

Is Slavery All That Bad? James 1:1

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In his epistle, James, the brother of Jesus, under direction of the Holy Spirit describes himself as a “*bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ* (James 1:1).” Likewise, the apostle Peter describes himself as a “*bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ*” (2 Peter 1:1). The apostle Paul uses the same description in Titus 1:1, “*Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ.*” Jude states in verse 1 that he too is a “*bondservant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.*” And finally, John, in his last contribution to the *New Testament*, begins the Book of Revelation with these words:

¹ The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated *it* by His angel to His bond-servant John, ² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, *even* to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.¹

In each of these verses we see that “*bondservant*” is used to describe these N.T. authors. Since these descriptions aptly describe James, Peter, Paul, Jude, and John, all under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we have to ask ourselves the following questions:

- What does being a “*bondservant*” literally mean?
- To whom are we serving?
- What are indicators if we really are bondservants to the Lord Jesus Christ?
- How can I be a better slave to the Lord Jesus Christ?

I. What does being a “*bondservant*” mean?

- A. Being a bondservant comes from the Greek word “δοῦλος” (*doulos*). It literally means “*slave*” or “*servant*.” It can be used to refer literally to “*a slave, a man of servile condition.*” This word can also be used metaphorically to describe one who gives himself up to another’s will; it is one whose service is used by Christ in extending and advancing His cause among others. It is a servant-type disposition that is devoted to another to the disregard of one’s own interests.
- B. Since this word occurs at least 125 times in the *New Testament*, we have numerous biblical references to glean further study. For example, consider reading Matthew 8:9; Mark 10:44; John 8:34; 15:15; Romans 6:20; 1Corinthians 7:21; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 6:5; 1Timothy 6:1; Philemon 16.²

¹*New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Re 1:1-3.

²James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), GGK1528.

- C. Interestingly, in the Greek translation of the *Old Testament*, the *Septuagint* “*doulos*” described Israel’s great leaders who occupied positions of privilege and honor (e.g., Moses [Deut. 34:5; et al.]; David [2 Sam. 7:5; et al.]; and the prophets [Jer. 7:25; 44:4; Amos 3:7]).³
- D. The idea of “*servanthood*” went beyond Israel’s leaders to the nation itself. According to Isaiah 41:8-9, 43:10-13, and 44:1-5, Israel as a nation received a unique call from God to be His servant, one who is a witness to the power, greatness, and glory of God to all the nations of the world.
- E. The nation Israel is not the only one called to be God’s “*servant*.” In the prophetic words of Isaiah in 42:1, the Messiah himself is identified as the “*Servant of the Lord*.” He would be a gentle servant, one who would not raise His voice on the streets or bruise a reed (Isaiah 42:2-3), yet the power of the Holy Spirit would be on Him. Ultimately through Him the gentile world will have the opportunity for salvation, and the light of His salvation will shine to all corners of the earth (Isaiah 49:6). In fact, in Isaiah 50:5-7, the Messiah is graphically described as one who will do the will of the Father no matter what humiliation, suffering, or disrespect He receives. And the *Gospel of Matthew* implies that the actual ministry of Jesus Christ was a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophetic words of the “*Servant of the Lord*” (Matthew 12:17-21; cf. Isaiah 42:1-4).
- F. Thus, rich in O.T. imagery when N.T. authors who were familiar with Jewish biblical thought, characterized themselves as “slaves,” they unashamedly expressed the fact that they belong to Jesus Christ. By using “*doulos*” as a descriptive word to describe themselves, they are highlighting service as a slave, stressing the idea of “*subjection*.” Therefore, the upshot is that for James, Peter, Paul, Jude, and John, to be servant of Jesus Christ is to follow hard after Jesus Christ, following His example by inward conformity and outward obedience, “*subjecting*” every aspect of their lives to Him for His glory. It is a lifestyle that sincerely says in inward affections and outward conformity, “*Not I, but Christ*.”
- G. Famously used in Mark 10:45 and powerfully illustrated in John 13:1-15 we have another Greek word that is related to “*servanthood*.” Did not the Savior say that He came to serve and not to be served (Mark 10:45)? The Greek word for “*serve*” that is used here is “*διακονέω* (*diakoneō*)” which means “*to serve, to render assistance*.” This is poignantly demonstrated when the apostle John recorded the historic event in the Upper Room, on the eve of His persecution, trials, and crucifixion, when Jesus took a towel and washed the feet of His disciples; foot-washing was something only servants did (John 13:1-15). With this descriptive word we see a service of love. Following obedience to the will of the Father, we see a Servant of Love, one whose true cost of servanthood was exemplified upon the horrific but blessed event whereby love (sacrificial love; *agape*), evil (Jesus wrongly punished), hope (redemption made possible), and justice (justification) uniquely converged together upon Calvary.⁴

