

An Early Abolitionist Speaks Out against Slavery (1757)

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John Woolman, born in New Jersey in 1720, was raised as a Quaker and dedicated much of his life to eradicating slavery and the mistreatment of the poor and oppressed. Woolman's methodology was one of compassion and kindness, in keeping with Quaker tradition. He felt the slave owner was injured as much as the slave through slavery, at least in his soul and inner conscience.

Woolman's thinking would become the foundation of abolitionism. The following selection, taken from Woolman's journal, recounts his experiences in traveling to Virginia for a Quaker meeting in 1757 and exemplifies the sort of argument Woolman used in making his antislavery message.

Source: Woolman, John. *A Journal of the Life, Gospel Labors, and Christian Experiences of that Faithful Minister of Jesus Christ*, John Woolman. Dublin: R. M. Jackson, 1776.

Journey to Maryland and Virginia, 1757

9TH OF 5TH MONTH—Breakfasted at a Friend's house who afterwards putting us a little on our way, I had conversation with him, in the fear of the Lord, concerning his slaves, in which my heart was tender, and I used much plainness of speech with him, which he appeared to take it kindly. We pursued our journey without appointing meetings, being pressed in my mind to be at the Yearly Meeting in Virginia. In my travelling on the road I often felt a cry rise from the center of my mind thus—"Oh Lord, I am a stranger in the earth, hide not Thy face from me." On the 11th we crossed the rivers at Patowmack and Rapahannock, and lodged at Port Royal. On the way, happening in company with a Colonel of the Militia, who appeared to be a thoughtful man, I took occasion to remark on the difference in general betwixt a people used to

labor moderately for their living, training up their children in frugality and business, and those who live on the labor of slaves; the former, in my view, being the most happy life. He concurred in the remark, and mentioned the trouble arising from the untoward, slothful disposition of the Negroes, adding that one of our laborers would do as much in a day as two of their slaves. I replied that free men whose minds were properly on their business, found a satisfaction in the improving, cultivating, and providing for their families; but Negroes, laboring to support those who claim them as their property, and expecting nothing but slavery during life, had not the like inducement to be industrious.

After some further conversation I said that men having power too often misapplied it; that though we made slaves of the Negroes, and the Turks made slaves of the Christians, I believed that liberty was the natural right of all men equally. This he did not deny, but said the lives of the Negroes were so wretched in their own country that many of them lived better here than there. I only said, "There's great odds in regard to us on what principle we act"; and so the conversation on that head ended. I may here

add that another person some time afterwards mentioned the wretchedness of the Negroes occasioned by their intestine wars as an argument in favor of our fetching them away for slaves. To which I replied, if compassion for the Africans, on account of their domestic troubles, was the real motive of our purchasing them, that spirit of tenderness being attended to would incite us to use them kindly, that as strangers brought out of affliction their lives might be happy among us. And as they are human creatures, whose souls are as precious as ours, and who may receive the same help and comfort from the Holy Scriptures as we do, we could not omit suitable endeavors to instruct them therein; but while we manifest by our conduct that our views in purchasing them are to advance ourselves, and while our buying captives taken in war animates those parties to push on that war and increase desolation amongst them, to say they live unhappy in Africa is far from being an argument in our favor. I further said, the present circumstances of these provinces to me appear difficult; the slaves look like a burdensome stone to such as burden themselves with them; and that if the white people retain a resolution to prefer their own outward prospect of gain to all other considerations, and do not act

conscientiously toward them as fellow creatures, I believe that burden will grow heavier and heavier until times change in a way disagreeable to us. At which the person appeared very serious and acknowledged that in considering their condition and the manner of their treatment in these provinces he had sometimes thought it might be just in the Almighty to so order it. . . .

The prospect of a road lying open to the same degeneracy in some parts of this newly settled land of America in respect to our conduct towards the Negroes hath deeply bowed my mind in this journey, and though to briefly relate how these people are treated is no agreeable work, yet, after reading over the notes I made as I traveled, I find my mind engaged to preserve them. Many of the white people in those provinces take little or no care of Negro marriages; and when Negroes marry after their own way, some make so little account of those marriages that with views of outward interest they often part men from their wives by selling them far asunder, which is common when estates are sold by executors at vendue. Many whose labor is heavy being followed in the field

by a man with a whip, hired for that purpose, have in common little else to eat but one peck of Indian corn and some salt, for one week, with a few potatoes; and the latter they commonly raise by their labor on the first day of the week. The correction ensuing on their disobedience to overseers, or slothfulness in business is often very severe, and sometimes desperate.

Men and women have many times scarce clothes sufficient to hide their nakedness, and boys and girls ten and twelve years old are often stark naked amongst their master's children. Some of our Society, and some of the society called Newlights, use some endeavors to instruct those they have in reading; but in common this is not only neglected, but disapproved. These are a people by whose labor the other inhabitants are in a great measure supported, and many of them in the luxuries of life. These are a people who have made no agreement to serve us, and who have not forfeited their liberty that we know of. These are the souls for whom Christ died, and for our conduct towards them we must answer before that Almighty Being who is no respecter of

persons. They who know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent, and are thus acquainted with the merciful, benevolent, Gospel Spirit, will therein perceive that the indignation of God is kindled against oppression and cruelty, and in beholding the great distress of so numerous a people will find cause for mourning.

Questions

1. Explain what Woolman means when he reflects, "There's great odds in regard to us on what principle we act." What is he suggesting about justice, punishment, and reward in this life or the next?
2. Quakers were well known for their mildness and reluctance to offend others. How is this reflected in Woolman's conversations with Virginians? Do his mild words reflect the mildness of his beliefs?
3. This passage raises the common defense slaveholders made of slavery—that Africans were inherently lazy and would only work under the threat of punishment. How does Woolman answer that charge?