



Slave of All

Mark 10:35-45

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

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Good morning, it is so good to be back with you today. This past week, I spent most of the week down in Luray, VA, as a couple colleagues and I gathered to think through, pray over, and discern our worship focus for the coming months. I spent a lot of time thinking about all of you, and thinking about our collective identity. I want to begin this morning's sermon by reiterating how grateful I am to be your pastor. It really is a joy to serve with you in this community, and to share in the often-difficult work of diving deep into God's word, of reframing the witness of the Church in the world, and of climbing what feels at times to be an uphill battle in our society as we work for God in our mission of making a place for everyone (*everyone!*) to know God's love.

In this early fall season, we are currently studying some of "The Difficult Words of Jesus" using the scholarship and writing of Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, who is an Orthodox Jew and professor at Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

In today's focus, which comes from chapter 3 of her book, we are looking at Jesus' imperative, which says those who want to be first must be a "slave of all." I found myself fascinated with Dr. Levine's work this week, as she offers some important context to this scripture.

A couple years ago, I preached on the history of this word, *slave*, which comes from the Greek word *doulos*. It's a word that, in light of our American history, carries a lot of weight. In fact, because of the original American sin of chattel slavery, the word *slave* has become almost taboo, even for use in the Biblical text. Dr. Levine notes that while the word *doulos* is used about 120 times in the Greek New Testament, in most English translations of the Bible, the word "slave" is replaced with the word "servant." In fact, the Message Bible only uses the word "slave" 42 times in the New Testament; the Revised Standard Version just 57 times; the New International Version just 59 times; while the New Revised Standard Version, which is one of the more academic translations, uses the word "slave" 122 times – almost every time.

Again, Dr. Levine notes that those who believed in upholding slavery in colonial America were quick to preach on the Bible's references to slavery. They used what scriptures existed with the word *doulos* to make the argument for maintaining slavery – an argument that led to the formation of this church – our church – in 1849. However, Levine continues, those who do not agreed with slavery have, instead of digging deeper into the text where the word *doulos* appears to argue a more faithful understanding, tried to write the word slavery out of the text. We have ignored such texts, and allowed those who commandeered the scriptures for the abomination that is human slavery to have the only authoritative take from the Biblical perspective on how and if slavery should exist.

We cannot ignore the difficult words of Jesus. We must dive deeper, understanding that God's word in full offers a proclamation of new life, full life, and community well-being. We must look at the text, not in isolation from its context or its surrounding stories, but in the frame work of the Gospel – the good news – to see what Jesus was insisting upon when saying we should be a “slave of all.”

As we begin to approach this text, we must take our first steps in antiquity. The Bible, though absolutely applicable for disciples today, was not written for you and me. The Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament were written for the Jewish Community. And the New Testament was written for the disciples of Christ living in the Mediterranean region during the 1st Century Roman Empire. While not ignoring the history of slavery since then, we must attempt to understand the framework of slavery in the era when this text was first written. “In the first century of the Common Era, as much as one-third of the population of the Roman Empire lived in slavery, and many more were the descendants of slaves.”ⁱ Slavery was not, at the time, some foreign or vague entity – it was woven into the fiber of society.

Indeed, if you look at the whole of the Biblical witness, slaves were not only named as part of the family household, some of the most important names in the Biblical text identified themselves as slaves. Moses, King David, Mary, Paul, and even Jesus himself all referred to themselves as “slaves of God.” The construct of slavery was one that was so prevalent, that it became a model for faithfulness throughout the Biblical witness.

