COMMONLIT

Name: _____ Class: _____

To Those Who Keep Slaves, and Approve the Practice

By Richard Allen
1794

Richard Allen (1760-1831) was a minister, educator, writer, and one of the most distinguished African-American leaders of his day. Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in 1794, with the intent of providing African-Americans, both those free and those enslaved, with a spot to worship without the threat of racial discrimination. Throughout his life, Allen worked hard to advance the state of people of his race in society; this activism encompassed educational and political efforts. As you read, take notes on the rhetorical strategies Allen uses to advance his perspective on the state of black people in 18th-century American society.

[1] The judicious[1] part of mankind will think it unreasonable that a superior good conduct is looked for from our race, by those who stigmatize[2] us as men, whose baseness[3] is incurable, and may therefore be held in a state of servitude, that a merciful man would not doom a beast to; yet you try what you can to prevent our rising from a state of barbarism[4] you represent us to be in, but we can tell you from a degree of experience that a black man, although reduced to the most abject state human nature is capable of, short of real madness, can think, reflect, and feel injuries, although it may not be with the same degree of keen resentment and revenge that you who have been and are our great oppressors would manifest[5] if reduced to the pitiable condition of a slave.

"A portrait of Richard Allen, a Methodist bishop and founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church" by Daniel A. Payne is in the public domain.

We believe if you would try the experiment of taking a few black children, and

cultivate their minds with the same care, and let them have the same prospect in view as to living in the world, as you would wish for your own children, you would find upon the trial, they were not inferior in mental endowments.[6]

I do not wish to make you angry, but excite attention to consider how hateful slavery is in the sight of that God who hath destroyed kings and princes for their oppression of the poor slaves. Pharaoh and his princes with the posterity[7] of king Saul, were destroyed by the protector and avenger of slaves. Would you not suppose the Israelites to be utterly unfit for freedom, and that it was impossible for them, to obtain to any degree of excellence? Their history shows how slavery had debased[8] their spirits. Men must be willfully blind, and extremely partial, that cannot see the contrary effects of liberty and slavery upon the mind of man; I truly confess the vile habits often acquired in a state of servitude, are not easily thrown off; the example of the Israelites shows, who with all that Moses[9] could do to reclaim them from it, still continued in their habits more or less; and why will you look for better from us, why will you look for grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles?[10] It is in our posterity enjoying the same privileges with your own, that you ought to look for better things.

When you are pleaded with, do not you reply as Pharaoh did, "Wherefore do ye Moses and Aaron let the people from their work, behold the people of the land now are many, and you make them rest from their burthens."[11] We wish you to consider

1. **judicious** ***(adjective)*** having, showing, or done with good judgment or sense
2. **stigmatize** ***(verb)*** to describe or regard as worthy of disgrace or great disapproval
3. lowness
4. **Barbarism** ***(noun)*** absence of culture and civilization
5. **Manifest** ***(verb)*** to display or show by one's actions or appearance; to be evidence of
6. **Endowment** ***(noun)*** a person’s natural ability or talent
7. **Posterity** ***(noun)*** all future generations
8. **Debase** ***(verb)*** to reduce in quality or value; to degrade
9. Moses is a prophet in Abrahamic religions, which includes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. According to the Hebrew Bible, he was a former Egyptian prince who became a religious leader later in life.
10. A thistle is an herbaceous plant of the daisy family, which typically has a prickly stem.

that God himself was the first pleader of the cause of slaves.

[5] That God who knows the hearts of all men, and the propensity[12] of a slave to hate his oppressor, hath strictly forbidden it to his chosen people, "Thou shalt not abhor[13] an Egyptian, because thou wast a stranger in his land." Deut. 23. 7. The meek and humble Jesus, the great pattern of humanity, and every other virtue that can adorn and dignify men, hath commanded to love our enemies, to do good to them that hate and despitefully use us. I feel the obligations, I wish to impress them on the minds of our colored brethren,[14] and that we may all forgive you, as we wish to be forgiven, we think it a great mercy to have all anger and bitterness removed from our minds; I appeal to your own feelings, if it is not very disquieting to feel yourselves under dominion[15] of wrathful[16] disposition.

