



*Considerations on Slavery, in a Letter to a Friend*  
Nathaniel Appleton (1767)

*This pamphlet consists of a long letter by white merchant Nathaniel Appleton, of Massachusetts, urging an unnamed friend not to invest in the African slave trade. Appleton paints a vivid picture of slavery as inhumane, and he takes the stand that it would be better for Britain's colonies to be economically ruined than to use enslaved workers. In an appended note, granting permission to publish the letter, Appleton denounces colonists as hypocrites if their mounting agitation for "liberty"—which in a few more years would ignite the American Revolution—does not translate into opposition to slavery.*

Great Britain, the envy of the world, does not permit a slave on her happy island but gives to everyone freedom, which stamps him image of his God. [...]

I should have thought none but the hardened wretch could have entertained a thought of planning a voyage to Africa with design to bring off its inhabitants and *curse* them with perpetual slavery, even supposing they were in some sort our enemies. But how is it aggravated when we know that the Africans are a harmless people, having never gone beyond their own bounds to trouble mankind, and but for the interruption from white people might enjoy all the sweets of a rural life, being blessed with a fine fruitful soil, which yields with small labor all the necessaries of life. This is the people who by some strange fatality are pitched upon by the Europeans for slaves. And how are they made such? [...T]he basest means are used to accomplish the basest end. It is well known we have been, above a century past, crowding our luxuries upon the Africans; and when the gold dust of their land could not satisfy us, they were tempted to sell their brethren to purchase our intoxicating liquors and childish toys. Thus we imposed upon their weakness and encouraged their barbarity, by appearing ready purchasers of their people for perpetual slaves. This trade for the lives of men, being once established, has set all Africa by the ears. All honest industry among them is laid aside for the more profitable business of trepanning one another; all common confidence is destroyed, and indeed their natural affections are very much weakened by their immoderate fondness for our luxuries.\* Pray, sir, is not this inhumane in us?

But further, I find, by the accounts of that trade, that when a powerful black prince has collected, by force or artifice, a number of his color, they are offered to the whites for sale. [...I]n their choice, they pay no regard to former connections: husband and wife are parted, parents and children are separated, the weakly wife will not be taken to accompany the healthy husband. Oh! methinks I hear their screeches, rending the very heavens, when these horrid scenes take place! The *unhappy healthy* are immediately hand-tied, and then, two and two, are yoked by their necks like horses for shipping, and driven in herds by their masters to the seacoast, and stowed in the hold of a vessel. Owners are so greedy of a large freight that they crowd the negroes in such

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\* Chambers's dictionary observes that it is frequent for a son to sell his father and mother, and parents their children, for a few bottles of brandy [...]

[Footnote from the source publication. The "dictionary" referred to is an early English encyclopedia, Ephraim Chambers's Cyclopædia, first published in 1728.]

numbers, and under such close confinement lest they should rise, as renders their passage almost intolerable. Upon a moderate computation, it is reckoned that 10 or 12 thousand die yearly on their passage [...] It is well known that the greatest number by far of these miserable creatures are fixed on the West India islands, where their fate in general is so extremely hard as to shock a humane tongue to relate or a humane ear to hear. Though they spend 6 days in 7 in unremitted labor for their masters, constantly overlooked by cruel drivers, yet the master does not think himself obliged to provide food for his slaves; indeed, he allows them Sundays to till a small piece of land for themselves and carry the produce to market, by which they subsist [...] I need not relate any particulars of the unbounded whippings which they are exposed to and commonly experience upon every slight offence. The least opposition discovered in them, or attempt to free themselves from their miserable state, is sure and certain death, and that with all the aggravation that cruelty can invent, such as starving to death in the midst of plenty, in which state, I have heard gentlemen say, they live in a cage from 7 to 9 days. Oh! horrid! [...]

Can the stale and flimsy pretense that Africans used to kill their captives before we appeared to buy them justify the hellish practice of the present day, even though it should be granted that that was the fate of some? For without all doubt, a much greater number are now yearly destroyed in the extra wars occasioned by the demand for slaves. The shocking noisome passages, as mentioned above, besides the self-murders they are driven to by despair, such as starving or strangling themselves, beating their brains against the ship, or jumping overboard; the sickly climates to which they are carried; the excessive labor to which the greatest part are driven, which we may well think vastly shortens their days, for a slave of 40 years is scarce worth owning—when you take all these circumstances into consideration, I doubt not, sir, but you'll be convinced that there are more lives lost now among the Africans yearly than before the present practice of slavery commenced, and that the balance of misery is vastly increased against them, and all this by us Christians.

