

Slavery

How the word was used in the first century

- Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: All the words in this group [slavery] serve to describe the status of a slave or an attitude corresponding to that of a slave...Hence we have a service which is not a matter of choice for the one who renders it, which he is to perform whether he likes it or not, because he is subject as a slave to an alien will, to the will of his owner.
- In Greek society, slavery was opposite to their love of freedom, being the founders of modern democracy. Their only exception to the abhorrence of describing themselves as slaves even in figures of speech was in describing the nobility of being a slave to the law or social order.
- In Hebrew writing, “slave of God” was a common description, and their most famous leaders were described as slaves of the people. But, slaves in the real world had no rights. Calling someone a slave was a high insult, possibly resulting in prosecution.

New Testament view of literal slavery

- In the New Testament, slavery was to be avoided (1 Corinthians 7:21 – 23), but the position of slave was not deemed a moral evil. Rather, slaves were commended to work hard and well (Ephesians 6:5 – 8, Colossians 3:22 – 24, 1 Timothy 6:1 – 2, Titus 2:9 – 10, 1 Peter 2:18 – 20). Christian slave owners were not directed to release their slaves, but to be good masters (Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 4:1)

Slaves of God, Jesus, and one another

- The New Testament repeats the phrase, “slave of God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9, Titus 1:1, James 1:1), but Paul objected from being described in that way by a demon (Acts 16:17). The phrase lacked the negative side of slavery because there was no fear in being a slave of God, since God acted in the slave’s best interests (Romans 8:15). The description of “slave of Christ” is much more common (Romans 1:1, 2 Peter 1:1, Jude 1, Revelation 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Galatians 1:10, Colossians 4:12, 2 Timothy 2:24, Romans 14:18, Romans 12:11, Colossians 3:24). Paul used the image to describe idol worshippers as slaves to non-gods (Galatians 4:8).
- Christians were described as slaves of one another, which would be unattractive to the Greek notion of the liberty of the individual (1 Corinthians 9:19, 2 Corinthians 4:5, Galatians 5:13, Philippians 2:22). However, Jesus was described as a slave in this same way (Philippians 2:7, John 13:5 – 17).

Figurative slavery

- The figure of speech that extends beyond common usage of the time is that of being a slave to sin (Romans 6:6, Romans 6:16 – 23, Romans 16:18, Titus 3:3, 2 Peter 2:19). Both Jews and Greeks would object to the characterization because, as most active addicts would say, “I can stop any time I want.” Paul made the point that Judgment was the cause (Hebrews 2:15); people are held in slavery to sin because of their fear of death and the next stop, Judgment.
- Paul extended the figure to include slavery to the Law of Moses (Romans 7:6, Romans 7:25, Galatians 4:1, Galatians 4:7, Galatians 4:21 – 5:1).
- We are redeemed from slavery to the normal decay of the world (Ephesians 5:16, Colossians 4:5, Romans 8:21) and from sin (Romans 8:23, Ephesians 1:14).