

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

THE LESSON: PERSPECTIVE, PURPOSE, PERSEVERANCE

“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbour serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages.”

(Jeremiah 22:13)

From ancient times, the practice of slavery has existed, but during the European colonial period it took on an even more horrific form. England, Portugal, France, Spain, and Holland were competing over who could build the largest, strongest and richest colonies in the Americas. Fuelling this competition were unscrupulous traders who had discovered the immense profit that could be made by capturing people from West Africa and transporting them to the “new world” where they would then be sold as slaves. Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, millions of Africans were shipped across the Atlantic. Unknowable numbers of them died. Those who survived emerged from the cargo ships into a life of dehumanization within an established racial caste system. They and any children they might have were to be classified as the “property” of their owners – indefinitely.

“Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”

(James 4:17)

William was born to privilege in 1759 England. He was charming, eloquent, well-connected, and ambitious. By his early twenties he'd been elected to the British parliament, and he was on his way to achieving his goal of gaining as much distinction for himself as possible. But in the years that followed, William was moved to reflect on the vanity of his life, and he did not like the conclusions he came to. This period of reflection culminated in a spiritual rebirth, and with it, William found fresh purpose.

William placed himself under the spiritual guidance of John Newton, who had been the priest at William's childhood parish. John knew firsthand about the horrors of the slave trade because he had once been a slave trader, before conversion and conscience had led him to repent of his involvement. With John's help, William came to recognize that he was in a unique position from which he could work towards change. For the rest of his life, William would fight for the total abolition of slavery in Britain and its colonies. He put his considerable gifts to work with this in view, at one point writing,

“To all the inhabitants of the British Empire, who value the favour of God, or are alive to the interests or honour of their country – to all who have any respect for justice, or any feelings of humanity, I would solemnly address myself. I call upon them, as they shall hereafter answer, in the great day of account, for the use they shall have made of any power or influence with which Providence may have entrusted them, to employ their best endeavours, by all lawful and constitutional means, to mitigate, and, as soon as it may be safely done, to terminate the Negro Slavery of the British Colonies; a system of the grossest injustice, of the most heathenish irreligion and immorality, of the most unprecedented degradation, and unrelenting cruelty”.

“Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”

(Galatians 6:9)

The fight William had taken up was not an easy one. Slavery had become crucial to numerous economic interests and his opponents were many. Not only did his opponents block the legislation he put forward, but they actively vilified him at every opportunity. Nevertheless, William carried on with his legislative efforts. And in the meantime, he kept busy. He gave money to the poor and advocated for a wide range of causes, both social and religious. He also met and married a young woman named Barbara, with whom he fathered six children.

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In 1807, the first major victory was achieved: the abolition of the slave *trade* in the British Empire. Once the law was passed, implementation and enforcement was still needed. And yet another major injustice remained to be fought: those who had already been traded into slavery *remained* enslaved. In 1833 – more than a quarter of a century later – parliament passed legislation abolishing slavery completely. William, then in his 70s, received the good news. Three days later he died in the knowledge that his mission had been accomplished.

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: CHRISTIANITYTODAY.COM, “WILLIAM WILBERFORCE: ANTISLAVERY POLITICIAN” | BRITANNICA.COM, “JOHN NEWTON” AND “WILLIAM WILBERFORCE” | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, “THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 2” | WIKIPEDIA.ORG, “ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE” AND “WILLIAM WILBERFORCE” | WILLIAM WILBERFORCE, “AN APPEAL TO THE RELIGION, JUSTICE, AND HUMANITY OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE, IN BEHALF OF THE NEGRO SLAVES IN THE WEST INDIES”.)

AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE “FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES”, WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer).)

Review today’s lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of William that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you’ve chosen. Discuss your reflections with a friend or a group of friends, and together commit to a concrete action you can take this week.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following prayer.

O God, who by thy Holy Spirit hast given unto one man a word of wisdom, and to another a word of knowledge, and to another the gift of tongues: We praise thy Name for the gifts of grace manifested in thy servant William, and we pray that thy Church may never be destitute of the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH, POET, OR SCHOLAR, P. 317)