Nor do I think that the scandalous vindication which some have had the effrontery to offer will satisfy a lover of truth and justice, viz., that but for the slave trade, the West India islands could not be cultivated to such amazing profit. *Let them sink, then.* Others have said that if the slave trade was prohibited, many gentlemen of immense fortunes must be ruined. *Let them [be ruined] and beg.* 'Tis more honorable to seek a support by begging than by theft, as every man does who lives by the forced labor and privation of the liberty of any of his fellow creatures. And though many a palliative have been compounded by some, even of the right reverend clergy, for the consciences of those who have been troubled in a serious hour, yet I believe they have been too modest to think them sufficient cures for such malignant wounds. [...]

I know, indeed, the great advantage 'tis pretended slaves receive by being brought from a land of heathenish darkness and idolatry to a land highly favored with the light of the glorious gospel, and so blessed with the means of salvation. But let those that appease their consciences with this specious argument consider, first, that we are not to do evil that good may come of it; and further, what a very small proportion of these poor transported slaves have the least chance of being benefited by Christianity. For I take it, and doubt not you join me, that it is no breach of charity to say that all those Africans which are carried to our West India islands are carried from a land of ignorance and innocence to a land of glaring wickedness, where they have constant examples of every vice and where they are likely to become sevenfold more the children of Satan

than when in their native country. And as to those few who are called happy in being brought into these northern colonies, very little can be said of the advantages which they receive or the improvement they make of it; for from the best observations that I have been able to make (and I have long thought on the subject), I don't believe there is one in ten of those that have had the best opportunity that know any more of the Christian religion, except the name, than their brethren now in Guinea [...]

[W]e are taught in the gospel to esteem all men our brethren [...]; of this we cannot have the least doubt when we hear our Lord saying, on the mount,

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, etc., that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.

If this be scripture or the word of God to mankind, and the enslaving a poor innocent people, in the method now practiced, be consistent therewith, I acknowledge all my ideas of the words are confounded and the scriptures are written in an unknown language to me. [...]

I can't conclude this part without making the following application to anyone that ever purchased a slave: Can you lay your hand on your breast and declare, in the presence of almighty God, that you verily think, after the most mature consideration, that in purchasing one of the human race, as innocent as yourself, and making him subservient to your sovereign will all his days, without a chance of freedom, that you in no respect deviate from that rule laid down by Christ, *whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them*? If you can say thus, and think you shall be able to say so, when closing the scene of this life, and have no compunctions of conscience in your last moments for having so far promoted and encouraged the slave trade as to be a purchaser—if this is your sober thought, go on, buy more, dip largely in the trade, for it is profitable, and blacken these fair northern climates as the West Indies are *black*. [...]

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Sir,

This brings you my consent to publish the letter I wrote you some years ago upon the African slave trade. My objection arose from a hope that some abler hand would undertake a subject, in my apprehension, worthy the best head and best heart. But as yet nothing has appeared, though the very enlarged sentiments of liberty which have lately prevailed, among all ranks of people, one would think naturally tended to raise up many writers against that cruel practice of enslaving the *blacks*.

It has always appeared very strange to me how people can be so sensibly affected with what has but a remote tendency to deprive them of their smallest right or privilege, and yet remain so insensible of the deplorable state of so many of our species that live among us [...] With what consistency can an American captain, trading upon the Guinea Coast for slaves, open his mouth and plead for liberty and his natural rights? [...] Why do [...] even professed Christians engage in the same traffic, and yet talk loudly of liberty, civil and religious, and tell us that without liberty and the free disposal of a man's time and property, life itself is not worth having? When an Englishman would paint the greatest curse that can befall him, it is to be no better off than an African slave; and yet he will deliberately plan a scheme to increase the number of these

wretches with no greater temptation, perhaps, than to add a few more pounds to his crowded bags. [...] Is this the effect of your progress in all the noble arts and sciences? Is this the effect of your Christian knowledge? Shameful fruit!

Oh! ye sons of liberty, pause a moment, give me your ear. Is your conduct consistent? Can you review our late struggles for liberty, and think of the slave trade at the same time, and not blush? Methinks were you an African, I could see you blush.

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An anomalous capitalizing of *Blacks* in the source has been converted here to lowercase to match the source's consistent use of lowercase for *negro* (whether adjective or noun), for *white* (whether adjective or noun), and for *black* as an adjective. Some terms indicating elevated social status (*sir*, *prince*, *captain*), which are capitalized in the source, have been converted here to lowercase. The word *gospel*, inconsistently capitalized in the source, has been converted here to lowercase for consistency with the source's use of lowercase for *scripture* and *word of God*. *Christian* and *Christianity*, consistently lowercase in the source, have been capitalized here for the sake of modernization.

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