

SPEECH ON SLAVERY | Abraham Lincoln | 1854

Abraham Lincoln wrote this speech six years before he was elected the 16th President of the United States. Lincoln was well-known for his opposition to slavery, and this piece reinforces his belief that slavery went against the core principles of the nation's Founding Fathers. In this text, Lincoln contrasts slavery with "free labor." Free labor is a system that lets paid workers have the freedom and ability to earn wages and rise towards property-owning independence.

As you read, note the language Lincoln uses to describe free labor as well as slave labor.

• • •

Equality in society alike beats inequality, whether the latter be of the British aristocratic sort or of the domestic slavery sort.

We know Southern men declare that their slaves are better off than hired laborers amongst us. How little they know whereof they speak! There is no permanent class of hired laborers amongst us. Twenty-five years ago I was a hired laborer. The hired laborer of yesterday labors on his own account to-day, and will hire others to labor for him to-morrow.

Advancement – improvement in condition – is the order of things in a society of equals. As labor is the common burden of our race, so the effort of some to shift their share of the burden on to the shoulders of others is the great durable curse of the race. Originally a curse for transgression upon the whole race, when, as by slavery, it is concentrated on a part only, it becomes the double refined curse of God upon his creatures.

Free labor has the inspiration of hope; pure slavery has no hope. The power of hope upon human exertion and happiness is wonderful. The slave-master himself has a conception of it, and hence the system of tasks among slaves. The slave whom you cannot drive with the lash to break seventy-five pounds of hemp in a day, if you will task him to break a hundred, and promise him pay for all he does over, he will break you a hundred and fifty. You have substituted hope for the rod.

And yet perhaps it does not occur to you that, to the extent of your gain in the case, you have given up on the slave system and adopted the free system of labor.