

My Ears You Have Pierced
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Deuteronomy 15:12-18

I think it was about the time I was starting high school when a new fashion trend showed up. All of a sudden, men were getting their ears pierced. Some of the more daring, boundary-pushing souls at my high school were showing up with jewelry in their ear. It turned a few heads and sparked quite a bit of discussion. Well, if earrings caused a stir in the relatively fashion progressive world of high school, you can imagine the tongues wagging when the first male earring appeared at First Kingston Christian Reformed Church. First Kingston was not a place for cutting-edge fashion. It wasn't a place for cutting edge anything. But one September, a new young couple appeared in church-I believe he was a grad student at the local university-and in his ear was a single gold stud. My parents were pretty accepting of all this. They thought it was just fine. But most of the older generation was not so sure. Most of them thought the earring was *Echte Verskriklikje*.

It all seems quaint now. Nowadays, males and females are piercing just about every part of their body. But at the time it was a big deal. People were upset. In fact, I can remember a friend of mine who had a piercing getting all sorts of grief for it. People would say all sorts of derogatory things to him. He told the story of how someone at church came up to him, looked at his gold stud and said, "Whose slave are you?" At the time we didn't understand what this person meant, but now after reading Deuteronomy 15, I get it.

Actually, 'Whose slave are you' is exactly the right question to bring to this text. 'Whose slave are you' is, in fact, the question in Deuteronomy 15. Much of the slavery in those days was what you call indentured servitude. Many of the slaves in those days were slaves because they owed money and couldn't pay it back. They couldn't give money against their debts and so sometimes they had to give themselves. Deuteronomy 15 makes sure that this kind of slavery doesn't last a lifetime. The longest anyone had to work to pay off a debt would be 6 years. If you were willing to toil and sweat, and bow and scrape, and 'yes sir' and 'no sir' your way through 6 years, you knew you still had a shot at freedom.

Now obviously these would be 6 hard years. The spirit of your service in these years would be pretty negative. Your service would have the spirit of a 4th grader doing her algebra homework. Your service would be that of the college student working in the Knollcrest dishroom at 6:45 in the morning as a way to pay his bills (I speak from personal experience). It would be a spirit of duty and obligation. It would be service through gritted teeth. You serve your master, but all the while, you mumble under your breath about how much you hate this and how you can't wait to get away.

But now, in Deuteronomy 15, another kind of service is suggested. Verses 16 and 17 suggest the possibility of serving with an entirely different spirit. Now we have the possibility of joyful service. If you serve a master who is generous and kind, if you serve a master who treats you well, if you love your master and the work he gives to you and don't want to leave him, the law allows for you to bind yourself to commit to him for life. And when you make that lifetime commitment to joyful service, you get your ear pierced. You stand up next to a wooden doorframe. You put your ear against the door. Your master takes a pointy awl and pierces your ear and the two of you are bound together for life. Your pierced ear becomes a symbol of your devotion and affection for your master. Now you work as a servant the rest of your life, only now you're not serving through gritted teeth and mumbling under your breath. Now you get up in the morning looking forward to the day. Duties become delights. Obligations become opportunities.

Such was the law in ancient Israel. But this passage is more than a law for ancient Israel, this passage is also a metaphor for us. It's not just about the relationship between ancient slaves and their earthly masters, it is about our relationship with God, the heavenly master.

In fact, I think this image of servanthood is probably what Psalm 40 is talking about. Psalm 40:6-8 are notoriously difficult to translate. Here's what it says in the Bible translation that is in our pew, the new NIV. "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire-but my ears you have opened." Here's how that same verse is translated in the old NIV: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced. In one translation, the Psalmist says, 'God has opened my ears so I can hear him.' In the other translation, the Psalmist says God is piercing his ear.

I like that older translation. That older translation understands Psalm 40:6 in terms of Deuteronomy 15. The Psalmist is imagining that God has pierced his ear. He is imagining that he is a slave who has committed himself to his heavenly master for a lifetime of joyful service.

I like that translation because that translation fits the larger context of the Psalm. That translation fits the story of Psalm 40. Psalm 40 is about a person who has been in terrible trouble, in terrible distress. He has been in the muck and mire; he has been in the pit. But God rescues him from the pit and brings him out and gives him a new place to stand. Psalm 40 is the song of a person who has been through the worst of life, but who has come back on the other side full of confidence in God's love for him, Full of love for his God.