If you love your children, if you love your country, if you love the God of love, clear your hands from slaves, burthen not your children or your country with them, my heart has been sorry for the blood shed of the oppressors, as well as the oppressed, both appear guilty of each others blood, in the sight of him who hath said, he that sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.

Will you, because you have reduced us to the unhappy condition our color is in, plead our incapacity for freedom, and our contented condition under oppression, as a sufficient cause for keeping us under the grievous yoke.[17] I have shown the cause, — I will also show why they appear contented as they can in your sight, but the dreadful insurrections[18] they have made when opportunity has offered, is enough to convince a reasonable man, that great uneasiness and not contentment, is the inhabitant of their hearts. God himself hath pleaded their cause, he hath from time to time raised up instruments for that purpose, sometimes mean and contemptible[19] in your sight, at other times he hath used such as it hath pleased

11. burdens
12. **Propensity** ***(noun)*** an inclination or natural tendency to behave a certain way
13. **Abhor** ***(verb)*** to regard with disgust and hatred
14. brothers
15. **Dominion** ***(noun)*** control of a region; power to rule
16. **Wrath** ***(noun)*** extreme anger
17. The yoke is a tool used to control livestock, and is often used to refer to those who are oppressed or controlled.
18. **Insurrection** ***(noun)*** an act of revolt against civil authority

him, with whom you have not thought it beneath your dignity to contend.[20] Many have need convinced of their error, condemned their former conduct, and become zealous[21] advocates for the cause of those, whom you will not suffer to plead for themselves.

19. **Contemptible** ***(adjective)*** not worthy of respect of approval
20. **Contend** ***(verb)*** to argue strongly
21. **Zealous** ***(adjective)*** extremely passionate or enthusiastic in support of a person, object, or cause

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best summarizes the main point of the text?
    A. Slavery cannot rightfully be law in a nation founded upon Abrahamic religious doctrine, since the Old Testament explicitly prohibits it.
    B. The institution of slavery revolves around a complex judicial system that has its roots in the teachings of Jesus Christ.
    C. White slave-owners do not have any way of understanding just how degrading and inhumane the life of a slave is.
    D. Slavery is unjustifiable and one of the main pro-slavery justifications ignores the fact that a person's living conditions influences his disposition.

2. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. "Men must be willfully blind... that cannot see the contrary effects of liberty and slavery upon the mind of man" (Paragraph 3)
    B. "We wish you to consider that God himself was the first pleader of the cause of slaves." (Paragraph 4)
    C. "If you love your children, if you love your country, if you love the God of love, clear your hands from slaves, burthen not your children or your country with them" (Paragraph 6)
    D. "in the sight of him who hath said, he that sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." (Paragraph 6)

3. Which statement best describes the effect of the phrase "look for grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles" on the passage's meaning? (Paragraph 3)

    A. It uses metaphors to emphasize the absurdity of the expectation that enslaved people will be able to maintain ideal characteristics when they are treated so cruelly.
    B. It demonstrates through imagery that white Americans would become unable to function properly under the conditions forced upon slaves.
    C. It uses a metaphor to highlight the issues with efforts by pro-slavery advocates to justify the brutality of slave-owners.
    D. It uses figurative language to prove that slaves have been denied the freedom and opportunities afforded to white American adults and their children.

4. How does paragraph 2 contribute to the development of the main idea in the text?

    A. It argues that black children need the opportunity to pursue education.
    B. It reveals that experiments have proven that black children have the same IQ as white children.
    C. It states that black children deserve the same opportunities as white children to see if they are equally intelligent.
    D. It argues that black children have the same mental capacity and potential if they were given the same opportunities as white children.

5. How does the language of the text contribute to its message and its persuasiveness?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Consider the highly academic and courteous nature of the text in contrast to the extreme brutality and disregard for human life demonstrated by slave owners. Why does Allen use a very academic tone in his persuasion?

2. What does it mean to be a good citizen? Is it important to be willing and able to object to the way things are done in one's country if one identifies a substantial systemic flaw?

3. Allen describes the prospect of educating black children with the same care and resources as white Americans as an "experiment." In the context of the text, how has American changed over time? Draw on the article, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in forming your answer.