



An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York Jupiter Hammon (1787)

Jupiter Hammon was born into slavery in New York in the early 1700s. Having been allowed to learn to read and write, he became known among whites for composing didactic Christian poetry, the publication of which made him the first published African American author. He later wrote the essay excerpted here, in which he exhorts his fellow slaves to serve their masters faithfully and exhorts free blacks to live piously and industriously so as to dispel anti-black stereotypes. Hammon died in his 90s, having spent his entire life enslaved to multiple generations of the same family.

When I was at Hartford, in Connecticut, where I lived during the war, I published several pieces which were well received, not only by those of my own color but by a number of the white people, who thought they might do good among their servants. This is one consideration, among others, that emboldens me now to publish what I have written to you. Another is, I think you will be more likely to listen to what is said when you know it comes from a negro, one of your own nation and color, and therefore can have no interest in deceiving you or in saying anything to you but what he really thinks is your interest and duty to comply with. My age, I think, gives me some right to speak to you and reason to expect you will hearken to my advice. I am now upwards of seventy years old and cannot expect, though I am well and able to do almost any kind of business, to live much longer. [...] I have great reason to be thankful that my lot has been so much better than most slaves have had. I suppose I have had more advantages and privileges than most of you who are slaves have ever known—and, I believe, more than many white people have enjoyed—for which I desire to bless God and pray that he may bless those who have given them to me. I do not, my dear friends, say these things about myself to make you think that I am wiser or better than others, but that you might hearken, without prejudice, to what I have to say to you on the following particulars.

First, respecting obedience to masters: Now, whether it is right and lawful in the sight of God for them to make slaves of us or not, I am certain that while we are slaves, it is our duty to obey our masters in all their lawful commands, and mind them unless we are bid to do that which we know to be sin or forbidden in God's word. The apostle Paul says: "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness in your heart, as unto Christ; not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as the servants of Christ doing the will of God from the heart [...]" Here is a plain command of God for us to obey our masters. It may seem hard for us, if we think our masters wrong in holding us slaves, to obey in all things; but who of us dare dispute with God! He has commanded us to obey, and we ought to do it, cheerfully and freely. This should be done by us not only because God commands, but because our own peace and comfort depend upon it. As we depend upon our masters for what we eat and drink and wear, and for all our comfortable things in this world, we cannot be happy unless we please them. This we cannot do without obeying them freely, without muttering or finding fault. If a servant strives to please his master, and studies and takes pains to do it, I believe there are but few masters who would use such a servant cruelly. Good servants frequently make good masters. If your master is really hard, unreasonable, and cruel, there is no way so likely for you to convince him of it as always to obey his commands, and try to serve him, and take care of his interest and try to promote it all in your power. If you are proud and stubborn and always finding

fault, your master will think the fault lies wholly on your side; but if you are humble and meek and bear all things patiently, your master may think he is wrong. If he does not, his neighbors will be apt to see it, and will befriend you and try to alter his conduct. If this does not do, you must cry to him who has the hearts of all men in his hands and turneth them as the rivers of waters are turned.

The second particular I would mention is honesty and faithfulness. You must suffer me now to deal plainly with you, my dear brethren, for I do not mean to flatter or omit speaking the truth, whether it is for you or against you. How many of you are there who allow yourselves in stealing from your masters. It is very wicked for you not to take care of your masters' goods, but how much worse is it to pilfer and steal from them whenever you think you shall not be found out. This, you must know, is very wicked and provoking to God. There are none of you so ignorant but that you must know that this is wrong. Though you may try to excuse yourselves by saying that your masters are unjust to you, and though you may try to quiet your consciences in this way, yet if you are honest in owning the truth, you must think it is as wicked, and on some accounts more wicked, to steal from your masters than from others.

