

Slave or servant?

We suggest that the HCSB usually replace “slave” with “servant” whenever service is rendered to God, to the Lord, and to Christ. In addition, we see a number of other passages in the New Testament where a shift from “slave” to “servant” would better reflect the thought of the original and be less confusing to the target audience. At the end of this document, we provide a list of passages where we suggest the change from “slave” to “servant.”

We are aware that in classical Greek the word δοῦλος is “slave” and is customarily used for a person who is owned by another person and subject to that person. Yet we see convincing reasons why δοῦλος should be rendered “servant” in many NT passages.

1) We are convinced that “slave” has negative overtones in English that don’t fit in many of the contexts of the New Testament.

It is undeniable that “slave” is very often a suitable gloss for δοῦλος in the New Testament. But to argue that δοῦλος “means” slave and not servant—and therefore the matter is settled—would be to oversimplify greatly what we “mean” by “meaning.” If a word’s “meaning” includes its referents—those objects in the real world that the word can and cannot be used to point to—then it simply is not true that the referents of δοῦλος in the New Testament and the English word “slave” are in every way the same. But today it is also widely recognized that there is more to “meaning” than reference. That is to say, words do not merely represent things. They also *do* certain things to those who read and hear them, and careful speakers and authors choose words with this in mind. It seems to us that a modern English speaker almost invariably wants to *do* certain things by choosing “slave” that a first-century Greek speaker did not necessarily intend with δοῦλος. Here we have in mind especially the emotional impact of the English word “slave,” as will be explained below.

While many δοῦλοι had a harsh and unpleasant existence in the Roman empire, some of them enjoyed distinction, ease, and respect, particularly if they had a wealthy and prominent master. The experience of the first century δοῦλος was not uniformly negative and brutal (See Murray Harris, *Slave of Christ*, p. 35-44). On the other hand, we do not see the English word “slave” as having any positive associations for the 21st century American who has learned about pre-Civil War slavery in this country. Instead what the word calls to mind is uniformly negative: “slave to her iPhone,” “slave of the bottom line,” “treated like his slave.” The word “slave” depicts a servitude that is exclusively unrewarding and unpleasant. The word “slave” even suggests an institution that many regard as morally wrong.

To us, an approach that insists on translating δοῦλος with “slave” throughout the New Testament and does so purely on the basis of Greek lexicography does not pay enough attention to the shades of meaning that the word “slave” holds in modern English. For this reason we are troubled by the HCSB Bullet Note which suggests that “slave” is the only acceptable translation for “the strong Greek word *doulos*” and that “servant” always inaccurately portrays the “brutal reality of the Roman empire’s inhumane institution.” We hope the HCSB editors will modify this Bullet Note.

We do think δοῦλος can be rendered as “slave” when the context points to a vocation that is compulsory and largely undesirable. For that reason we feel that “slave” is an acceptable translation of δοῦλος in Luke 17:7-10. We recognize that there are passages where the expression “slave of Christ” (or “of God”) is used in explicit contrast with “being free” (See 1 Cor 7:22; Eph 6:6; 1 Pet 2:16). Many translations render δοῦλος as “slave” in these three passages and do so quite appropriately.

Because of the entirely negative connotations of “slave,” however, we do not believe it is a good word generally to represent a believer’s relationship with the Lord. We think the word “servant” better describes the individual who has been set free by the blood of Jesus and blessed with the spirit of sonship. Paul wrote in Romans 8:14: “All those led by God’s Spirit are God’s sons. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear (πνεῦμα δουλείας πάλιν εἰς φόβον), but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father!” (See also John 15:15 and Gal 4:4-7).

Pastoral concern for the listener leads us to ask the HCSB to reconsider its rendering of δοῦλος for a believer’s service to the Lord. We wonder: will even faithful Christians, though well-versed in Scripture, always remember that a “slave” *of God* serves joyfully and without fear because for Jesus’ sake he is also God’s adopted son? Or will all the baggage brought to the word “slave” by our collective American experience up through the Civil War overpower such thoughts? We also wonder about how African-Americans will respond to this term. Won’t the usage of “slave” shout from the page, “Forced service against one’s will!”?

