

Slaves of Christ¹

A few weeks ago, I preached this same passage in Colossians 3 focusing on the principles we find in it for a theology of work. This morning I'd like us to give attention to what this passage has to say in its immediate context and application on the topic of slavery. Obviously, the idea of slavery is fraught with all kinds of baggage and negative connotations. Many today regard slavery as America's original sin and some would say an unforgiveable sin. Our not-too-distant American history is filled horrible atrocities and injustices in connection with slavery. Any discussion of slavery today whether through movies, fictional stories, or history books is sure to bring out the worst examples of cruel and inhumane slavery imaginable. Add to that our history of sinful racial animosity that is closely bound up with these discussions and you can understand why many preachers and Bible teachers would just prefer to pass these verses over. Many are embarrassed that Paul and the other NT authors do not outright condemn slavery. And here Paul is giving instructions not only to Christian slaves but to Christian Masters! Paul has no problem condemning and challenging other commonly accepted Greco-Roman practices like homosexuality, prostitution, or worship of false gods. Why does he not condemn slavery? Why does he permit it to continue in the churches?

Here at TPC we firmly believe that all of Scripture is breathed out by God – inspired by the Holy Spirit – and without error – and that all of Scripture is profitable for the people God. That includes passages like this one. Both the Old and New Testaments have quite a bit to say about slavery in various times and places. 13 of Jesus' parables mention slaves. Paul makes mention of slavery in almost all of his letters, and gives specific instructions to slaves in 6 of his letters. In fact, the Greek word for “slave” in all its forms is used about 150 times in the New Testament. Slavery, metaphorically or literally, is all over the NT.

This reality is obscured a bit by translators often using the words “servant” or “bondservant” instead of “slave” in every instance of the Greek word *doulos*. But *doulos* just means slave. The same can be said of the OT word *hebed*, which also means slave, but is often translated as “servant”. We'll come back in a moment to why translators do that.

Not only is slavery a prevalent concept in the NT, but the Old Testament, likewise, is filled with stories and examples of slavery. The Mosaic Law itself regulated a form of slavery in Israel. The story of Israel's redemption is a movement from slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh to Sabbath freedom in the Land. “Slavery and freedom” are featured as a kind of central motif throughout the OT to talk about salvation. In fact, the word “Redemption” is an economic term associated with the ransom of slaves.

The New Testament also continues the metaphor of slavery to talk about our redemption from the bondage of sin, the flesh, and the devil to the freedom in the Spirit that we have as Slaves of Christ, purchased with His precious blood. Paul, Peter, James, John, Jude, Timothy, Epaphras, and Tychicus are referred to as “Slaves of Christ.” Slaves are ones who belong to a Master, which in the NT is just the Greek word *Kyrios*, which means Lord. Christ is our Lord and master. We belong to Him because we were bought by Him with a price. Redeemed and purchased by His blood.

It is understandable why many modern bible translators do not translate the Greek and Hebrew words for ‘slave’ as such every time. Slavery is not a one-size fits all concept. And that's important to remember. There are some important differences in how slavery has functioned in the ancient world and in the modern world – though both had their share of cruelty and injustices. More than that, there are important differences between how slavery functions in Biblical law and pagan law and culture. If we only import our understanding of 19th century American slavery back into our discussion of biblical slavery we are bound to misunderstand things.

The most basic definition we can give of slavery is one person owning the service and labor of another. Sinful versions of slavery attempt to say more than that. But only the Lord can demand total and complete devotion of those made in His image. Only the Lord can truly claim to own a human being. Throughout history slavery has been a fact of life in most cultures. As we will see there have been a wide variety of forms of slavery: voluntary and

¹ I'm indebted to the following works for clarifying many issues regarding biblical slavery: James B. Jordan, “Slavery in Biblical Perspective” (Th. M. thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980). Gary North, *Tools of Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute of Christian Economics, 1990), pp. 111-208. John Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), pp. 648-662. Douglas Wilson, *Black and Tan* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2005). Mark Meynell, *The New Testament and Slavery: Approaches and Implications* (London: The Latimer Trust, 2007). Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (Leicester: Apollos 1999).

involuntary, temporary and permanent, oppressive slavery and just and equitable slavery. Let's look at some examples in the Old Testament before turning to the NT situation that Paul addresses.

