

**WHAT HAVE WE, AS INDIVIDUALS, TO DO
WITH SLAVERY?**

BY SUSAN C. CABOT

‘I WISH you would not distress me by continually talking about the slaves. I do not consider the subject as belonging either to you or me; it is for the south, and not for the north. The southerners must do their work, and we must do ours. I make a rule of forgetting the slaves as far as I can. What is the use of dwelling upon what you cannot help? it only unfits one for doing any thing. For my own part, I find quite enough for my time and thoughts in feeling and acting for those at my very door, whose wants and necessities require all of one’s spare hours; and were I to take up the slave question, I hardly know what would become of me. No; this work is beyond my powers; it would only be a waste of time and feeling to attempt it. At all events, I cannot bear it; it only makes me nervous, and no good comes of dwelling upon it.’ These words, or their meaning, are often uttered to those who allude to the subject of slavery in their intercourse with friends; but they do not always carry conviction with them, even when those to whom they are addressed are conscious that the speaker is one who is devoted to charitable thoughts and deeds, and earnestly striving to take their full share of the duties which Christianity lays upon her disciples; but we lament the more for this very reason that they should be uttered, because we think them at variance with that very charity which calls upon us to overcome all things. It may seem foolish or presumptuous to attempt to confute them, and we would not strive to do so in this way of argument; but in presenting another, and what seems to us a more satisfactory view of the subject, we may hope, as “in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to

[page 2]

Man,” that we may by this appeal excite sympathy and interest in what seems to us a more just and Christian way of looking at the subject.

In reply to the remarks we have cited, we should say that our interest in the slave springs from the same source as our interest for the poor; we cannot say, My heart shall flow out for the white woman, and not for the black, for the free woman, and not for the bond. The sense of justice and of right does not stop to inquire how far, or how long, or upon what objects she shall exercise her divine power; but, like the widow with her flask of oil, pours out upon him who stands in need, and finds in proportion as this is done, so is the supply. In how few words are we told in this simple story to trust in right doing! When we undertake to fix the boundary of our hearts, and say how far, or how long, or for whom they shall move us to act, it shows we have not put our confidence in him who has made them to beat; it is the questioning of the divine power to mistrust them in this way. While we are intent upon doing the right thing, the urn will fill without our care; for we know not at best how it is that we are able to remove mountains, excepting by our trust in the divine word.

Those who are troubled and made nervous by the discussion of slavery, and wish never to hear about it are not put into this state because they have no feeling for the slave, but because they find it necessary to work with a distinct idea that they must accomplish something, as they show when you ask them to give money to buy one of these poor sufferers. How willingly they will do this! And yet in their hearts they may have been wanting in that true sympathy which, in the sight of God, makes this purchase a dreadful comment on the relation of his children one to the other.

‘Why,’ we are asked, ‘do you say we may have been wanting in true sympathy for the slaves?’ Because we believe a true sympathy for their condition would leave no desire to criticize any sincere efforts to help them out of their despair, but would gladly join in the work, with the prayer that God would order it for the right.

When we feel called upon to do something, the nerves take their appointed place, and give us the power to accomplish what we desire to do; and then they become sources of pleasure, and not of pain. To bear one another’s burdens came from the lips of Jesus. Did not his life show us how to do this? When he called the lepers

[page 3]

to him, had not his heart overflowed with love and compassion and the thought that this too is a child of God, would he not have felt nervous, and questioned the prudence and propriety of touching him?