³Cited from Expository Notes of Tom Constable from the Epistle of James at www.soniclight.com cf. Burdick, Donald W. "James." In *Hebrews-Revelation*. Vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. 12 vols. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981. Burdick, p. 167.

⁴*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 Compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 2:81.

- H. Therefore, since the apostles were committed followers of the Lord Jesus Christ they identified themselves as His servants. This is in keeping with Jesus' instruction to those who are willing to be His committed disciples in Mark 8:34-38:⁵

- 34 And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.
- 35 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.
- 36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?
- 37 "For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?
- 38 "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."⁶

- I. What it means to be a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ is that one must be resolved to deny oneself (i.e., turn away from the idolatry of self-centeredness), take up one's cross (i.e., the willingness to suffer for Jesus even if it costs us everything) and follow Him (present tense).

II. To Whom Are We Serving?

- A. The most central reason why this kind of slavery is not bad is because of the Master believers serve. As stated by my senior pastor Rev. Bruce Bumgardner, "slavery is not bad when you have the right master."
- B. In summary, Jesus Christ is God; He is the second member of the one and only Triune God. Since there is only One God in Three Persons, Jesus Christ is fully and equally God. In essence, He is the sum-total of His infinite perfections. As the God-Man Jesus Christ is undiminished Deity-perfect humanity. Therefore, since God is infinitely perfect He is the perfect Master! *Consider meditating upon the words in Philippians 2:5-11.*

III. What Are Indicators that we are Slaves of Jesus Christ?

- A. Since James, Peter, Paul, Jude, and John are described as "*bondservants of Jesus Christ*," these qualities reveal the fact that it is possible to be a slave of Jesus Christ. Therefore, having *observed* that being a bond-servant is one who is resolved to turn away from the idolatry of self-centeredness, be willing to suffer for Jesus Christ even if it costs us everything, and follow hard after Him in the details of daily living, and *considered* to whom we are serving, the one and only infinite Triune God, what are indicators that we are slaves of Jesus Christ?
- B. The following "*road-signs*" or indicators may assist us in examining ourselves in order to determine whether we are actually are slaves of Jesus Christ. To be sure, these are only indicators and the following list is not complete. Notwithstanding, I do hope they are thought-provoking in scrutinizing ourselves to see whether this godly way of life is evident in the way we live:

⁵ See "An Exposition of Mark 8:34" at www.prshockley.org under the tab, "Spiritual Life." This sermon is also available on audio at www.pinevalleybible.org under "audio ministry." Once there look for "special sermons" and scroll down.

⁶*New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Mk 8:34-38.

1. I may be slave of Jesus Christ when I whole heartily and consistently insist in doing His will rather than seeking to fulfill my selfish, self-promoting desires and wishes. Humility is my practice and pride is foreign to my deep-seated affections.
2. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when my integrity is overwhelmingly known over the years to distinctly model Jesus Christ in my daily dealings with others, whether at work, home, and ministry.
3. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when my conscience remains consistently clear before my holy, all-present, and all-knowing God.
4. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when those who know me best see that I'm completely in love with Jesus Christ, following hard after Him as evidenced in my commitment to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, governing the life of my family around the reverent worship of Jesus Christ, long intense hours of prayers, and the deep meditation of Scripture.
5. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when I regularly go out of my way to minister to the needs of others—even if it significantly (not just marginally) cost me time, resources, and energy.
6. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when I'm willing to give up everything for the cause of Jesus Christ (e.g., my comforts, day-planner, money, positions, rewards, etc).
7. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when my children passionately seek to emulate Jesus Christ.
8. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when I unashamedly share the gospel of Jesus Christ.
9. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when I have a qualitative (and perhaps quantitatively) list of people I've discipled and mentored unto spiritual maturity.
10. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when I'm inwardly and sincerely repulsed by sin I see within myself and what surrounds me.
11. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when Scripture is inculcated or inscribed in my life to the extent that the Word of God is inseparable from the way I live.
12. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when Christ truly is my life, His legacy is my legacy, His ministry is my ministry; His life is LIVED through my life.
13. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ if I purposefully promote, participate, and carry-out those activities that will offer Him my very utmost. He doesn't receive my "*left-overs*." Rather, He receives my very best—whether it is time, energy, or resources.
14. I may be a slave of Jesus Christ when I consistently separate from those influences that dishonor Jesus Christ.
15. I may be slave of Jesus Christ when God calls me to Himself and says to me, "*Well-done my good and faithful servant.*"

