



SLAVE OR MASTER?

The Wisdom Books in the Bible reference an unusual occurrence that, because it is mentioned multiple times, must have at least occasionally happened—a slave becoming a ruler. Here are three examples:

- *Under three things the earth quakes, and under four, it cannot bear up: Under a slave when he becomes king...* (Proverbs 30:21-22a, NASB).
- *Luxury is not fitting for a fool; much less for a slave to rule over princes* (Proverbs 19:10).
- *I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves on the land* (Ecclesiastes 10:7).

All three of these passages suggest that this strange, twisted irony of a slave becoming a ruler is completely wrong and even dangerous. I think we can make an important application to these “slave-turned-ruler” passages that is relevant to us today. Our material possessions are our modern-day slaves of which we are to be the rulers. So who is the servant and who is the master in your world? The answer may not be as clear or as obvious as we might like to think. Ask yourself these questions: “Do I own my possessions or do my possessions own me? Am I the servant or am I the master?”

I learned this lesson the hard way many years ago when I was a young father. I wanted my young daughters to have horses to ride, so I went out and bought two older horses. I was so excited to be the proud owner of two new horses...I thought. What I learned was that these horses I now owned needed to be watered every day. Since the new barn that I built to shelter them had no running water, I had to fill up buckets of water at the house and carry the water over to the barn (a very long walk). Two horses drink a lot of water! That lasted a short while until I paid to have a water line run to the barn.

I also realized that the horses I owned needed to be given hay every day. So I had to buy hay, which meant I had to buy an old pickup truck to haul the hay to the barn. I had to load it in the loft and then go to the barn twice a day and throw some of it into their mangers. Then the real shock! These horses indiscriminately redeposited all the hay and grain I fed them right back onto the stall floor. Adult horses, and they weren't potty trained! And guess who got to regularly shovel it out of the stalls and haul it away!

After one winter of that, I had had enough. I built a shelter in the pasture so they could stay in the field year-round. This solved one problem and created two new ones. Now I had to hook a hose to the water line to get it out to their water tank, which would routinely freeze in the winter, so I would have to go out with my crow bar each day and break the ice so the horses could drink. I finally spent more money to run electricity out to the shelter to put a heater in the tank so it wouldn't freeze. I still had to take the hose back to the house after each fill-up to keep it from freezing and breaking. I also had to haul the hay from the barn loft out to the field. Admittedly, I am a little slow, but one day it hit me. I didn't own these horses; these horses owned me. I had

become their servant and they had become my master. The country song says it best, “I know what I was feeling, but what was I thinking?”

You may laugh at my youthful ignorance, but I fear that all of us may be guilty to one degree or another of the same folly. We think we are accumulating “servants,” only to discover that these servants often end up becoming our masters. The more we accumulate, the more our lives are consumed with taking care of our servants—cars, houses, clothes, “toys,” investments, businesses—take your pick. Let me ask you, “Do you really own them, or do they, in fact, own you?”

A businessman admitted, “There are times I must honestly confess, I feel more like my business owns me than that I own my business. I work endless hours for it, caring for it, managing it, paying attention to every detail of it, making sure it is healthy and growing, nursing it when it is sick. I also need to care for my employees and, as every businessman learns sooner or later, when things get tight the employees get paid before the owner does. Tell me again, who’s the owner and who’s the servant?”

Know this: There is not any kind of asset that, if left unattended, will not eventually end up becoming a costly liability. Skip servicing your car and see what happens. Your house is constantly in need of your attention and your money to keep it from falling down around you. Your clothes don’t wash, iron, and hang themselves up. Even your children and your spouse, if you do not invest huge amounts of everything into them, will eventually become a major liability to you.

One of the greatest delusions to which we often fall prey is the folly of thinking that the wealthier we can become materially, the more freedom we will have. But the fact is, it is not at all that black and white. In many cases, just the opposite will be true. Often the wealthier a person becomes, the more enslaved he is to caring for and attending to all his “servants,” and the less flexibility and freedom he actually has—emotionally, spiritually, and physically—for the really important pursuits and priorities of life. It is a trade-off of one freedom for another that often leaves us less free after each trade. It may just be that the freest person in the world is not the mega-wealthy individual, but is actually the person who has nothing—the person with no material masters that are demanding huge amounts of time, attention, and physical and emotional energy to care for them.

Consider this story: A businessman was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellowfin tuna. The businessman complimented the fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them. “Only a little while,” the man replied. The businessman then asked why he didn’t stay out longer and catch more fish. The man said he had enough to support his family’s immediate needs.

The businessman then asked, “But what do you do with the rest of your time?” The fisherman said, “I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, Maria, and stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, señor.” The businessman scoffed, “I am a Harvard MBA and I could help you. You should spend more time fishing, and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat. With the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats; eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman, you would sell directly to the processor and eventually open your own cannery. You would control the product, processing and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then L.A., and eventually New York City where you would run your expanding enterprise.”

The fisherman asked, “But señor, how long will all this take?” To which the businessman replied, “Fifteen to twenty years.” “But what then, señor?” The businessman laughed and said, “That’s the best part! When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich. You would make millions.” “Millions, señor? Then what?” The businessman said, “Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take a siesta with your wife and stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos.” The fisherman, still smiling, looked up and said, “Isn’t that what I’m doing right now?”

It might be good for all of us to take inventory of our lives and our material possessions to determine just how much of what we legally “own” actually emotionally, spiritually, and/or financially “owns” us, lest through some twisted irony we see [our] *slaves riding on horses* [while we are] *walking like slaves on the land* (Ecclesiastes 10:7).

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