In addition, in numerous parables and in several other New Testament passages we see references to slavery in a form far removed from what was once practiced in the Americas. In some of them the δοῦλος was put in charge of cities or had accounts/debts settled with the master. In others our Lord uses the word δοῦλος to teach us about the service we render to Him. In these instances too we prefer “servant,” since the mechanical use of “slave”—with its exclusively menial and harsh connotations—seems out of place.

2) There is an unacceptable inconsistency if “servant” is used for the believer’s relationship with the Lord in the Old Testament while “slave” is used for the believer’s relationship with the Lord in the New Testament.

We have noticed that in the Old Testament, whenever the Master is the Lord, the HCSB without exception renders עֲבָדָי as “servant,” not “slave.” We have found 36 such instances in the Psalms alone. The great men of faith and the prophets are regularly referred to as the “servants” of the Lord.

We have also noticed that the only three passages in the New Testament where the HCSB translates δοῦλος as “servant” refer to Moses (Rev 15:3) or the prophets (Rev 10:7, 11:18). We assume that this was done to keep a certain intertextual connection between the Old and New Testaments. From our perspective, however, there is now a glaring intertextual inconsistency between the two testaments in the HCSB in that believers in the Lord in the Old Testament are called “servants” and believers in the Lord in the New Testament are called “slaves.” Will this confuse the average reader of the HCSB? Frankly, this confuses us and troubles us. If Moses as a δοῦλος of the Lord is a “servant,” we think that Paul, James, and other New Testament believers should be referred to as “servants” as well. They served God with the same spirit as that of their Old Testament counterparts.

Intertextual issues also arise when we notice that Luke's portrait of Mary invites comparison with the way Hannah speaks in 1 Samuel. In her prayer to God (1 Sam 1:11) and in her conversation with Eli (1 Sam 1:16, 18), Hannah refers to herself either as אֲנִי עַבְדָּתְךָ or as אֲנִי עַבְדָּתְךָ. The HCSB properly translates both expressions as "your servant." Although modern Americans do not refer to themselves that way even when speaking to a high official, they know that polite individuals in earlier times had a deferential way of calling themselves "your servant" (never "your slave") to show respect. Thus it is jarring to hear Mary refer to herself in the HCSB as "the Lord's slave" (Luke 1:38) and "His slave" (Luke 1:48). Mary may well have spoken in Aramaic, but Luke's report is in Greek, and the Greek noun he uses, δούλη, is the same noun we find in the Septuagint when Hannah calls herself "your servant" in speaking to God and to Eli. That kind of usage in the Septuagint is deserving of further consideration.

3) The Septuagint shows that “servant” is a legitimate translation for δοῦλος in Hellenistic Judaism.

We suspect that the original HCSB translators chose “slave” as the preferred rendering of δοῦλος because that is what shows up routinely as the meaning in Greek lexica and wordbooks. However, we think that the evidence of the Septuagint needs to be given greater consideration when it comes to understanding the usage of δοῦλος in the New Testament.

In the Septuagint, David is called a δοῦλος of Saul. Uriah, Joab, Absalom, Ittai, Ahimaaz, Shimei, Barzillai, and David’s soldiers are said to be his δοῦλοι. Obadiah, Naaman, and Gehazi are δοῦλοι to Elijah. In these Septuagint passages it would be impossible to translate δοῦλος as “slave” because the δοῦλος was not owned by the other person. Instead the word cries out to be rendered as “servant.” This shows that in Hellenistic Judaism the circle of meaning for δοῦλος was obviously wider than the English word “slave.” Indeed, δοῦλος was often used in Hellenistic Judaism in contexts where the English word “servant” is the best English equivalent. No doubt this is why one major Septuagint lexicon (J. Lust, E. Eynikel, & K. Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*) lists both “servant” and “slave” as acceptable glosses for δοῦλος; in fact, “servant” is listed first. In another Septuagint lexicon (T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*), the second gloss given for δοῦλος is “submissive and respectful person.”

