

The 11th Commandment Unpacked

“he shall be his slave forever” Exodus 21:5-6

Exodus 21:1-6

¹ “Now these are the rules that you shall set before them. ² **When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.**

³ If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. ⁴ If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. ⁵ But if the slave plainly says, **‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free.’** ⁶ then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and **he shall be his slave forever.**

Why piercing? • **Why a door?** • **Why an ear?**

WHY DID BONDSLAVES HAVE THEIR EAR PIERCED?

ONE FOR ISRAEL

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There was a song we used to sing about God piercing our ears as a mark of willingly becoming a bondsman, according to the process laid out in Deuteronomy 15. At the time, I was going through a protracted debate with my parents, who felt I was not old enough for pierced ears, so I really liked that song, and sang it defiantly. I did not understand it then, but that particular part of the Torah was not about jewelry. The meaning of this ear-piercing ritual that God outlines in the law is much more profound than I could possibly have imagined.

The instructions for making a regular slave into a bondsman are laid out twice in the Torah: Exodus 21, and Deuteronomy 15. As a rabbi once pointed out to me, it is highly interesting that right after the Ten Commandments, when God launches into his law, this the very first thing he says:

Exodus 21:1-6 *“When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing... But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.”*

Right after the dramatic Exodus from slavery in Egypt, God tells them that **the first thing you should know about slaves is that they should go free.** For nothing. That the Hebrew people should not be indefinitely enslaved, but offered the chance to go free after a limited time of service. **After that, the slave might choose to stay – out of love for the master – but that should be a matter of free choice.** Deuteronomy 15 reiterates the principle:

*“If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. **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. But if he says to you, ‘I will not go out from you,’ because he loves you and your household, since he is well-off with you, then you shall take an awl, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever.” (Deut 15:12-17)*

Why piercing? • **Why a door?** • **Why an ear?**

It does seem a slightly strange ceremony, doesn't it? But as is so often the case with the Bible, if you scratch a little beneath the surface, there are all manner of truth treasures to be found. It's a matter of asking the right questions and steady observation.

Take the principal ideas to start with: Nails driven through flesh? Blood on doorframes? Permanent piercing, with holes and scars forever? Does it sound at all familiar?! If you are starting to see the parallels, good.

WHY PIERCING?

The process was this: The slave, who for the reason of love wished to serve his master voluntarily, would be taken to a doorframe. Then a *martzayah* – something that is used to bore a hole (the word is only used in these two descriptions in the Bible) would pierce or bore a hole through the skin of the earlobe, marking the flesh permanently.

Paul says in Galatians, “I carry the scars of Jesus on my own body.” (Gal 6:17 ISV) The word for scar here is *στίγμα* – *stigma*. Here is the Strong’s Definition: from a primary *στίζω* *stízō* (to “stick”, i.e. prick); a mark incised or punched (for recognition of ownership), i.e. (figuratively) scar of service: mark. The description continues;

A mark pricked in or branded upon the body. To ancient oriental usage, slaves and soldiers bore the name or the stamp of their master or commander branded or pricked (cut) into their bodies to indicate what master or general they belonged to, and there were even some devotee’s who stamped themselves in this way with the token of their gods.

Paul is talking about scars, marks, stigmas in his own body that mark him out as a bondsman to Yeshua. But Yeshua also has permanent scars. **His scars also came about from having his flesh pierced on wood, as a result of love, and willing submission to serve.** “Not my will, but yours”, he said. “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve”. Yeshua is the ultimate servant, whose glorious scars all other scars can only be a shadow of.

“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.” (John 20:19-20)

He still has scars on his hands to this day, and forever – a permanent mark of his great love and willing servanthood, far beyond any conceivable call of duty.

i.e. Philippians 2 Christ’s Example of Humility

¹So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of **a servant**, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Servant (of a bond-servant) – **1401** *doúlos* (a masculine noun of uncertain derivation) – properly, someone who belongs to another; a *bond-slave* (*enslaved*), without any ownership rights of their own. Ironically, **1401** /*doúlos* (“bond-slave”) is used with the *highest dignity* in the NT – namely, **of believers who willingly live under Christ’s authority as His devoted followers.**

WHY A DOOR?