Old Covenant

The first example we see of slavery in the Bible is in Genesis 9, after the sin of Ham against his father, Noah. Noah curses Canaan, Ham's son, with a sentence that he will be a slave to his brothers. His brothers will dictate his work and rule over him. Slavery here is the result of sin. It occurs first as a judgment on man for ungodly behavior.

Now, obviously, not everyone who ends up enslaved is directly responsible for that situation. Joseph was captured by his brothers and stolen into slavery. It wasn't due to sin on *his* part, but due to the sin of others. My point here is that slavery is a result of the fall. Slavery is not a pre-fall institution like Marriage or the Church. Slavery is not part of God's original design for mankind. In this sense, we can say that slavery is ultimately not ideal, although as we will see there are examples where slavery *can* be a form of mercy and even salvation for the slave.

After Genesis 9 we see godly and ungodly examples of slavery in Scripture. We can make a distinction between biblical, righteous forms of slavery and unrighteous forms of slavery. Abraham had slaves that he treated in righteous ways and appeared to invest a great deal of trust and authority in. Eliezer, his chief slave, was set to be the heir of his household. He was counted as a member of Abraham's household. If Eliezer is the same chief servant in Gen 24, he also had charge of all of Abraham's estate and was even sent out to choose a wife for his son. This is an example of a slave relationship that is just and equitable.

We also have negative examples of slavery in Scripture like Joseph's experience and most notably, Israel's slavery under the tyrant Pharaoh. It is out of the harsh and cruel slavery of Pharaoh that the Lord redeems His covenant people by the hand of Moses. The Lord brings them out of the house of bondage into Sabbath freedom. YHWH becomes their Master, and they are to be His slaves. But this is not a cruel and inhumane slavery, but a benevolent and loving relationship. In contrast to Pharaoh, YHWH is a gracious and merciful Master. He brings true freedom for His people. The Lord gives Israel His Law which regulates how **they** are to treat any **slaves** in their midst. We read some of these laws from Exodus 21 this morning.

Against the backdrop of the barbaric slavery in the ancient world, we can see how revolutionary and merciful the Lord's instructions on slavery really were. In pagan cultures, slaves were treated as subhuman objects, but in Israel slaves were given rights and protection as image bearers. There are civil penalties if a slave is mistreated, including the slave being set free. Slaves were to be given sabbath rest instead of being endlessly worked. They were to be taken care of with food and clothing. Israelites were not to take slaves by means of kidnapping or man-stealing (that was a crime punishable by death). The Lord reminds them numerous times that they too were slaves in Egypt and this ought to result in a different way of dealing with slaves. They were not to deal with them the way the other nations do. They were to show kindness to their slaves as a redeemed people. In this sense, it's like David says in Psalm 84, I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in tents of wickedness.

There is also a distinction in the law between foreign slaves and Israelite brothers who became slaves. Israelite brothers who became poor could sell themselves into a kind of slavery to their fellow Hebrew brothers. In these cases, they were to be set free every 7 years. It was not a permanent arrangement. There is a Sabbath principle. It is oriented toward freedom and rest.

And not only is it oriented toward **freedom** as the goal, but it also included a kind of maturity and blessing for the slave. There is something like a trade-apprenticeship described in the law. Deuteronomy 15 says,¹³ *And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed.* ¹⁴ *You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.* So, the idea is that he would work with you for 6 years and learn from you, and then be sent out with plenty to start out on his own. The goal is for the Hebrew brother to be rehabilitated to go and make a living on his own. The goal is **not permanent slavery**, but **freedom** and **maturity**.

Slavery in these Old Covenant examples was a merciful institution. Whether it was a foreigner who would otherwise be put to death or suffer unjust and cruel treatment in another nation or a Hebrew brother who was given a kind of safety net in cases of poverty or even in the case of a thief who is unable to make restitution. Instead of being put to death or locked in a prison cell for years, they were given the opportunity to make restitution and to improve their situation. All of that is important to see in perspective when trying to understand how the Bible gives

legitimacy to some forms of slavery. Again, I think we can say that ultimately slavery is not ideal, that it is a result of the fall. But in these kinds of biblically regulated cases, it was merciful and even a kind of salvation for those who had much worse alternatives. It protected the dignity of image bearers and offered a kindness that was unparalleled in the ancient world. Most importantly, Israel's slave laws were oriented toward freedom and maturity. That's the Old Testament situation.