What is behind the word δοῦλος in these Septuagint passages, of course, is the Hebrew word עֶבֶד. It is significant that in ancient Semitic usage this was often a term indicating high status. To be an עֶבֶד of a king meant you were an important person. It was an honorific title. The word עֶבֶד also, of course, was used to refer to ordinary, literal slaves. We notice that the HCSB carefully sorts out the Old Testament occurrences of עֶבֶד, sometimes translating “slave” and sometimes “servant.” We think that the HCSB should do the same with the New Testament occurrences of δοῦλος. It can be argued that this would be appropriate because the Septuagint shows that δοῦλος served as a Greek equivalent of עֶבֶד among Hellenistic Jews.

If it is argued that how to translate עֶבֶד and how to translate δοῦλος are separate issues, scholars agree that the New Testament writers lived in the thought world of Hellenistic Judaism and were fully aware of the Septuagint. To establish the meaning of New Testament words, the Septuagint is a foundational resource. The use of δοῦλος in the Septuagint is a strong linguistic reason why we don’t hesitate to suggest that the HCSB’s translation of δοῦλος should frequently be “servant” rather than “slave.”

4) The testimony of other English translations

We are confident that the HCSB translators are aware of how the other major evangelical translations are handling this matter. In light of other translations’ more flexible treatment of δοῦλος, the HCSB approach can seem somewhat mechanical.

Verses where we suggest a change from “slave” to “servant”

Verses where service is rendered to God, to the Lord, or to Christ.

Luke 1:38 – “I am the Lord’s slave,” said Mary. “May it be done to me according to your word.”

Luke 1:48a – because He has looked with favor on the humble condition of His slave.

Luke 2:29 – Now, Master, You can dismiss Your slave in peace, as You promised.

Acts 2:18 – I will even pour out My Spirit on My male and female slaves in those days, and they will prophesy.

Acts 4:29 – And now, Lord, consider their threats, and grant that Your slaves may speak Your message with complete boldness,

Acts 16:17 – As she followed Paul and us she cried out, “These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the slaves of the Most High God.”

Romans 1:1 – Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle and singled out for God’s good news

Galatians 1:10 – For am I now trying to win the favor of people, or God? Or am I striving to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ.

Philippians 1:1a – Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus:

Colossians 1:7a – You learned this from Epaphras, our dearly loved fellow slave.

Colossians 4:7 -- Tychicus, our dearly loved brother, faithful servant, and fellow slave in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me.

Colossians 4:12a – Epaphras, who is one of you, a slave of Christ Jesus, greets you.

2 Timothy 2:24 – The Lord’s slave must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone, able to teach, and patient,

Titus 1:1a – Paul, a slave of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ,

James 1:1a – James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ:

2 Peter 1:1a – Simeon Peter, a slave and an apostle of Jesus Christ:

Jude 1a – Jude, a slave of Jesus Christ and a brother of James:

Revelation 1:1 – The revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave Him to show His slaves what must quickly take place. He sent it and signified it through His angel to His slave John,

Revelation 2:20 – But I have this against you: You tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and deceives My slaves to commit sexual immorality and to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

Revelation 6:11 – So a white robe was given to each of them, and they were told to rest a little while longer until the number would be completed of their fellow slaves and their brothers, who were going to be killed just as they had been.

Revelation 7:3 – “Don’t harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we seal the slaves of our God on their foreheads.”

Revelation 19:2 – because His judgments are true and righteous, because He has judged the notorious prostitute who corrupted the earth with her sexual immorality; and He has avenged the blood of His slaves that was on her hands.

