

BOUGHT WITH A PRICE

Getting started: I would remind you that slave markets were a common reality in the Roman world. Wherever Paul traveled, in any city or town of any size, he would have seen active slave markets. The master of analogies that he was, he found many connections between slavery and the Christian Life. Until freed, we are “slaves of sin.” All the world was in bondage to Satan and his ways. Jesus did not come because someday we might be thrown into Hell; Jesus came to free us from a bondage we were already in. So I also need to be reminded that in Greek, the word for “slave” and the word for “servant” are the same word. It is the whim of the translator that chooses to write down “slave” or “servant,” depending on how the flavor of the passage strikes him.

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There is a phrase familiar to most of us that we sometimes use to express a cynical evaluation of the moral and ethical stature of human beings. It claims that none of us live by pure principles beyond a certain point. Selfish desires and self-centered aspirations will at some point overcome our convictions about right behavior. The cynical phrase is this: EVERY MAN HAS HIS PRICE. At some point we will sell out, if the price is high enough.

In a movie called *The Electric Horseman*, a rancher has transported Rising Star, a great race horse, and Sonny Steele (played by Robert Redford) – who has stolen Rising Star (and Jane Fonda) – in his cattle truck, to get them out of a region where the police are closing in. There is a large reward out for capturing Sonny. As the rancher offloads them from the truck, Sonny tries to express his gratitude. “There aren’t many men you can trust fifty thousand dollars worth,” he says. The rancher replies, “You better get on over the mountain before it comes to me what I’m passing up.”

A sweet moment. At this point, at least, the price is not high enough to make this rancher sell out. It makes us like and admire him.

It would be nice to believe that other people did not have a price. We could then afford to trust them implicitly. We could have the wonderful confidence of knowing that they would not “sell us out” for any reason, at any price. That is, of course, what makes the Old Covenant so appealing. We are sons and daughters of the commandments. We have sworn to God that we will keep the commandments – no matter what. No bribe, no excuse, no circumstance will cause us to steal or lie or commit adultery or weaken our allegiance to God. And so the world became a beautiful place in which to live. But alas! EVERY MAN HAS HIS PRICE. AND EVERY WOMAN TOO. All of us get betrayed from time to time.

Like many of you, I once enjoyed thinking of myself as a person who could not be bought. Among all the lesser types of humans, I would stand as a moral giant who would neither bend nor falter amid the compromises and bribes of the world around me. I looked with disdain and disapproval on those I saw around me who traded their principles and their character in the marketplace of fleeting desires and temporal gains. How blind we sometimes are to our own inner selves. Never has any man sold out more completely than I have. Never has any man been less principled.

No inherent goodness governs my actions. No personal philosophy of love or justice controls my decisions or determines my choices. Like everyone else, I had my price, and I sold out. However imperfectly I may live up to my end of the bargain, it is nevertheless my full intention to throw every match, to play every game, to place every bet – according to the instructions of the One who bought me out. I know where my “payoff” comes from, and it is not from anything or anyone in this world. And so, while a person might deal in trust with the One who bought me, he would be a fool indeed to trust *me*.

There is no moral justification for my selling my soul. Therefore I must confess that I am no longer moral in any true sense of that word. But by way of explanation, I will say that I got a very good price. In fact, it’s the same old story: I got a price I could not refuse. He paid a price so vast that the poor treasures I once dreamed of possessing seemed like dust and ashes in comparison. To tell the truth, the price was so high I did not believe it was a serious offer for a long time. I thought it had to be some kind of trap or some kind of trick – you know, a con-game to take in the suckers: promise them anything, but never pay off.

So I made Him show me the payoff again and again. I did not see how He could have that much to give, never mind the willingness to give it. When I finally became convinced that He did have the amount, I became even more convinced that He would never hand it over – not for the likes of me.

But He just laughed. Told me to go ahead and take it with me; if I changed my mind about the bargain, I could always bring it back, and He would not even charge me for the part I had used. It took me even longer to get up the nerve to try that! It smelled too perfect. There had to be an angle. Nobody makes an offer like that unless they are setting you up to be the goat.

So I kept telling Him NO! Yet I could not get it out of my head. I knew it had to be really risky. But you know how it goes: once you get the *possibility* into your head, everything else seems drab and worthless. After a while you tell yourself it's better to risk and lose than to spend the rest of your life regretting your cowardice.

