

Weekly Encouragement

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Don't Miss the Blessings

By Rev. Peter Eng



"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4: 18-19)

On a certain Sabbath, Jesus was asked to read the Scriptures. He turned to Isaiah and read the powerful message of hope and redemption for the Year of Jubilee.

The people would understand Jesus as saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed (=Christ-ed / messiah-ed) me, to proclaim good news to the poor ... to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He followed the reading with a

bold claim, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah. He has come to bring God's jubilee. There would be special blessings for the poor, the captives, the blind and the slaves. Furthermore, Jesus expanded this blessing from Jews to all of humanity.

We will focus on the freedom of the slaves.

In ancient Israel, slavery was the result of debt. These slaves were in effect indentured servants, contracted to serve 6 years and they will be freed on the seventh year. But there is something special after 7x7 (49) years of the religious calendar. It is the return of all ancestral land with the cancellation of all debt. In the Jubilee, slaves will not be freed with no means of income. The restored ancestral land would be the opportunity to restart their lives.

Just think of it. If you were a slave, you will be free. All your debts will be cancelled. Your ancestral land will be returned to you. Any failure on your parent's part that resulted in your situation or any failure on your part causing hurt to your children will be forgiven and its effects neutralized. You get to reboot your life without debts of sin, guilt, or money.

Fast forward to our present time. The jubilee that Jesus proclaimed has been

fulfilled. Jesus has indeed freed all slaves because today slavery is not acceptable, and in most parts of the world, it is a serious crime. Jesus brought in perpetual jubilee! But was it the work of Christ that abolished slavery? Absolutely!

Slavery was common and harsh. Conquered peoples became slaves. Indebted people became slaves. Children of slaves were slaves. Slaves operated at every level of society. The truth about slavery is that it has existed throughout all of human history until the nineteenth century when people around the world began to reject slavery as immoral. There was hardly any culture untouched by slavery. It was an accepted social institution because there was no dignity placed on being human. Slavery can be defeated only when human dignity is universally accepted. And that can be traced directly to the universal acceptance of human dignity in the Judeo-Christian faith.

Yahweh declares that all humans are made in his image ([Gen 1:26-27](#)). When the law was given to Israel as a nation, God instituted a set of laws that restricted slavery to indentured service and made provisions for the remission of all debt every fifty years.

The growth of Christianity and the assertion that all humans are of equal worth in God's sight make slavery inconsistent with human dignity. Paul addressed this issue sensitively and truly when he wrote to Philemon the Christian slave owner. Onesimus his escaped slave had become a Christian under Paul's ministry. What did Paul do? Paul could say Onesimus should remain free, but Roman law would make Onesimus a fugitive perpetually subject to capital punishment. Instead, he sent Onesimus back to Philemon with instructions on how Philemon should receive Onesimus, "no longer as a slave but

more than a slave, as a beloved brother." Then, Paul put himself on the line for Onesimus. "So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account." ([Philemon 1:17-18](#))

Some critics of Christianity would point to the acceptance of slavery in the NT as some defect of the Christian faith. But social historians recognize the incompatibility of Christian love and value to the institution of slavery. The Christianization of large segments of society created a moral climate that confronted the morality of slavery.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is about redemption from sin and death. When individuals turn to Christ in adequate numbers, the social ethic begins to reflect Christian values. In addition to slavery, another closely related moral issue is infanticide. It was very common in the ancient world, but the dignity of every human being has made infanticide a crime around the world. The early church is focused on its call to bring about the redemption of individuals. This sets the stage for true social change.

The freedom from slavery is concomitant with the freedom from debt. Christians have been successful in abolishing slavery. But we have not done anything about freedom from debt. In fact, many see debt as a desirable financial tool.

There is a debt that leads to certain slavery, even today. Consumer debt. When money is borrowed for discretionary consumption, it leads to an indebtedness that cannot be repaid except with severe privations. Consumer debt for discretionary spending is a great evil that is not consistent with the Christian faith.

Investment debt is still debt. Investment debt gone bad is no less crushing than consumer debt. Things rarely progressed as planned in investments. A Christian needs to exercise great care and restraint when using debt for investment. A farmer who borrowed to invest on his land and ran the risk of losing his land, was certainly better off than the wastrel that has no opportunity to repay his debt. But when the investment goes wrong, that debt is no less crushing, and the claim of creditors is no less terrible. Many Christians today experience this with real estate debt. A debt that is unpaid can enslave us, even though it no longer makes us literal slaves.

It is perhaps time for Christians to rethink the joy of freedom from debt that Jubilee brings.

We need to recognize the danger of debt. We enter into debt because we assume we are able to repay. All too often, things do not go as planned and our debt cannot be managed. This can get us into trouble.

I think it should be the aim of every Christian to be debt free, in the same way that every slave would want to be free from slavery. Debt is not slavery, but debt was the cause of slavery. In today's world, we can let debt get out of control and lose our joy, peace of mind, Christian witness, our walk with God, etc.

Perhaps Christians can lead the way to a financial revolution concerning debt. Christian values concerning debt would include a rejection of consumer debt for discretionary spending; encourage a simple lifestyle; fiscal responsibility; and urge grave caution with firm safeguards for large debt of any sort. Debt can be a legitimate financial tool, but a dangerous one

nonetheless. It is like fire, a good servant, but a destructive master.

I cannot say I am free from all debt at this point in my life. But I don't want to miss the Jubilee blessing of being debt free. I pray for God's grace as I work assiduously towards being debt free. If you still have some debt, you may want to prayerfully consider joining me in seeking the blessing of freedom from debt. We have established that that is a blessing Jesus Christ wants to bestow on us. We just need to ask if we want this particular blessing.

Note: The ESV is used unless indicated otherwise.

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Rev. Peter Eng is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.