- C. In summary, I may be a slave of Christ when my heart passionately seeks to love Him, my mind seeks to deeply know Him, and my will seeks to completely obey Him. Or said differently, when my deep-seated affections (heart), soul (my conscious thought-life), mind (reasons and judgments), and strength (bodily powers/capabilities) are regularly and consistently harmonized together in glorifying God, then Jesus is my Master.

IV. How Can I Better Become a Slave of Jesus Christ?

- A. Though the above indicators give us ways to better become a slave of Jesus Christ, I offer the following applications for consideration:
1. Change the way you live. If you are not offering Him your utmost, then you need to make the decision that no matter what it costs you, you are going to commit yourself to being a sincere disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 8:34).
 2. No longer prostitute your heart, mind, soul, and strength to the idol of self-centeredness and the fleeting temptations and vices of the world. Rather, you be committed to being distinctly Christian by whole heartily worshipping Him in your daily activities.
 3. Find and pro-actively be involved in a church that inductively, line-by-line meditates upon the study of God's Word and its application to you and your family. Remember, the goal of instruction is to intimately know Christ.
 4. Pray to God every day that you would have an unquenchable passion for Him and be grievously burdened for those who don't know Jesus Christ.
 5. Be mentored by a slave of Christ and deeply invest in the lives of others who seek to be slaves of Jesus Christ.
 6. Seriously study what it means to be a "*spiritually mature*" believer of the Lord Jesus Christ. Consider what it means to be "controlled by the Holy Spirit," to "*walk by means of the Holy Spirit*," to not "*grieve*" or "*quench*" the Holy Spirit of God. The following books have been informative in various ways as I consider what it means to be spiritually mature, etc.:
 - a. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Designed to be Like Him*.
 - b. Lewis S. Chafer, *He that is Spiritual*.
 - c. Charles Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life*.
 - d. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The True Believer*.
 - e. A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*.
 - f. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*.
 - g. Leonard Ravenhill, *Why Revival Tarries*.
 - h. Chuck Colson, *Loving God*.
 - i. John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*.
 - j. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* and *On Knowing Christ*.
 - k. John Piper, *Desiring God*.

One Final Thought:

I would like to close this study with another way of looking at what it means to be a slave of Jesus Christ and how this characteristic may be applicable to our lives. Consider the words of Oswald Chambers from his daily devotional, *My Utmost for His Highest*, March 14th.

“...you are that one’s slaves whom you obey...” (Romans 6:16).

The first things I must be willing to admit when I begin to examine what controls and dominates me is that I am the one responsible for having yielded myself to whatever it may be. If I am a slave of myself, I am to blame because somewhere in the past I yielded to myself. Likewise, if I obey God, I do so because at some point in my life I yielded myself to Him.

If a child gives in to selfishness, he will find it to be the most enslaving tyranny on earth. There is no power within the human soul itself that is capable of breaking the bondage of the nature created by yielding. For example, yield for one second to anything in the nature of lust, and although you may hate yourself for having yielded, you become enslaved to that thing. (Remember what lust is-“I must have it now,” whether it is the lust of the flesh or the lust of the mind). No release or escape from it will ever come from any human power, but only through the power of redemption. You must yield yourself in utter humiliation to the only One who can break the dominating power in your life, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ. “... He has anointed Me... to proclaim liberty to the captives...” (Luke 4:18 and Isaiah 61:1).

When you yield to something, you will soon realize the tremendous control it has over you. Even though you say, “Oh, I can give up that habit whenever I like,” you will know you can’t. You will find that the habit absolutely dominates you because you willingly yielded to it. It is easy to sing, “He will break every fetter,” while at the same time living a life of obvious slavery to yourself. But yielding to Jesus will break every kind of slavery in any person’s life.