

Slave

✖ *Best-selling author and pastor John MacArthur believes that a mistranslated word has changed the message of the New Testament. He asserts that the term servant instead of the term slave has misconstrued what it means to truly be a follower of Christ.*

The following is an excerpt from his new book, Slave: The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ (Thomas Nelson).

A Word That Changes Everything

Since its first appearance in Antioch, the term *Christian* has become the predominant label for those who follow Jesus. It is an appropriate designation because it rightly focuses on the centerpiece of our faith: Jesus Christ. Yet ironically, the word itself appears only three times in the New Testament—twice in the book of Acts and once in 1 Peter 4:16.

In addition to the name *Christian*, the Bible uses a host of other terms to identify the followers of Jesus. Scripture describes us as children of God, citizens of heaven and lights to the world. We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, members of His body, sheep in His flock, ambassadors in His service, and friends around His table. WE are called to compete like athletes, to fight like soldiers, to abide like branches in a vine, and even to desire His word as newborn babies long for milk. All of these

descriptions—each in its own unique way—help us understand what it means to be a Christian.

Yet, the Bible uses one metaphor more frequently than any of these. It is the word picture you might not expect, yet it is absolutely critical for understanding what it means to follow Jesus.

It is the image of a *slave*.

Time and time again throughout the pages of Scripture, believers are referred to as *slaves of God* and *slaves of Christ*.

In fact, whereas the outside world called them “Christians,” the earliest believers repeatedly referred to themselves in the New Testament as the Lord’s slaves. For them, the two ideas were synonymous. To be a Christian was to be a slave of Christ.

The story of the martyrs confirms that this is precisely what they meant when they declare to their persecutors, “I am a Christian.” A young man named Apphianus, for example, was imprisoned and tortured by the Roman authorities. Throughout his trial, he would only reply that he was the slave of Christ. Though he was finally sentenced to death, and drowned in the sea, his allegiance to the Lord never wavered.

Other early martyrs responded similarly: “If they consented to amplify their reply, the perplexity of the magistrates was only the more increased, for they seemed to speak insoluble enigmas. ‘I am a slave of

Caesar," they said, 'but a Christian who has received his liberty from Christ Himself;' or contrariwise, 'I am a free man, the slave of Christ;' so that it sometimes happened that it became necessary to send for the proper (the *curator civitatis*) to ascertain the trust as to their civil condition."

But what proved to be confusing to the Roman authorities made perfect sense to the martyrs of the early church. Their self-identity had been radically redefined by the gospel. Whether slave or free in this life, they had all been set free from sin; yet, having been bought with a price, they had all become slaves of Christ. That is what it meant to be a *Christian*.

The New Testament reflects this perspective, commanding believers to submit to Christ completely, and not just as hired servants or spiritual employees—but those who belong wholly to Him. We are to obey Him without question and follow Him without complaint. Jesus Christ is our Master—a fact we acknowledge every time we call Him "Lord." We are His slaves, called to humbly and wholeheartedly obey and honor Him.

We don't hear about that concept much in churches today. In contemporary Christianity the language is anything but slave terminology. It is about success, health, wealth, prosperity and the pursuit of happiness. We often hear that God loves people unconditionally and wants to be all *they* want to be. He wants to fulfill every desire, hope and dream.

Personal

ambition, *personal* fulfillment, *personal* gratification—these have all become part of the language of evangelical Christianity—and part of what it means to have a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” Instead of teaching the New Testament gospel—where sinners are called to submit to Christ, the contemporary message is exactly the opposite: Jesus is here to fulfill your wishes. Likening Him to a personal assistant or a personal trainer, many churchgoers speak of a personal Savior who is here to do their bidding and help them in their quest for self-satisfaction or individual accomplishment.

The New Testament understanding of the believer’s relationship to Christ could not be more opposite. He is the Master and Owner.

We are His possession. He is the King, the Lord and the Son of God. We are His subjects and His subordinates.

In a word, we are His *slaves*.

Lost in Translation

Scripture’s prevailing description of the Christian’s relationship to Jesus Christ is the slave/master relationship. But do a casual read through your English New Testament and you won’t see it.

The reason for this is as simple as it is shocking: the Greek word for *slave* has been covered up by being mistranslated in almost every English version—going back to both the King James

Version and the Geneva Bible that predated it. Though the word *slave* (*doulos* in Greek) appears 124 times in the original text, it is correctly translated only once in the King James. Most of our modern translations do only slightly better. It almost seems like a conspiracy.

Instead of translating the word *doulos* as "slave," these translations consistently substitute the word *servant* in its place. Ironically, the Greek language has at least half a dozen words that can mean *servant*. The word *doulos* is not one of them. Whenever it is used, both in the New Testament and in secular Greek literature, it always and only means *slave*. According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, a foremost authority on the meaning of Greek terms in Scripture, the word *doulos* is used exclusively "either to describe the status of slave or an attitude corresponding to that of a slave." The dictionary continues by noting that "the meaning is so unequivocal and self-contained that it is superfluous to give examples of the individual terms or to trace the history of the group. ... [The] emphasis here is always on 'serving as a slave.'" Hence we have a service which is not a matter of choice for the one who renders it, which he has to perform whether he lives it or not, because he is subject as a slave to an alien will, to the will of his owner. [The

term stresses] the
slave's dependence on his lord."

