

On the Slave Trade

by John Woolman

We must consider the suffering of others as if it were our own and not support or participate in slavery, which is a form of oppression that is contrary to the principles of Christianity.

Scripture: Exodus 23:7

Topics: "Social Justice", "Christian Ethics"

Description

John Woolman preaches about the deep-rooted issues of departing from the truth of Jesus, leading to the acceptance of unjust practices like the slave trade. He highlights the inhumane treatment of slaves, the violence and bloodshed involved in capturing them, and the harsh conditions they endure. Woolman emphasizes the need for compassion, meekness, and humility in all interactions, condemning the unrighteousness and oppression that stain the land with blood. He calls for a return to true Christian values, denouncing the luxury and vanity that have led to the suffering of innocent lives.

Transcript

Though departing from the Truth as it is in Jesus, through introducing Ways of Life attended with unnecessary Expences, many Wants have arisen, the Minds of People have been employ'd in studying to get Wealth, and in this Pursuit, some departing from Equity, have retain'd a Profession of Religion; others have look'd at their Example, and thereby been stengthen'd to proceed further in the same Way: Thus many having encourag'd the Trade of taking Men from Africa and selling them as Slaves.

It hath been computed that near One Hundred Thousand Negroes have, of late Years, been taken annually from that Coast, by Ships employed in the English trade.

As I have travell'd on religious Visits in some Parts of America, I have seen many of these People under the Command of Overseers, in painful Servitude.

I have beheld then as Gentiles, under People professing Christianity, not only kept ignorant of the Holy Scriptures, but under great Provocations to Wrath; of whom it may truly be said, They that rule over them make them to howl, and the Holy Name is abundantly blasphemed. Where Children are taught to read the Sacred Writings, while young, and exempl'd in Meekness and Humility, it is often helpful to them; nor is this any more than a Debt due from us to a succeeding Age.

But where Youth are pinched for want of the Necessaries of Life, forced to labour hard under the harsh Rebukes of rigorous Overseers, and many Times endure unmerciful Whippings: In such an Education, how great are the Disadvantages they lie under! And how forcible do these Things work against the Increase of the Government of the Prince of Peace!

Humphrey Smith, in his works, p. 125(1), speaking of the tender Feeling of the love of God in his Heart when he was a Child, said, "By the violent wrathful Nature that ruled in others, was my Quietness disturbed, and Anger begotten in me toward them yet that of God in me was not wholly overcome, but his Love was felt in my Heart, and great was my Grief when the Earthly-mindedness and wrathful Nature in others so provoked me, that I was estranged from it.

"And this I write as a Warning to Parents and Others, that in the fear of the living God, you may train up the Youth, and may not be a Means of bringing them into such Alienation."

Many are the Vanities and Luxuries of the present Age, and in labouring to support a Way of living conformable to the present World, the Departure from that Wisdom that is pure and peaceable, hath been great.

Under the Sense of deep Revolt, and an overflowing Steam of Unrighteousness, my Life has often been a Life of Mourning, and tender Desires are raised in me, that the Nature of this Practice may be laid to the Heart.

I have read some Books by People who were personally acquainted with the Manner of getting Slaves in Africa.

I have had verbal Relations of this Nature from several Negroes brought from Africa, who have learned to talk English.

I have sundry Times heard Englishmen speak on this Subject, who have been in Africa on Business, and from all these Accounts, it appears evident that great Violence is committed, and much Blood shed in Africa getting Slaves.

When three or four Hundred Slaves are put in the Hold of a Vessel in a hot Climate, their breathing soon affects the Air. Were that Number of free People to go Passengers, with all Things proper for their Voyage, there would Inconvenience arise from the greatness of Number; but Slaves are taken by Violence, and frequently endeavour to kill the white People, that they may return to their Native Land. Hence they are frequently kept under some Sort of Confinement, by means of which a Scent ariseth in the Hold of a Ship, and Distempers often break out amongst them, of which many die. Of this tainted Air in the Hold of Ships freighted with Slaves, I have had several Accounts, some in Print, and some verbal, and all agree that the Scent is grievous. When these People are sold in America, and in the Islands, they are commonly made to labour in a Manner more servile and constant, than that which they were used to at Home, That with Grief, with different Diet from what had been common with the, and with hard Labour, some Thousands are computed to die every Year, in what is called the Seasoning.

Thus it appears evident, that great Numbers of these People are brought every Year to an untimely End; many of them being such who never injured us.

Where the Innocent suffer under hard-hearted Men, even unto Death, and the Channels of Equity are so obstructed, that the Cause of the Sufferers is not judged in Righteousness, the Land is polluted with

Blood. Numb. xxxv. 33.

Where Blood hath been shed unrighteously, and remains unattoned for, the Cry thereof is very piercing.

Under the humbling Dispensations of Divine Providence, this Cry hath deeply affected my Heart, and I feel a Concern to open, as I may be enabled, that which lieth heavy on my Mind.

