

Deuteronomy 15:12-18

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After dealing with concern for the poor, Moses then turned to the issue of those who are servants. Moses asks every Hebrew master to release his Hebrew servant after six years, unless the servant decides to remain with him. In the latter case, the master shall pierce the ear of the servant with an awl pressed against the door to seal their mutual commitment.

Having discussed the matter of poverty in Israel, Moses then instructed the Israelite masters on how to treat their Hebrew servants. Foreigners could be owned and serve as permanent servants ([Leviticus 25:39-55](#)). Hebrew servants were to be treated differently. Moses stated that *if your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years.*

The word translated *kinsman* (Heb. “*āḥ*”) can also be translated as “brother,” meaning fellow Israelite. The *kinsman* could either be a *man* or a *woman*. Both genders were subject to the same law regarding servitude. In the Ancient Near East, a person who was destitute could be “sold” (or he/she could sell himself/herself) to fellow Israelites so they could pay off a debt with labor. In modern terms we could think about professional athletes who connect themselves with a contract that allows them to be bought and sold. This servitude in Israel was primarily an economic arrangement. This work was to last for a period of *six years*, then the master was to *set him free in the seventh year*. This would have the practical impact of limiting the servant’s contract.

Naturally, when someone is unable to pay a debt, they are not in the strongest of negotiating positions. It would be easy to be taken advantage of, and lose one’s freedom. This provision allows for a debt to be paid, or someone to climb out of poverty, through entering a term of servitude, but the term must not extend beyond six years. The policy goal is to provide a way out of poverty for those who have fallen on hard times, while protecting them from losing their freedom. This, again, makes it clear that there is to be no systemic poverty in Israel. However, there is to be no permanent welfare class either. People are to pay their debts, and work for their sustenance.

In addition to setting the Hebrew servant *free*, the master was not to *send him away empty-handed*. Doing so would further hurt the servant and worsen his

situation. Instead of releasing the servant *empty-handed*, the master was to supply sufficiently for him so that he would be able to take care of himself and his family. Part of what the servant was to earn for their six years of service is an amount of capital that allows them to make a fresh start. They fell on hard times, and had to indenture themselves for a time in order to make ends meet, or pay off their debts. But this six years of service is to not only tide them over, it is to give them ample funds to create a fresh start. The goal is for Israelites to be free, and self-governing. There is to be no permanent underclass. There is to be an opportunity for all to climb the ladder of economic success. Conversely, there is not to be a free lunch.

Moses declared to the Israelites that a master releasing a servant from his contract was to *furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat*. The verb *to furnish* here literally means “to put a necklace on” or “to serve as necklace” ([Psalms 73:6](#)). It is an intense form, meaning “you shall certainly furnish.” In our context, it is used in a figurative way and means to richly provision someone. The master was to richly load his Hebrew servant when he set him free.

The master was to give the freed servant *from his flock* (a reference to sheep and goats), his *threshing floor* (a reference to grain), and from his *wine vat* (a reference to the wine itself). The *threshing floor* refers to a hard, level surface on which the grain is removed from the harvested plants (with a flail). So this is harvested grain. The *wine vat* refers to a large container made of wood, connected to a lower container by a pipe. Once the grapes were mashed in the larger container, the juice would run into the lower container.

The master was to *give as the LORD his God has blessed* him—food, drink, and livestock—to the servant. This was to ensure the servant could have sufficient provision to get a fresh start and not go back into poverty. Since this was an agrarian society, the servant would need food and supplies to survive until the next harvest, or crop of livestock. The master was never to forget that what he possessed was a gift from the LORD in the first place. As a good steward of God’s goods, he was to in turn bless his neighbor/brother, and *give to him* (the freed servant) *as the LORD your God has blessed* him. This again reflects the core requirement of God’s vassals/servants to maintain the covenant they had agreed to follow, to love their neighbors as they loved themselves.

In addition to being a good steward of God’s provision, the Hebrews are to *remember that they too were a slave in the land of Egypt*. This is part of the mentality of putting oneself in the shoes of another, to know how to treat them

as you treat yourself. Each Israelite had been *a slave in the land of Egypt*; miserable and wanting freedom. What would treating their neighbor as they wanted to be treated look like? It would look like providing a means to freedom. A specific time of service (six years) followed by being set free with ample provision to fund a fresh start. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt for over 400 years. There, they knew nothing but labor, deprivation, and suffering. There was no end in sight. They were to remember how they were mistreated in order not to cause their poor Israelite servants to fall back into a slave-like existence.

Moreover, they were also to remember God's redemptive act by which He delivered them out of the hand of Pharaoh. They were never to forget that it was *the LORD* their *God* who *redeemed* them. Moses then connects this to his next statement by saying *therefore I command you this day*. The people were to follow the covenant, which instructs them to treat others like they would want to be treated, if they were put into servitude. And they were to remember that God freed them from servitude. Just as the LORD delivered them, they were to deliver their fellow Israelites.