The concept of bringing your servant to a door in order to carry out the whole operation is also quite interesting. The New Testament word for door appears 39 times, and is a fascinating study in itself. Yeshua says twice, “I am the door” in John 10: “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep”, and again, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture”.

A door is a passageway; a portal. It presents an opportunity to move from one environment to another. Isn’t that exactly what all of this is about? As a metaphor, a door can be used to signify opportunity, and “The door of the kingdom of heaven” is said to denote the conditions which must be complied with in order to be received into the kingdom of God.

When we think of doorframes in the Bible, our mind is whisked back to the Exodus story itself – a pivotal moment in Israel’s history. The moment when the Israelites were liberated from forced slavery, and were delivered into freedom, where they willingly entered into a covenant with their God – to follow his commandments. Blood on the doorframe is one of the most iconic images of this transfer from slavery into following a new Master in freedom. The blood of the Messiah from his pierced flesh on the cross, the blood of the Passover lamb on the lintels, and the blood of the slave who for love agrees to serve his master willingly.

Crossing over the threshold, through the door, must be voluntary. And Yeshua presents us with that opportunity. He IS that portal – he IS the door to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is no accident or mere matter of convenience that the servant is brought to a door for this ritual.

WHY EARS?

We find that earlobes also feature in two other significant places in the Torah – in the consecration of priests, and the cleansing of lepers: Leviticus 8:1

“Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests... you shall kill the ram and take part of its blood and put it on the tip of the right ear of Aaron and on the tips of the right ears of his sons, and on the thumbs of their right hands and on the great toes of their right feet, and throw the rest of the blood against the sides of the altar.”

Leviticus 14:1-4 *“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “This shall be the law of the leprous person for the day of his cleansing... the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop...”*

Scarlet yarn? Like the colour of blood? And hyssop, you say? Like they used to paint the blood on the doorframes on Passover night? Interesting...

It continues, v14-20: *“The priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering, and the priest shall put it on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot. Then the priest shall take some of the log of oil and pour it into the palm of his own left hand and dip his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand and sprinkle some oil with his finger seven times before the Lord. And some of the oil that remains in his hand the priest shall put on the lobe of the right ear of him who is to be cleansed and on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot, on top of the blood of the guilt offering. And the rest of the oil that is in the priest's hand he shall put on the head of him who is to be cleansed... Thus the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be clean.”*

So we have priests made holy to the Lord by their ears, thumbs and big toes being made holy with blood from the sacrifice, and then leprosy, a picture of sin in the Bible, cleansed and atoned for by blood applied to the same places, followed by anointing oil applied on top.

Our hands signify our deeds, our feet represent our walk, and our ears signify obediently hearing and obeying our Lord. It is a double picture of a life thoroughly cleansed and consecrated to God. Sin is atoned for, and the body is ready for service. Ear to the throne, ever ready to hear God's bidding and carry it out. The Apostle Paul regularly himself a bondservant of Yeshua, using the Greek word *doulos* (δοῦλος) which means a slave, bondservant, one of servile condition, and we would do well as those redeemed from sin and consecrated as priests to see ourselves in the same way.

1401 /doúlos ("bond-slave") is used with the *highest dignity* in the NT – namely, **of believers who willingly live under Christ's authority as His devoted followers.**

We are free – we are completely free to choose, but do you love the Lord so much that you will go to the doorway of decision and opportunity, Yeshua himself, and bear his stigma scars in your own body, surrendering the rest of your life to be God's willing slave forever? We give up the right to call the shots – instead, we obey His instructions. Our lives are not our own, but then again, we do not have to worry about what we will eat, drink and wear, but our Lord takes care of us, giving us everything we need to carry out his will. If you would like to, why not read again God's words in Deuteronomy, considering and applying each concept, and offering your life afresh in willing service to your Lord and Master.

“If the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master... I will not go out free,’ then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever”.

<https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/why-did-bondslaves-have-their-ear-pierced/>