When the Iniquity of the house of Israel and of Judah was exceeding great great, when the Land was defiled with blood, and the City full of Perverseness, Ezek ix. 9. some were found sighing and crying for the Abominations of the times. and such who live under a right Feeling of our Condition as a Nation these I trust will be sensible that the Lord at this Day doth call to Mourning, thou many are ignorant of it. So powerful are bad Customs when they become general, that People growing bold thro' the Examples one of another, have often been unmoved at the most serious Warnings.

Our blessed Saviour speaking of the People of the old World, said, They eat, they drank, they married, and were given in Marriage, until the Day that Noah went into the Ark, and the Flood came and destroy'd them all. He also spake concerning the People of Sodom, who were represented by the Prophet as haughty, luxurious, and oppressive: this was the sin of Sodom, Pride, Fullness of Bread, and Abundance of Idleness was found in her, and in her Daughters; neither did she strengthen the Hand of the Poor and Needy. Ezek. XVI.49.

Now in a Revolt so deep as this, when much Blood has been shed unrighteously, in carrying on the Slave Trade, and in supporting the Practice of keeping Slaves, which at this Day is unattoned for, and crieth from the Earth, and from the Seas against the Oppressor, -

While this Practice is continued, and, under a great Load of Guilt there is more unrighteousness committed, the State of Things is very moving.

There is a Love which stands in Nature; and a Parent beholding his Child in Misery, hath a Feeling of the Affliction, but in Divine Love, the Heart is enlarged towards Mankind universally, and prepar'd to sympathize with Strangers, though in the lowest Stations in Life. Of this the Prophet appears to have had a feeling, when he said, Have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us? Why then do we deal treacherously every Man with his Brother in prophaning the Covenant of our Fathers?

He who of old heard the Groans of the Children of Israel under the hard Task-masters in Egypt, I trust hath looked down from his Holy Habitation on the Miseries of these deeply oppress'd people.

Many Lives have been shortened through extreme Oppression, while they labour'd to support Luxury and Worldly Greatness; and though many People in outward Prosperity may think little of those Things, yet the gracious Creator hath regard to the Cries of the Innocent, however unnoticed by Men.

The Lord in the Riches of his Goodness, is leading some unto the Feeling of the Condition of this People, who cannot rest without labouring as their Advocates; of which in some Measure I have had Experience: for, in the Movings of his Love in my Heart, these poor Sufferers have been brought near me.

The unoffending Aged and Infirm made to labour too hard, kept on a Diet less comfortable than their weak State required, and exposed to great difficulties under hard-hearted Men, to whose Sufferings I have been a Witness, and under the Heart-melting Power of Divine Love, their Misery hath felt to me like the Misery of my Parent.

Innocent Youth taken by Violence from their Native Land, from their Friends and Acquaintances; put on board Ships with Hearts laden with Sorrow; exposed to great Hardships at Sea; placed under People, where their Lives have been attended with great Provocation to Anger and Revenge:

With the Condition of these Youth, my Mind hath often been affected, as with the Afflictions of my Children, and in a feeling of the Misery of these People, and of that great Offense with is minister'd to them, my Tears have often poured out before the Lord.

That Holy Spirit which affected my Heart when I was a Youth, I trust is often felt by the Negroes in their Native Land, inclining their Minds to that which is righteous, and had the professed Followers of Christ in all their Conduct toward them, manifested a Disposition answerable to the pure Principle in their Hearts, how might the Holy Name have been honoured amongst the Gentiles, and how might we have rejoiced in the fulfilling of that Prophecy, I the Lord love Judgment, I hate Robbery for Burnt-offerings, and I will direct their Work in Truth, and make an everlasting Covenant with them. Their Seed shall be known among the Gentiles and their Offspring amongst the People: All that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the Seed which the Lord hath blesses. Isaiah lxi.8.

But in the present State of things, how contrary is this Practice to that meek Spirit, in which our Saviour laid down his Life for us, that all the Ends of the Earth might know Salvation in his Name.

How are the Sufferings of our blessed Redeemer set at nought, and his Name blasphemed amongst the Gentiles, through the unrighteous Proceedings of his profess'd Followers!

My Mind hath often been affected, even from the Days of my Youth, under a Sense of that Marvellous Work, for which God, in infinite Goodness, sent his Son into the World.

The opening of that Spring of living Waters, which the true Believers in Christ experience, by which they are redeemed from Pride and Covetousness, and brought into a State of Meekness, wherein their Hearts are enlarged in true Love toward their Fellow Creatures universally: this work to me has been precious, and the Spreading of their Knowledge of the Truth among the Gentiles, been very desirable. And the professed Followers of Christ joining in Customs evidently unrighteous, which manifestly tend to stir up Wrath, and increase Wars and Desolations, hath often covered my Mind with Sorrow.

If we bring this Matter home, and as Job proposed to his Friends, Put our Soul in their Soul's stead.

