp. Luke 9:51.
4. The Hebrew servant is a beautiful picture of Christ, the perfect Bondservant!
5. Mrs. A. A. Whiddington (1853 – 1923)
6. John Newton (1725 – 1807).

Please Note:

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