We cannot, certainly, have any excuse either for taking anything that belongs to our masters without their leave or for being unfaithful in their business. It is our duty to be faithful, "not with eye-service, as men-pleasers." We have no right to stay, when we are sent on errands, any longer than to do the business we were sent upon. All the time spent idly is spent wickedly and is unfaithfulness to our masters. In these things, I must say that I think many of you are guilty. I know that many of you endeavor to excuse yourselves, and say that you have nothing that you can call your own and that you are under great temptations to be unfaithful and take from your masters. But this will not do; God will certainly punish you for stealing and for being unfaithful. All that we have to mind is our own duty. If God has put us in bad circumstances, that is not our fault, and he will not punish for it. If any are wicked in keeping us so, we cannot help it; they must answer to God for it. Nothing will serve as an excuse to us for not doing our duty. The same God will judge both them and us. Pray, then, my dear friends; fear to offend in this way; but be faithful to God, to your masters, and to your own souls.

[...] I will conclude what I have to say to you by advising you to become religious and to make religion the great business of your lives.

Now, I acknowledge that liberty is a great thing and worth seeking for, if we can get it honestly and, by our good conduct, prevail on our masters to set us free. Though, for my own part, I do not wish to be free, yet I should be glad if others, especially the young negroes, were to be free; for many of us who are grown up slaves, and have always had masters to take care of us, should hardly know how to take care of ourselves, and it may be more for our own comfort to remain as we are. That liberty is a great thing, we may know from our own feelings, and we may likewise judge so from the conduct of the white people in the late war. How much money has been spent, and how many lives have been lost, to defend their liberty. I must say that I have hoped that God would open their eyes, when they were so much engaged for liberty, to think of the state of the poor blacks and to pity us. He has done it in some measure and has raised us up many friends, for which we have reason to be thankful and to hope in his mercy. What may be done further, he only knows, for "known unto God are all his ways from the beginning."

But this, my dear brethren, is by no means the greatest thing we have to be concerned about. Getting our liberty in this world is nothing to having the liberty of the children of God. Now, the Bible tells us that we are all, by nature, sinners; that we are slaves to sin and Satan; and that unless we are converted, or born again, we must be miserable forever. [...M]y brethren, it seems to me that there are no people that ought to attend to the hope of happiness in another world so much as we. Most of us are cut off from comfort and happiness here in this world and can expect nothing from it. Now, seeing this is the case, why should we not take care to be happy after death? Why should we spend our whole lives in sinning against God, and be miserable in this world and in the world to come? If we do thus, we shall certainly be the greatest fools. We shall be slaves here and slaves forever. [...] We live so little time in this world that it is no matter how wretched and miserable we are if it prepares us for heaven. What is forty, fifty, or sixty years when compared to eternity? [...] If you become Christians, you will have reason to bless God forever that you have been brought into a land where you have heard the gospel, though you have been slaves. If we should ever get to heaven, we shall find nobody to reproach us for being black or for being slaves. Let me beg of you, my dear African brethren, to think very little of your bondage in this life, for your thinking of it will do you no good. If God designs to set us free, he will do it in his own time and way; but think of your bondage to sin and Satan, and do not rest until you are delivered from it. [...]

I will conclude what I have to say with a few words to those negroes who have their liberty. The most of what I have said to those who are slaves may be of use to you, but you have more advantages on some accounts—if you will improve your freedom, as you may do—than they. You have more time to read God’s holy word and to take care of the salvation of your souls. Let me beg of you to spend your time in this way, or it will be better for you if you had always been slaves. If you think seriously of the matter, you must conclude that if you do not use your freedom to promote the salvation of your souls, it will not be of any lasting good to you. Besides all this, if you are idle and take to bad courses, you will hurt those of your brethren who are slaves and do all in your power to prevent their being free. One great reason that is given by some for not freeing us, I understand, is that we should not know how to take care of ourselves and should take to bad courses—that we should be lazy and idle, and get drunk and steal. Now, all of those of you who follow any bad courses, and who do not take care to get an honest living by your labor and industry, are doing more to prevent our being free than anybody else. Let me beg of you, then, for the sake of your own good and happiness, in time and for eternity, and for the sake of your poor brethren who are still in bondage, “to lead quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty.” And may God bless you and bring you to his kingdom, for Christ’s sake. Amen.

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