The Psalmist is so excited by the deliverance he has experienced, he wants to offer a thank offering to God. That's what you were supposed to do in those days when you experienced God's grace, you were supposed to go to the tabernacle and offer a thank offering—a lamb or a goat. Only, the Psalmist is so overwhelmed with gratitude and love that he wants to give more than a lamb or a goat, he wants to offer himself as a thank offering. He wants to be a living sacrifice. He wants to give himself completely to this good master. And so he imagines that he is a slave who is so excited about working for his master, that he has allowed his ear to be pierced as a sign of devotion. He has allowed God himself to dig a hole in his ear so that the whole world may know who his master is. And he will serve his master the rest of his days, not through gritted teeth, not mumbling under his breath, but with joy!

When it comes to describing our relationship to God, slavery is not a very popular biblical image these days. You don't hear preachers saying, "We are God's slaves!!" even though it is an image the Bible uses. And there are good reasons for steering away from it. Slavery as an institution is evil. We fight slavery! It has been a massively destructive force in human history and God does not want one human being to own another. This is a good reason to put the slave image on the shelf. But there are also bad reasons for getting rid of the slave image. Right now, any image that smells like authority or hierarchy is in disfavor. In the current climate, it is not just slaves that get put on the shelf, but also metaphors like Lord and King and Ruler, and even Father. In the climate of our age, to submit to authority is uncool. In the climate of our age, to allow your will and your feelings to be subject to the feelings and will outside of yourself is a kind of weakness.

A good example of this is how we ground our moral choices. These days when a teenager (or an adult for that matter) makes a moral choice, they will almost never point to an outside authority as the ground for that choice. So, for example, if they choose not to drink at a party, and their friends ask them, "Why don't you join us?" they will almost never say, "it's against the rules" or "because my parents forbid it" or "because I believe it's against God's law."

They will not use these sorts of reasons because they ground the choice in someone else's will, someone else's authority. Instead they will justify their moral choice based on self-interest. I don't like alcohol. I have a track meet tomorrow morning and I want to be ready. Or even: I just don't feel like it tonight. Justifications based on personal self-interest and personal choice are acceptable. Justifications based on community rules or God's commands are considered weird and weak.

In the same way, we make our moral appeals based on self-interest as well. We don't say: don't have sex outside of marriage because it's against God's law. We say: don't do it because statistics show that people who wait have happier marriages. Or don't do it because you'll get a disease. We appeal to self-interest because, of course, no one wants to suggest that they are just surrendering their will to an outside authority. If you make a choice because it's what you want, great. You do you. If you make a moral choice because someone else commanded it, what's the matter with you?!

It reminds me of Jeremy Begbie's story. Jeremy Begbie is a British theologian and musician with an interesting conversion story. He grew up in a non-Christian home. He was an immensely gifted student who was into philosophy and literature and especially into music. As a teenager he was on his way to being a concert pianist. But then, the Holy Spirit got to him and he found himself becoming a Christian. At first, he resisted the change. He was worried that once he was converted, everything he enjoyed would have to fade away. All his passions would dim. For example, he specifically worried that he would have to give up his music, or that somehow his music would cease to be quite so enjoyable. He thought he'd spend his days thinking about Jesus and talking about church. He thought the things of the world would go strangely dim in the light of Christ's glory and grace.

But do you know what? Once he converted, exactly the opposite was true. Things got better. His enjoyment of the truly good things in life didn't fade, it increased. Once he gave himself to Christ, his music

became more of a passion and it took on deeper, more spiritual dimensions. Serving Jesus, submitting to Jesus, added color. It didn't turn everything gray! His music wasn't just about excellence and applause, it was about joy and Spirit. And he didn't play his music like his reputation depended on it; now his sense of self was grounded in the grace and love of Jesus. His story, and the story of so many people I know, exposes the great lie of radical individualism. The spirit of our service to God isn't gritted teeth and the mumbling of the servant working off his debt. It is the joy and the love of Psalm 40. It is the joy and love of the servant with the pierced ear.

We all end up serving something in this world. We all end up working for something, even if that something is our own whims and desires. But the best master out there is Jesus. The other masters, success, beauty, money, sex-you don't want to serve them, you don't want to work for them! On the outside it looks like the people working for their firms have a pretty glamorous life, but they are all terrible taskmasters. They will enslave you.

Jesus on the other hand, is a boss you could fall in love with. This boss gives you freedom to do your thing. It's His kingdom you're building, but He gives you all kinds of room to exercise your creativity and your gifts. This boss isn't distant from His workers. He knows us each by name, and when you need to talk with Him, He always makes Himself available. In fact, at Bethlehem, He came right down to the work floor to share our daily struggle. And the work He gives you is good work. It's hard work sometimes, but it's significant work. The work of love is simply the best thing out there. And finally, if times are tough, if there are cuts to be made and debts to be paid, this boss doesn't start axing the lowest employees, He doesn't start cutting middle management, He's the one to take on the debt, He will absorb the deepest cuts. He will allow himself to be pierced, for the sake of His servants. This is a good master. You could fall in love with a master like this. You might even get your ear pierced.

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