

Sermon Series on Christianity & Human Rights

*Christianity & Human Rights 1: Once You Were Slaves*

Deuteronomy 26:5-15

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

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Constitutions. By-laws. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They don't make for very exciting reading. They lay everything out in neat articles and clauses and subpoints. It's handy for reference, but it's not the kind of thing you'd read to your kids at bedtime, nor is anyone going to make a movie version of it.

Parts of the Bible read that way, too, especially the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy as well as significant chunks of Exodus and Numbers. You can't blame people for skipping over those parts when it comes to their devotional reading. The only part in all that legalese that most people are familiar with is the Ten Commandments.

But for all that the first five books of the Bible are full of detailed rules and regulations, those rules are rooted not in general universal principles but in a story. A story about a specific group of people in a particular time and place. That story is what sets the tone and the context for all those rules. That story, as we shall see, shapes the basis from which we can talk about human rights in the Bible, or for that matter in the modern world. And that story is summed up in the passage we heard from Deuteronomy: "My father was a wandering Aramean...and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty arm."

The placement of this particular passage, this recital of Israel's history, is very telling. It occurs in the context of a set of rules and regulations for tithing. As a result of that story of liberation from slavery, Jews are commanded to offer ten percent of all their produce every year to God. But while it is offered to God, it will be used by the priest, whose duties prevent them from making a living by other means, and by widows, orphans and foreigners. In other words, the story of liberation from slavery becomes the context for stewardship, a responsibility that all Jews must carry out. It is the reason why God delivered them out of the house of bondage in the first place. It is the reason why we have human rights today.

As we talked about last week, other ancient societies saw human beings as slaves of the gods. The Jewish story begins with slavery too, but they were slaves to human masters. God, rather than being the supreme overlord, plays the role of setting people free. That right there is a radical departure from everything that ever happened before in the ancient world. The implications of this story echo all the way through the entire Bible as a repudiation of slavery and tyranny, so that Jesus says, "Call no one 'master,' for you have one Master who is in heaven." But God didn't just set them free to do whatever they wanted. They were set free so that they could become God's people. And to do this, they needed a new constitution, new by-laws, what we in Biblical terms call "commandments."

You know the first commandment, right? You shall have no other gods before me. Except that's not actually how it goes. We usually leave out the first part of that first commandment, which is a story, the same one we heard in that passage from Deuteronomy: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." Because of that story, because of those events, therefore the following rules apply.

We think of the commandments as rules, as a moral or ethical code, and many of them do sound like that: do not kill, do not steal, even honor your parents. But some of the commandments don't fit into an ethical model, especially the one

about keeping Sabbath. It's sort of a mystery why that's in there at all. But another way to look at the commandments is to turn them around and see them as rights being conferred upon former slaves. You have a right to rest every seventh day. Slaves, after all, do not get time off. But this commandment insists that everyone has a right to rest: men and women, parents and children, free people and slaves, even animals.

The rest of the commandments can likewise be seen as rights. "You shall have no other gods before me" is a form of freedom of religion, of liberation from the tyranny of false gods. You no longer have to pay homage and obedience to those who call themselves Pharaoh, Emperor, King – gods. It's a variation of "Call no one 'master' for you have one Master who is in heaven." "Honor your mother and father." Think about what that means to slaves who could be sold away from their own families. "You shall not kill, you shall not steal," means you have the right not to be killed by those who think they own your life, you have the right to your own property and not have it taken away by your masters. These commandments are the rights and the responsibilities of a people who have been set free from bondage so that they may choose to enter a new covenant, a new form of voluntary service to God and to one another.

This "freed slave" ethic permeates the Bible in ways that we hardly even recognize today. But if we recall that freedom is the most basic of human rights, then we begin to see how this new religion of freed slaves will change the way the entire world understands what it means to be human. But it's less a set of rules than it is a story that has the power to reshape human destiny.

The Bible, after all, did not abolish slavery. Even up to New Testament times, slavery was still an accepted way of life. It would take 1800 years after the birth of Christ for Christian societies to at last abolish slavery. But the seeds of slavery's destruction had already been sown in the story of the Exodus. After all, how could such an institution stand when it inevitably cast owners into the role of hard-hearted Pharaoh, and God into the role of liberator?