All my pride and all my principles notwithstanding, how could I keep refusing such a price? *“This is my body, broken for you – this is my blood, poured out for the redemption of your soul.”*

Never could I ever be worth such a price. Never could all my integrity and high principles be worth that much. How could a person steel themselves against that kind of payoff? I confess it: in the long run, I did not have the strength to refuse His offer. The truth is, I would have sold out for far less. But that was His offer: Divine love through all eternity. New strength and purpose flowing through my veins. New Life, invading and taking over my reasons and purposes for living.

I know I ought to stop. Public confession is still held to be in poor taste in most circles. But I do wish to mention that being “bought” is not at all like what I had imagined. There are those who chide me, pointing out that I am no longer my own Master. And some call me a traitor to humanity, having been bought with a price. Quite right they are, too. I am no longer my own man, having been bought with a price. I belong to Another. A strange experience for one who was raised, as I was, to honor and fight for freedom.

Strangely enough, I do not really miss that freedom. Frankly, I was never very sure what I was going to do with myself in that old freedom anyway. It never was satisfying, never very much fun – though for years I tried to tell myself it was. I actually feel a lot freer now than I ever did when I owned myself. When you are already bought – when you are no longer for sale – a lot of would-be slave owners leave you alone. And that’s very nice.

The One who bought me paid such a high price that no one even tries to bid against Him in the open market. Sometimes they sneak in the back door and try to make a special deal for themselves, but they run like crazy when my real Master approaches. That is one of the big advantages. The world is full of soul salesmen, but none of them care for crossing swords with the True Master. That saves a lot of fruitless argument and wasted energy.

From my point of view, I have far more freedom in my slavery than most of the folk I know who still own themselves. You may think that is only rationalization, but I think everyone gets “owned” sooner or later by someone or something. I was just lucky I heard about this amazing offer before I sold out for a lot less.

The man who owns himself is a slave too, when you stop to think about it. I would not give you two cents for that kind of slavery anymore. When you own yourself, it is impossible to end up with more than you started out with. A lot of people see that and sell out to serving others instead. Society makes a big deal out of *that* kind of slavery. It has all kinds of nice adjectives for people who serve other people. But there is as much misery in this world because of people who try to serve other people as there is because of people who try to serve themselves. Lots of people try to serve their bosses or their relatives or their children or their friends or their mates – or even all of them all at once. Boy, talk about slavery! I would not be about to trade *my* kind of sellout for theirs. People who live to serve others always end up trying to control them in one way or another. “Look at all I have done for you. You owe it to me to be successful – to prove that what I did for you was worth it.”

If it is not very satisfying to belong to yourself, it certainly is not going to be any more satisfying to belong to some other person’s self. Of course, the Master who bought me sees more value in each of us than we would ever have dreamed of. He is forever giving some poor slob a chance he never deserved, or loaning Him some kind of gifts and riches he will never be able to pay back – just like He did with me.

But that's His business and His headache. I just try to do what I am told. It does get pretty interesting, though. It is amazing what the Master can sometimes do with a hunk of flesh and a heartbeat.

And that is one more thing I really want to tell you. There is something about being His slave that makes a special bond between you and all His other slaves. It's hard to describe but, work or play, or even in times of trial, we have a really great time together. I guess it's because we all know about the "sellout" and the price that was paid – and the huge payoff that is already coming, but getting bigger all the time. He pays the same price for each one of us, and He never sets one of us in charge of another one of us. Everyone has to report to Him personally. He has this strange way of treating us all like friends and equals, yet making each of us feel incredibly special.

That kills the jealousy and pride and pretense that usually muck up things between "normal" people. It's so wonderful not to have to worry about being "acceptable" or "good" or important enough not to be thrown away.

By the way, I do happen to be on an assignment tonight. I came here under orders to tell you for my Master that He is ready, willing, and able to pay the same price for you. Why? God knows! Except for Him, I would not see that much worth or value in you. Not any more than I could ever see it in myself.

Anyway, His offer stands open to you: *"This is my body, this is my blood: offered for you, that you might have life with me – and with God, my Father – forever!"*

Jesus does not do this under the table or in secret. It is an out-and-out payoff, and He does not care who knows it. He wants your soul, and He is willing to buy you out. If you accept His offer, you better believe He means it. And if we accept His offer, we better mean it too.

"You are not your own; you were bought with a price."