Greco-Roman slavery

By the time we get to the situation of the New Testament, the Greco-Roman pagan world did have some regulations for slaves in the first century. The situation for slaves was somewhat wide-ranging. Some estimate about 1/3 of the population in urban areas were slaves. Slaves worked all kinds of jobs with varying levels of education. Not all slaves were manual laborers, some were doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, secretaries, musicians, and sea captains. In fact, some slaves were even better educated than their own masters. Slavery was not always a permanent condition of life, but rather was temporary with a path to freedom. Some slaves could eventually become full Roman citizens.

Now obviously not all situations were good. As Peter points out in his first epistle, many slaves were abused and mistreated. In pagan culture, it was acceptable to view slaves as property and thus without dignity and personal rights. Roman law granted the right to the *pater familias* (head of the household) to punish or kill his slaves however he saw fit. There were no legal consequences for his unjust treatment of slaves.

Paul, speaking into this context, does not condemn the institution of slavery outright, but neither does he merely maintain the status quo. He addresses BOTH Christian Slaves and Christian Masters. Just as he expects their new identity in Christ to change how they relate in marriage and family and other social relationships, he also expects that identity in Christ to change how they relate as slave or master. When we put on the new man, it changes how we engage in the world.

Paul says in 4:1 *Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly (or with equality), knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.*

Notice Paul doesn't say Christian Masters, let your slaves go free because slavery is a sin. He says be a good master in light of who you are in Christ. Treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you have a Master in heaven. The word "master" here is just the same word for Lord. "Lords, treat your slaves justly and fairly know you have a Lord in heaven." In other words, remember that you ALSO are a slave of Christ when you are dealing with your slaves. You are accountable to Christ *your* Master. The Roman government may not care how you treat your slaves, but Jesus does. You will give an account to Him for your actions.

In the parallel passage in Ephesians 6, Paul tells Christians Masters to "*stop their threatening.*" He expects their new identity in Christ to change how they relate to their slaves. Christian Masters are not to be harsh or ruthless. They are to be just and equitable knowing they have a just judge.

Job recognizes this same principle. He says in chapter 31 ¹³ *"If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me,"*¹⁴ *what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?* ¹⁵ *Did not he who made me in the womb make **him**? And did not one fashion **us** in the womb?"* Job knows he will answer to the Lord for his treatment of those in his care. Job recognizes that the slave is a fellow image bearer who has dignity and rights from the Lord. The Lord cares about how we treat other image bearers. Masters in Rome may be immune from Caesar when they mistreat their slaves, but they cannot expect immunity before the divine judge.

Paul also gives instructions to Christian slaves. "*Obey in everything those who are your Lords according to the flesh.*" He doesn't tell slaves to escape from their masters because slavery is evil. He tells them to be a different kind of slave. Do everything as if Jesus Himself is your Master, because He is. Even in the face of injustice, entrust yourself to the Lord who judges justly and remember that the Lord will reward you for your labors. 1 Peter 2 tells Christian slaves to be subject and respectful *not only to the good and gentle Master but also to the unjust.* This doesn't just apply when working for a Christian master.

Paul in 1 Tim 6 gives instruction on what to do when working for Christian masters: "*Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.*" When you work for a believer, you should be even more eager to serve. Work for the good of all, but especially to the household of faith. Whether you work for an unjust master or a just one, if you are in Christ, you are called to work heartily unto the Lord.

Paul tells slaves that in Christ they will have the inheritance as their reward. This is significant because a slave by definition has no family inheritance to speak. He has no hope of future property or wealth. Paul says that

Slaves who belong to Christ have the hope of a glorious future inheritance and reward. When Christ appears, they will appear with Him in glory! They are to work with that inheritance in mind.