When the Suzerain God *redeemed* the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, He told the Egyptians to send them away with *articles of silver and articles of gold, and clothing* ([Exodus 12:35-36](#)). Such a mighty act, Moses said, should be remembered and applied by the Israelite masters to teach them how to act toward their fellow countrymen who worked for them as servants. When the Israelites left slavery with *gold* and *silver*, they were able to purchase provisions on their travels. The *gold* and *silver* also provided materials to build the wilderness tabernacle. Thus, the command that Israelite masters give provisions to their freed servants would ensure that the Israelite servants had enough to restart living on their own, and avoid falling back into servitude because of poverty. There was to be no systemic poverty in Israel.

Verses 16 – 17 describes how to deal with a servant who does not want to be freed in the seventh year. The scenario began when it would *come about if he says to you, 'I will not go out from you.'* Living and working closely with others in a household could result in close relationships, especially if the servant is treated well (as should be the case). The servant may not want to leave the master's service *because he loves you and your household*. Love, in addition to all of its emotional aspects, includes the sense of commitment. The servant could form a strong commitment to the master and his family and might decide not to leave.

The servant might also see that, *since he fares well with* the situation in the master's house, it might not go well for him or her when freed. In fact, falling back into poverty was a very real possibility for some. The servant might evaluate his or her prospects and decide that staying with their master is superior to whatever economic prospects they might have if they go back on their own.

If the servant decided not to leave but wanted to stay in the master's household, Moses told the Hebrew master that there was a legal procedure to formalize this relationship with his servant. This would provide a mutual commitment, master to servant, servant to master. Moses told the master to *take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door* (v. 17). An *awl* was a sharp instrument or tool made of flint, bone, stone, or metal. In ancient Israel, it was used to bore holes. Here, it was to be used to pierce the servant's ear to mark him or her as a servant for life ([Exodus 21:6](#)). This piercing of the servant's ear was to be done *into the door*. It is not specified here which door was meant. [Exodus 21:2 – 6](#) includes the note that the servant was to be brought to government officials (judges acting on God's behalf) and then be taken *to the door or the doorposts* ([Exodus 21:6](#)). Whether the piercing of the servant's ear occurred on the master's doorpost or that of the judges is not specified. It seems best to assume that it occurred at the master's doorpost in order to symbolize the servant's lifelong allegiance to the master's household.

Once the piercing had been done, the person would be a *servant forever*. This ceremony was also to be done *likewise to his maidservant*. [Exodus 21:2 – 6](#) does not include female servants in this ceremony, but this verse does.

Moses then addressed what the master's attitude should be when he sets free a servant after his six years of servitude. He told the master that *it shall not seem hard to you when you set him free* (v. 18). The Hebrew master, having been accustomed to the servant's work, might consider setting him free to be a hardship for himself. This would cause him to grumble. However, Moses commanded the master not to think and act that way because the Hebrew servant *has given him six years with double the service of a hired man*.

The phrase *double the service of a hired man* likely means that the cost of taking care of the servant was half the cost of paying a *hired* worker. Stated differently, the wages of a *hired* servant would have been twice what a Hebrew servant would cost. The master is to be grateful for the great benefit he received rather than unhappy that he is losing an asset. The fact that the servant's value was *double the service of a hired worker* makes the entire arrangement favorable. Each party to the agreement gained value. The

servant climbed out of debt or poverty, or both, and the master got repaid debt and/or benefitted from providing for the servant. But when the agreement ended, the master was to be grateful for the servant's contribution, as well as glad that the servant is now free again.

The best motivation for obeying this command to release servants in the sabbath year was *so the LORD your God will bless you in whatever you do*. As seen repeatedly in the Law of Moses, obedience brings blessing. There is an obvious cause-effect benefit to this system. It allows Israelites an ongoing pathway out of poverty, and allows them sufficient capital to get a fresh start. It also elevates work. When someone goes into poverty, their way of escape involves work. But this edict also prevents a permanent underclass. If someone decides to become a permanent servant, it was because they chose that avenue for themselves. As usual, God's blessing would come both from the natural consequences of living life in accordance with the cause-effect manner God prescribes, which is always for our best, as well as added divine blessings from God as rewards for obedience.

Biblical Text:

¹² **“If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free.¹³ When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed.¹⁴ You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the Lord your God has blessed you.¹⁵ You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today.¹⁶ It shall come about if he says to you, ‘I will not go out from you,’ because he loves you and your household, since he fares well with you;¹⁷ then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also you shall do likewise to your maidservant.**

¹⁸ **It shall not seem hard to you when you set him free, for he has given you six years *with* double the service of a hired man; so the Lord your God will bless you in whatever you do.**