While it is true that the duties of slave and servant may overlap to some degree, there is a key distinction between the two: servants are *hired*; slaves are *owned*. Servants have an element of freedom in choosing whom they work for and what they do. The idea of servanthood maintains some level of self-autonomy and personal rights. Slaves, on the other hand, have no freedom, autonomy or rights. In the Greco-Roman world, slaves were considered property, to the point that, in the eyes of the law they were regarded as *things* rather than *persons*. To be someone's slave was to be his possession, bound to obey his will without hesitation or argument.

But why have modern English translations consistently mistranslated *doulos* when its meaning is unmistakable in the Greek? There are at least two answers to this question. First, given the stigmas attached to slavery in the Western society, translators have understandably wanted to avoid any association between biblical teaching and the slave trade of the British Empire and the American Colonial era. For the average reader today, the word *slave* does not conjure up images of Greco-Roman society, but rather depicts an unjust system of oppression that was finally ended in parliamentary rule in England

and by civil war in the United States. In order to avoid both potential confusion and negative imagery, modern translators have replaced slave language with servant language.

Second, from a historical perspective, in late-medieval times it was common to translate *doulos* with the Latin word *servus*.

Some of the earliest English translations, influenced by the Latin version of the Bible, translated *doulos* as “servant” because it was a more natural rendering of *servus*. Added to this, the term *slave* in 16th century England generally depicted someone in physical chains or in prison.

Since this is quite different from the Greco-Roman idea of slavery, the translators of early English versions (like the Geneva Bible and the King James) opted for a word they felt better represented Greco-Roman slavery in their culture. That word was *servant*. These early translations continue to have a significant impact on modern English versions.

But whatever the rationale behind the change, something significant is lost in translation when *doulos* is rendered “servant” rather than “slave.” The gospel is not simply an invitation to become Christ’s associate; it is a mandate to become His slave.

Rediscovering This One Hidden Word

The Bible’s emphasis on slavery to God is missing from the pages of most modern English translations. But that which is hidden in our

modern versions was a central truth for the apostles and the generations of believers who came after them.

Early Christian leaders, like Ignatius (who died around AD 110) and his co-workers, saw themselves as “fellow slaves” of Christ. Polycarp (c. 69-155) instructed the Philippians, “Bind up your loose robes and serve as God’s slaves in reverential fear and truth.” *The Shepherd of Hermas* (written in the second century) warns its readers that “there are many [wicked deeds] from which the slave of God must refrain.” The fourth-century writer known as Ambrosiaster explained that “the one who is liberated from [the Mosaic Law] ‘dies’ and lives to God, becoming his slave, purchased by Christ.” Augustine (354-430) simply asked his congregation this rhetorical question: “Does your Lord not deserve to have you as his trustworthy slave?” Elsewhere, he rebuked those who would exhibit foolish pride: “You are a creature, acknowledge the Creator; you are a slave, do not disdain the Master.” Ancient Bible expositor John Chrysostom (347-407) comforted those who were in physical bondage with these words: “In things that relate to Christ, both [slaves and masters] are equal; and just as you are the slave of Christ, so also is your master.”

Even in more recent history, in spite of the confusion caused by English translations, leading scholars and pastors have recognized the

reality of this vital concept. Listen to the words of Charles Spurgeon—the great British preacher of the 19th century: “Where our Authorized [King James] Version softly puts it ‘servant’ it really is ‘bond-slave.’ The early saints delighted to count themselves Christ’s absolute property, bought by Him, owned by Him, and wholly at His disposal. Paul even went so far as to rejoice that he has the marks of his Master’s brand on him, and he cries, ‘Let on man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.’ There was the end of all debate: he was the Lord’s, and the marks of the scourges, the rods, and the stones were the broad-arrow of the King which marked Paul’s body as the property of Jesus the Lord. Now if the saints of old time gloried in obeying Christ, I pray that you and I ... may feel that our first object in life is to obey our Lord.

Scottish pastor, Alexander Maclaren, a contemporary of Spurgeon echoed these same truths: “The true position, then, for man is to be God’s slave. ... Absolute submission, unconditional obedience, on the slave’s part; and on the part of the Master complete ownership, the right of life and death, the right of disposing of all goods and chattels l.. the right of issuing commandments without a reason, the right to expect that those commandments shall be swiftly, unhesitatingly, punctiliously and completely

performed—these things inhere in our relation to God. Blessed [is] the man who has learned that they do, and has accepted them as his highest glory and the security of his most blessed life! For, brethren, such submission, absolute and unconditional, the blending and the absorption of my own will in His will, is the secret of all that makes manhood glorious and great and happy. ... [In] the New Testament these names of slave and owner are transferred to Christian and Jesus Christ.”

As these voices from church history make so abundantly clear, our slavery to Christ has radical implications for how we think and live. We have been *bought with a price. We belong to Christ.* We are part of a people for *His own possession*. And understanding all of that changes everything about us, starting with our perspective and our priorities.

True Christianity is not about adding Jesus to *my life*. Instead, it is about devoting myself completely to *Him*—submitting wholly to His will and seeking to please Him above all else. It demands dying to self and following the Master, no matter the cost. In other words, to be a Christian is to be Christ’s *slave*.

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