The circumstance of the complexion and conformation of the slaves, added to their long history of degradation, influences unconsciously, we think, the feelings and judgment of those who do not sympathize with the advocates of their cause. These objectors find it is easy enough to see the mistakes that are made in the means used, and in the mode of doing the work. Doubtless there is some ground for these objections, so keenly perceived; but we think the tares in this field can be safely left. When some delicate woman, brought up in the refinements of life, visits the hovel of the poor drunkard, and sees the object of her charity so disfigured that hardly a trace of humanity is left, she, all the more, longs to bring back the soul to this degraded temple, that it may again assert its origin. Her heart does not grow cold by criticism, but burns with a new desire, at the sight of this ruin, to do something to restore this fallen one. But this poor creature is white; hence her ears are quick to hear any suggestions to break the sinful chains that bind him to the earth. She does not ask herself to what country he belongs; she knows he is a child of God, and that is enough. But the poor negro whose dark skin we are unaccustomed to, whose chains are riveted by the hand of the white man, whose degradation is compelled by the avarice of selfishness, must be pleaded for, must be reasoned about, before we can penetrate the prejudice that hardens the heart against him—a prejudice which blinds the eye of justice, and makes us forget that this too is a child of God; and one whom, could the curtain be raised, perhaps we should see nearer the throne of grace than, in our short-sightedness, we imagined. Are we to question the wisdom of his existence? Are we to judge the Almighty?

If the question were put, whether, if the three millions of slaves were white instead of black, there would not be more sympathy for those who take their part, and less criticism upon their imperfect measures, there are many who would say, 'Yes,' and add, 'naturally enough we do prefer white to black; we have a right to our preference, and no one has a right to interfere with it.' We would not infringe upon the rights of any one; respect for the rights of all

[page 4]

being the groundwork of our interest in the slave. It is our preference, our choice, which guides us in our efforts for the emancipation of the slave; but it is not a choice of color, so much as of morality. We do not condemn this preference of any one; but when a matter of taste oversteps its legitimate bounds, and influences our judgment of right and wrong, encroaching upon the integrity of our hearts, bribing our consciences, and ruling our lives, then we are giving up gold for dross, the permanent for the transient, the corruptible for the incorruptible. Would the fugitive slave law that forces men and women to break away from their honest calling and the fireside of their cherished homes have been received with such patriotic consideration had these fugitives had a white skin instead of a black one? This new aspect of the system of slavery, this new manifestation of its reckless power, has a tongue for itself; it needs no comment. The 2d of June, 1854, has not yet faded out of the memory of those who, perhaps then for the first time, were made conscious of what stuff slavery is made.

But our object is not now to call up the horrors of slavery, in order to make apparent the view we have of it; it is simply to show our relation to it as Christians that we speak of it. We have said that one difference between those who do and those who do not advocate the cause of the slave is that the latter are influenced by the fact that their actions in this regard need the incentive of apparent results. One of their arguments against any action is that they see no good in it; 'What is the use of talking, if you do nothing? How are your lectures and your speeches going to affect the slave? There he is still in his bondage, and will continue to be so for all your words.' It may be so; but, could this be proved, it would not shake the friend of the slave from his purpose of clearing his skirts of the sin of slavery by his constant protest against it, and his determination to do all that in him lies to overthrow it, this being a necessary and natural expression of this allegiance to justice, and of his sympathy with humanity. We do not acknowledge as a consistent Christian him whose actions in the moral world are influenced by the idea of success, as a necessary condition of his efforts for the right. He shows a scepticism in the power of right. He works not as children, in the love of obedience to the perfect standard set up in our hearts, which we must obey, or become rebels. He would put himself in the place of the divine

[page 5]

law that he may come to a shorter method of accomplishing the work. For a time, in the eye of the world, he may succeed; but He that knows the end from the beginning sees with a clearer eye. It is from the starting point of right and not of calculation, that the abolitionist sets out upon his work of reform. His mind is not weakened or troubled by the many stumbling blocks in his way, nor is he moved from his purpose because misunderstood. When we are in earnest, we are unmindful of casualties. If the ground we have taken is a false one, if there is in it any contradiction to the simple precepts of Jesus, any thing at variance with his life, then should it be abandoned; but not till then. It may be supposed from what we have said that we are indifferent to results; not at all; but we leave them in the hands of God.