If we consider ourselves and our Children as exposed to the Hardships which these People lie under in supporting an imaginary Greatness.

Did we in such Case behold an Increase of Luxury and Superfluity amongst our Oppressors, and therewith felt an Increase of the Weight of our Burdens, and expected our Posterity to groan under Oppression after us,

Under all this Misery, had we none to plead our Cause, nor any Hope of Relief from Man, how would our Cried ascend to the God of the Spirits of all Flesh, who judgeth the World in Righteousness, and in his own time is a Refuge for the Oppressed!

If they who thus afflicted us, continued to lay Claim to Religion, and were assisted in their Business by others, esteemed Pious People, who through a Friendship with them strengthened their Hands in Tyranny:

In Such a State, when we were Hunger-bitten, and could not have sufficient Nourishment, but saw them in Fulness pleasing their Taste with Things fetched from afar:

When we were wearied with Labour, denied the Liberty to rest, and saw them spending their Time at Ease: When Garments answerable to our Necessities were denied us, while we saw them clothed in that which was costly and delicate:

Under such Affliction, how would these painful Feelings rise up as Witness against their pretended Devotion! And if the Name of their Religion was mention'd in our Hearing, how would it sound in our Ears like a Word which signified Self-exaltation, and Hardness of Heart!

Where a Trade is carried on, productive of much Misery, and they who suffer by it are some Thousand miles off, the Danger is the greater of not laying their Sufferings to Heart.

In procuring slaves on the Coast of Africa, many Children are stolen privately; Wars also are encouraged amongst the Negroes, but all is at a great Distance.

Many Groans arise from dying Men, which we hear not.

Many Cries are uttered by Widows and Fatherless Children, which reach not our ears.

Many Cheeks are wet with Tears, and Faces sad with unutterable Grief, which we see not.

Cruel Tyranny is encouraged. The Hands of Robbers are strengthened, and Thousands reduced to the most abject Slavery, who never injured us.

Were we for the Term of one Year only, to be an Eye-witness to that what passes in getting these Slaves:

Was the Blood which is there shed to be sprinkled on our Garments:

Were the poor Captives, bound with Thongs, heavy laden with Elephants Teeth, to pass before our Eyes on their Way to the Sea:

Were their bitter Lamentations Day after Day to ring in our Ears, and their mournful Cries in the Night to hinder us from Sleeping:

Were we to hear the Sound of the Tumult at Sea, when the Salvos on board the Ships attempt to kill the English, and behold the Issue of those bloody Conflicts:

What pious Man could be a Witness to these Things, and see a Trade carried on in this Manner, without being deeply affected with Sorrow?(2)

Through abiding in the Love of Christ, we feel a Tenderness in our Hearts toward our Fellow Creatures entangled in oppressive Customs; and a Concern so to walk that our Conduct may not be a Means of strength'ning them in Error.

It was the Command of the Lord through Moses, Thou shalt not suffer Sin upon thy Brother: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy Brother, and shalt not suffer Sin upon him. Lev.xix.17.

Again; Keep far from a false Matter; and the Innocent and Righteous slay thou not. Exod.xxiii.7.

The Prophet Isaiah mentions Oppression as that which the true Church in Time of outward Quiet should not only be clear of, but should be far from it: Thou shalt be far from oppression, Isaiah liv.14. Now these Words, far from appear to have an extensive Meaning, and to convey Instruction in regard to that of which Solomon speaks, Though Hand join in Hand, yet the Wicked shall not go unpunished. Prov.xvi.5.

It was a Complaint against one of old, When thou sawest a Thief, thou consentedst with him.

The Prophet Jeremiah represents the Degrees of Preparation toward Idolatrous Sacrifice, in the Similitude of a work carried on by Children, Men, and Women. The Children gather Wood, the Fathers kindle the Fire, and the Women knead the Dough to bake Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, Jer.vii.18.

It was a Complaint of the Lord against Israel, through his Prophet Ezekiel, that they strengthen'd the Hanks of the Wicked, and made the Hearts of the Righteous sad. Ezek.xiii.12.

Some Works of Iniquity carried on by the People were represented by the Prophet Hosea, in the Similitude of Ploughing, Reaping, and eating the Fruit: You have ploughed Wickedness, reaped Iniquity, eaten the Fruit of Lying, because thou didst trust in thy own Way, to the Multitude of might Men, Hosea x.13.

Notes

(1) A/Collection/of the Several Writings and/Faithful Testimonies/of that/

Suffering Servant of god and Patient/Follower of the Lamb,/Humphrey

Smith/who Dyed a Prisoner of the Testimony of Jesus/in the Winchester

Common-Gaol, the 4th day of the 3d Month, in the Year 1663."

This Quotation is from Andrew Sowles Edition, London, 1683. Quarto.

(2) Various Editions omit the concluding paragraphs below. The first edition

of 1774 contains them, and agrees therein with a not in the York MS.

which is here followed.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-woolman/on-the-slave-trade/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net