But as we begin to parse this out, as we start to dive deeper, the metaphor breaks down quickly. Try as we might to frame this in a 1st Century context, even looking beyond our experience of chattel slavery here in America, it's impossible to understand how anyone – in any era – could legitimately use the metaphor of slavery as a way to describe faithfulness to God. There are many reasons this breaks down, but perhaps primary is that, in such a metaphor, God becomes the slave master. As Amy-Jill Levine notes, “To think of God as a slave owner sets up a potentially unhealthy model for humanity. Slaves in antiquity, who could be beaten, branded, whipped, and tortured, obeyed their masters primarily out of fear.”ⁱⁱ

Is this really how we approach God? Do we subscribe to faithfulness first and foremost because we know God has such ultimate power, like that of a slave master, to punish us for disobeying any stated commands? ... This metaphor seems to be incongruent with the greater Biblical witness of God – who is said to know us intimately, to have a purpose for our lives, and to desire the health and well-being of all of creation. Surely this God, the God who heals the blind and makes the lame to walk, the God who welcomes the foreigner and demands justice for the widow, and the God who brings the dead back to life is not a whip-wielding master who doles out physical punishment as a way to demand righteousness.

Not to mention, if one is to understand God as a brutal slave master, it's not hard to make the argument that being a brutal slave master is with the realm of faithful living. If it's ok for God to torture us for our lack of faithfulness, then how can we argue against such torture from leaders of the Church or even political governance towards those who are unfaithful? Does the cross of the Roman Empire then become an acceptable practice for those deemed unrighteous?

I feel like these should be rhetorical questions, but to ensure there is no confusion – the answer is *NO*. No, there is no such validity to be found in the Biblical text. Capital punishment, whether the Roman Cross or the Electric Chair, is an abomination to the God of new life and new beginnings. No, it is never ok to employ torture to force faithfulness, neither from the church nor from empirical governments. No, you cannot be a brutal slave master and fall within the realm of faithful living. ... How can I be so sure? Because I understand the Biblical text, as a complete and definitive teaching, to articulate the will of God, which demands captives be set free, the oppressed to be free from oppression, and for justice – true justice, not some partisan-appointed judge justice – to be the way of faithfulness.

And so, if we reject the metaphor of God being a slave owner, and therefore reject the idea that we are actual slaves – as history has defined slavery – we come back to the initial question wondering, how are we to understand Jesus’ imperative that we be “slaves of all”?

Amy-Jill Levine offers three possibilities, which I think are all worth exploring. Perhaps we are so disenchanted with the idea of slavery, that no idea can be deemed perfect, but at a minimum these ideas might help us ask better questions about faithful living today.

The first option Levine offers is that “[Jesus] meant “slave” in the sense of prioritizing the needs of the community over one’s needs, fully.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The context for Mark 10 helps us frame this first option. The disciples, specifically the brothers, James and John, were asking Jesus if they might share in Christ’s glory. Jesus has been hinting that his future would lead to some form of glory, even if that glory required an unwelcome stop on the cross. James and John don’t ask to share in the brutality of the cross, but they do want a piece of the glory to come – they want to be seated right next to Christ. “The disciples seem to think of themselves, and by extension, the church, in the same way that they think of the structures of society and government. It is another hierarchy where some people lord it over others.”^{iv} And here, early on, they want the good seats.

Jesus’s response is to deny such a desire. Instead of acquiescing to their request, Jesus says no, and then adds more. He says, if you really want to have such glory, such power, you must reframe your understanding of what glory is – what power looks like. Though there are other texts where we find Jesus and God’s followers calling themselves “slaves of God,” in this text, Jesus refutes the disciples desire to have power by insisting they become “slaves of *all*.” (Not of God, but of *all*.) What does this mean?

Even in the best of living situations, a slave was always expected to understand their role as serving the family. Slaves were expected to do what was necessary for the well-working of the household. Without attempting to romanticize the role of slave, slaves were expected to deny their own needs to accommodate for the needs of the greater household. Let us be clear, “Slaves in antiquity, for the most part, had no choice; they were bought and sold, like a sheep or a piece of furniture.”^v Here, Jesus offers that a choice is available, but that the role remains the same – by becoming “slaves of all,” we are making a willing choice to set the needs of the greater community above our own.

Independently, this might seem like a stretch, but this invitation fits the framework of the greater witness and teaching of the Bible. In Galatians 5, Paul will write, “You were called to freedom; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love to serve one another.” The invitation to be a slave to all is an invitation to use our freedom to prioritize the needs of the greater household.