The Bible did not abolish slavery, but it did place great restrictions upon it. Slaves had rights. They too were entitled to the same rights and responsibilities of the covenant as were free people. All kinds of restrictions limited the conditions under which a person could become a slave, how they had to be treated, and protecting them against abuse or exploitation, as spelled out in this passage in Deuteronomy 15:12-18:

If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today. But if he says to you, "I will not go out from you," because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his earlobe into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. You shall do the same with regard to your female slave. Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired laborers; and the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do.

Furthermore, the Bible forbids kidnapping anyone and forcing them into slavery, and requires that if a slave runs away, Jews must help them and give them refuge, not return them to their masters. Compare that to the Fugitive Slave Act in the United States, where people were required bylaw to return slaves to their masters, even if the slave had made it to a free state. In the US, this made free blacks vulnerable to being kidnapped and sold illegally into slavery, whereas the Bible law

served as a limit against abusive masters, because a cruel master would not be able to hold on to their slaves. So while the Bible did not abolish slavery, it placed many restrictions on it, many protections for slaves, and most importantly it told a story in which God identity is primarily defined as the One who sets slaves free. Because of that, it was inevitable that those who took the Bible seriously would one day reach a point where they would reject slavery altogether.

But the implications of that story extend beyond the issue of slavery. Based on their experience with hard-hearted Pharaoh, the Bible limited the power of the king, who was anything but an absolute monarch. Deuteronomy 17 reluctantly recognizes that these freed slaves would one day want a king like all the other nations, but it cautions that the king must not acquire a lot of horses (symbolic of military power), or take many wives or accumulate much wealth. Instead it commands:

When [the king] takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and sisters and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendents will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel. (Deut. 17:18-20)

This concern about too much power is accompanied by a concern for those with no power, those who are the most vulnerable to exploitation and neglect: the widows and the orphans. These are people who have no male authority figure to protect them in a patriarchal world. (Jesus will later acknowledge the reality of abusive patriarchal power when he says, “Call no man ‘father’, for you have one Father in heaven.”) But another group of people is included in this protected class: the foreigner. In all our current debates about immigration reform, we would do well to listen to what the Bible has to say on the matter. Foreigners are seen as being outside the community, outside recognized authority, and therefore as potential enemies. But again the Exodus story reminds us that we were once foreigners in a strange land. Will we subject the foreigner in our midst to the kind of exploitation and abuse that we suffered at the hands of the Egyptians? God forbid it!

In contrast to all these rules protecting the vulnerable, there are actually very few Bible laws protecting the rights of the wealthy and powerful. The Bible is hardly opposed to private property, but it is very skeptical of the concentration of a large amount of wealth into a small number of hands. To address that concern, the Bible sets forth the concept of the Jubilee year, a year in which slaves are freed, debts are cancelled, confiscated property – including land that had been legally sold – is returned to its original owners. Other ancient societies periodically cancelled debts, but not on a regular basis. It was always at the discretion of the king and was mainly used as a favor to create political alliances. By contrast, the Jubilee year followed a regular schedule, and it applied to everyone.

Scholars debate whether the terms of the Jubilee year were ever really carried out, but even if it wasn't, the idea was still there. I remember when I first learned about those Jubilee laws, how it radically challenged a lot of the secular view of economics that I just take for granted. Jubilee lifts up a different view of economics: that poverty must not be allowed to be institutionalized. The Jubilee presupposes a right to participate in social and economic life by even the most marginalized groups. And it doesn't wait for the free market (our modern day false god) to regulate events. Instead, Jubilee recognizes the need for political action to restore and safeguard those rights, something to consider as our nation struggles to figure out how to get free of the yoke of debt and the tyranny of an unregulated market in our times.

We would do well to remember this Bible lesson: that we owe more than just charity to the poor and the vulnerable. They have rights. And the more powerful you are, the greater your responsibility toward the weak. “In Bible terms, equality is not a matter of treating everyone the same, but rather of compensating for those inequalities which prevent common participation in the life and benefits of the community.”