There must arise in the mind of every one who uses his faculties consciously some idea of the object he has chosen as most worthy of the use of his powers; but it comes before his mind as the result of the work of time, with which he personally has nothing to do, any further than a strict adherence to what he conceives to be the right thing as the time requires. The artist who first conceives the idea of the cathedral flowing in all the splendor of his aspiring soul, solemnized with the desire of making a place of worship fitting the Most High is not deterred from devoting all his thoughts to carrying out his conception from the fact that he shall never see it realized; he still feels a sacred obligation to be true to his idea; he still retains his temple of worship within.

With these views, it is natural that the advocate of the slave should be opposed to those who try to forget him, who think it not their affair to interfere with his condition, who treat the attempt to restore him to the place God assigned him as Quixotic. Those who so feel are considered the common sense part of society, the rational—the practical. We have attempted to show how we differ from them, and why; and we think we have the vantage ground, from the fact that we have espoused the cause in question. The interest which induces one to adopt any subject (supposing the mind tolerably fair) helps him to understand and see more quickly its claims; it renders him clear sighted to its vulnerable points, that he may guard against them. We cannot to justice to any subject till we have loved it; it is this “hunger of the heart” which is

[page 6]

essential to put in motion the will, and which gives sight to the understanding.

When our philanthropy is influenced by our taste it shows that it springs not from the highest source, and is liable to fail when its refreshing waters are most needed for the parched lips which plead for it; but when this happens, we are apt to think the fault is in the object and not in ourselves. This is a failure we can avoid, as we have before intimated, by starting from the highest point, from that source of living waters which is a well ever springing up, that we may always trust in. Those who are simply guided by their taste and their sensitiveness in their works of philanthropy naturally avoid all contact with slavery. The fact of the color and degraded condition of the slave repels them. This seems to us a form of atheism. It may seem a harsh judgment; but surely, if we believe that we are all children of God, and that he is no respecter of persons, it is a great presumption for us to discard as unfit for our sympathy and portion of his family; and by indulging in this selfish selection we are doing homage to ourselves rather than to Him. This exclusive feeling carried out would gradually estrange us from an impartial being; our hearts would grow hard; and, in the midst of our rejoicing amongst our chosen friends, some hour might come when there might appear a fiery hand, that would write in burning characters that the day of such a philanthropy were numbered. It seems more fitting for Christians to take their feast at the common table of humanity, where neither complexion nor country can interfere with our belief that we are all children of God, all learners in the great school of life which is the preparation for a higher existence.

The advocates of the slave are called people of one idea. But this one idea—what is it? It is an idea that includes all others, for its aim is to overthrow a system which takes in and covers all the immoralities and sins that man can work upon the fair face of God's earth. Let one sin be mentioned which does not, almost of necessity, spring from the atheistic root of slavery! From the time when Joseph was cast into the pit by his brothers down to the present hour, its poisonous root has sent forth its shoots; and here, in this so called land of freedom, it flourishes in the plantations, and is exhibited on the auction block. We are longing and looking for the hour when the sin that has sold our brother shall,

[page 7]

through much sorrowing and many tears, be so repeated of that on bended knee and in deep humiliation we shall ask pardon of our great iniquity. May this Joseph be the prefigurement of our better spirit, of our allegiance to the highest law of right. Let us take all that we have, and make a pilgrimage in the search for what we have lost, till we find ourselves again in the arms of truth and justice. We have done this great sin in the sight of Heaven; let us pray to be refreshed by peace of conscience. Let this slavery become a history to be told to our grandchildren, taking its place with that record of sins of which the floods of heaven were opened to destroy all likeness from the face of the earth. Let us pray for that mercy which shall allow us an ark of safety in the integrity of our determination: that we may rise above these dark waters which threaten to destroy the life of our souls.

Published for gratuitous distribution, at the Office of the AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY, No. 138 Nassau Street, New York. Also to be had at the Anti-Slavery Offices, No. 21 Cornhill, Boston, and No. 31 North Fifth Street, Philadelphia; and at the Anti-Slavery Depository, Salem, Columbiana Co., Ohio.