The second possibility Levine notes is that “[Jesus] meant “slave” with the hint that crucifixion becomes a possible death, given the strong link between the status of slave and the form of death.”^{vi}

Indeed, crucifixion was a form of capital punishment often used on slaves. Crucifixion was, like a lynching, a public display of power by those who insisted on maintaining power. Such killings were unjust, offered solely as a way to instill fear in any and all who breathed with the hope of change or equality. They were scapegoat murders, carried out to remind the populous who held the power as both judge and jury.

In this second option, we are reminded of Jesus’ invitation to “pick up your cross and follow me.” Just as Jesus himself would be strung up on the cross, it was expected that any who truly devote themselves to the will and way of God would find a similar fate. God’s will offers a direct contradiction to the power of empire; it insists on the division of resources which the powerful seek to hoard; and it bucks the hierarchical structure that deems some as oppressors, and others as oppressed. Any who become a “slave of all” will be opening themselves up to the punishments used against those who prioritize the well-being of all over the economic systems that prioritize the few.

Finally, Amy-Jill Levine offers that “[Jesus] meant slave in the same way as he did when speaking of “hate” in discussing the family: his model is one of moving from life in this world into life in the kingdom of heaven, from holding on to what we normally value to moving toward that for which a price cannot be set.”^{vii}

One element of being a slave is that you are owned; “you are subject to an alien will.” Even John MacArthur, in his sermon, “Slaves of Christ,” notes that as a slave, one does not have the ability to function on their own will. “That is to say,” he writes, “[a slave] has no freedom to do what [they] want to do.”^{viii}

However, we can, as Amy-Jill Levine notes, see this loss of control, from a place of discipleship, as great gain. Again, not to romanticize slavery, Levine offers, “For actual slaves, or for people who are not among the “first,” the injunction to be a slave to all can take a more pernicious turn.” But in the way Christ invites this, as one who *chooses* and has the ability to opt-in to this position as slave from the perspective of discipleship, such a choice allows us to name that we have only one master, who is God. Levine offers that such a statement becomes a proclamation of ultimate freedom, because it indicates that nothing and no one else is in control.

This has been our focus in recent weeks, coming from many of these difficult words of Jesus: we are invited to give up all our possessions so that they cannot control our allegiance; we are told to hate

your father and mother, so as to prioritize the will and way of God; and now, we are told that to be first, we must be a slave to all, embracing the will and way of just one master – the God of creation, whose hope is for everyone to have life, and life abundant.

As I spent time reflecting on this text last week, I have to say, I wondered, can this imperative to be a “slave of all” be redeemed for use today, knowing what we do about history? Is there a way to separate the horrors of slavery in antiquity, the brutality of slavery in our own nation’s foundation, and even the slavery that continues today through human trafficking, such that we can hear this invitation as the good news it was intended to offer? Can God reclaim and redeem this word *doulos* from the sin of humanity? I honestly don’t know.

But even as hard a text as it might be to claim, the underlying invitation of the text is one we must proclaim. We must hear the good news in Christ’s invitation: there is a God, and it is not us. There is a God who loves everyone, who demands the worth of every-one, who prioritizes the well-being of the whole over any one, and we – as disciples of the Risen Lord – are invited to share in this creation-loving work. We are called to speak God’s truth even as it goes against the powers of society, to proclaim God’s love even as it upends the brutality of empires, and to acknowledge we are in this world together even as it thwarts American individualism and exceptionalism. We are called to give ourselves fully to the will of God so that God’s love might be made manifest in us and through us, for the reconciliation of humanity. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine. *The Difficult Words of Jesus*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Levine.

ⁱⁱⁱ Levine.

^{iv} Leonard Vander Zee. “Commentary on Mark 10:35-45.” <http://cepreaching.org>. Retrieved September 27, 2022.

^v Levine.

^{vi} Levine.

^{vii} Levine.

^{viii} John MacArthur. “Slaves of Christ.” <http://gty.org>. Retrieved September 27, 2022.