Revelation 19:5 – A voice came from the throne, saying: Praise our God, all His slaves, who fear Him, both small and great!

Revelation 19:10a – Then I fell at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “Don’t do that! I am a fellow slave with you and your brothers who have the testimony about Jesus....”

Revelation 22:3b – The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and His slaves will serve Him.

Revelation 22:6 – Then he said to me, “These words are faithful and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent His angel to show His slaves what must quickly take place.”

Revelation 22:9 – But he said to me, “Don’t do that! I am a fellow slave with you, your brothers the prophets, and those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.”

Parables where “servant” is the better English equivalent because of the elevated status of the δούλος.

Matthew 18:23-35

²³ “For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves.²⁴ When he began to settle accounts, one who owed 10,000 talents was brought before him.²⁵ Since he had no way to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.

²⁶ “At this, the slave fell facedown before him and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!’²⁷ Then the master of that slave had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.

²⁸ “But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him 100 denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, ‘Pay what you owe!’

²⁹ “At this, his fellow slave fell down and began begging him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’³⁰ But he wasn’t willing. On the contrary, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed.³¹ When the other slaves saw what had taken place, they were deeply distressed and went and reported to their master everything that had happened.

³² “Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.³³ Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’³⁴ And his master got angry and handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed.³⁵ So My heavenly Father will also do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from his heart.”

Matthew 21:33-37 (See also Mark 12:1-5 and Luke 20:9-11)

³³ “Listen to another parable: There was a man, a landowner, who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. He leased it to tenant farmers and went away.³⁴ When the grape harvest drew near, he sent his slaves to the farmers to collect his fruit.³⁵ But the farmers took his slaves, beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.³⁶ Again, he sent other slaves, more than the first group, and they did the same to them.³⁷ Finally, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said.”

Matthew 25:14-30 (See also Luke 19:12-27)

¹⁴ “For it is just like a man going on a journey. He called his own slaves and turned over his possessions to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents; to another, two; and to another, one—to each according to his own ability. Then he went on a journey. Immediately ¹⁶ the man who had received five talents went, put them to work, and earned five more. ¹⁷ In the same way the man with two earned two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹ “After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The man who had received five talents approached, presented five more talents, and said, ‘Master, you gave me five talents. Look, I’ve earned five more talents.’

²¹ “His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your master’s joy!’

²² “Then the man with two talents also approached. He said, ‘Master, you gave me two talents. Look, I’ve earned two more talents.’

²³ “His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your master’s joy!’

²⁴ “Then the man who had received one talent also approached and said, ‘Master, I know you. You’re a difficult man, reaping where you haven’t sown and gathering where you haven’t scattered seed. ²⁵ So I was afraid and went off and hid your talent in the ground. Look, you have what is yours.’

²⁶ “But his master replied to him, ‘You evil, lazy slave! If you knew that I reap where I haven’t sown and gather where I haven’t scattered, ²⁷ then you should have deposited my money with the bankers. And when I returned I would have received my money back with interest.

²⁸ “ ‘So take the talent from him and give it to the one who has 10 talents. ²⁹ For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have more than enough. But from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. ³⁰ And throw this good-for-nothing slave into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Mark 13:33-34

³³ “Watch! Be alert! For you don’t know when the time is coming. ³⁴ It is like a man on a journey, who left his house, gave authority to his slaves, gave each one his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to be alert.”

Luke 12:35-40

³⁵ “Be ready for service and have your lamps lit. ³⁶ You must be like people waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet so that when he comes and knocks, they can open the door for him at once. ³⁷ Those slaves the master will find alert when he comes will be blessed. I assure you: He will get ready, have them recline at the table, then come and serve them. ³⁸ If he comes in the middle of the night, or even near dawn, and finds them alert, those slaves are blessed. ³⁹ But know this: If the homeowner had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect.”

Another passage where “servant” is preferred because the service is neither forced nor negative.

2 Corinthians 4:5 – For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves because of Jesus.