Both the slave and the master are brothers in Christ and stand side-by-side in Christ. They may have a difference of authority in the world, but they both serve the same Master. They both share the same access at the same table of the Lord. This is what Paul means when he says in verse 11, in the new man *“¹¹ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”* Whether in a low-class or high-class position – we are all fellow heirs and share the same Master and Lord. Christ is in the slave as much as he is in the master. They both share the hope of glory and are co-heirs of the same inheritance. As Paul says, whether you are a slave or a freeman, we are all slaves of Christ. We all have the same Lord and master

Gospel Freedom

Considering all this, another question arises: if slavery is not sinful *per se*, as it has been defined by God’s Word, should it be perpetuated? Is it desirable to maintain that institution? I think we could debate the wisdom of the modern prison system vs some kind of debt-servitude for payment or civil penalty, like we see in the Old Covenant law. We would do well to reflect on the Bible’s wisdom regarding these matters as we seek to enact just laws. But aside from that issue, does that Bible promote slavery as an institution to maintain?

We mentioned that the Old Covenant regulation of slavery was oriented toward freedom and maturity of God’s image bearers. Can we say the same of the New? Is Paul ambivalent about the freedom of slaves? In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul tells slaves in the church this: *“²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. ²¹ Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. ²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.”*

Paul was not a revolutionary, he was not an abolitionist, in the strict sense. He says slaves, fulfill your obligations – remain where you are. BUT, we can say he does have a gospel-orientation toward freedom and maturity. If you can gain your freedom, DO IT. And certainly, don’t become a slave if you can help it. If you are in Christ, you are a **freedman** of the Lord. Your fundamental identity in Christ is one of freedom. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3, *“¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”* The Lord through the gospel brings freedom and maturity. Freedom from bondage to sin... and maturity from one degree of glory to the next. Yes, this is already a spiritual reality for those who are in Christ – whether slave or free-, but Paul would see this manifest itself more and more in all our dealings in the world. Ultimately, the gospel transforms **us** and how we engage with the world. Our new identity in Christ creates a new way of being in **this** world. Paul says you are being transformed to greater degrees of glory and that should result in greater maturity.

New life in Christ promotes self-government, freedom from all kinds of bondage, growth in maturity and wisdom, hard work and the enjoyment of the fruit of those labors. In other words, it promotes conditions which make slavery unnecessary (Murray 100). Ideally, as the Gospel takes root in a society and increasingly bears fruit, that will result in the kind of economy that does not need slavery. It should result in the kind of people who would not depend upon a slave system.

The gospel transforms how people engage in all aspects of our life. How we approach our marriages, our family life, and our work and social relations. Historically speaking, economic advancement and innovation have followed the promotion of the Gospel. Those things are an outworking of religious and moral flourishing. Just look at the Reformation and the subsequent literacy and economic fruit.

Anecdotally, this week I heard the owner of a construction company talking about a practice they have of sharing the gospel with their laborers. He said that those who come to know the Lord experience change and transformation. And it results in not only better relationships in their personal lives, but in better quality and honesty in their work. That owner said he had a kind of natural incentive to promote the gospel to these workers – because it creates a new kind of worker.

When you are in Christ, you have a new relationship to the Lord (a restored relationship) and a new identity as the renewed image of God. This results in new desires from a new heart. Christ changes how you engage in the world. Let’s take a man who works in sales, for example, for a non-Christian company. When he becomes a new man in Christ, he doesn’t need to quit his job as a sales rep. But his new identity will change what kind of worker he is and what kind of practices he will and will not engage in. Before he was willing to engage in shady and deceptive

practices, now he refuses to participate in that. Now he seeks the good of his employer and his customers because he wants to please the Lord in how he engages in his work.

Slaves of Christ

Paul says that we all, whether slave or free, are now slaves of Christ, serving our Lord and Master. Formerly we were slaves to sin and unrighteousness. When the Devil was our father, we were on the path to death and destruction. We were held captive by our sinful passions that produced death and misery within us.

But God in His great mercy sent His only Son to take the form of a slave for our sake. He suffered injustice and took the wrath and judgment that we deserve. He died the death that we deserve and swallowed up death in His victorious resurrection. Now that you have been set free from sin, you have become slaves of God and slaves of righteousness. And rather than being a de-humanizing relationship, being a slave of Christ makes us **more** fully human – the renewed image of God in Christ. The fruit of your new life in Christ leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. Now that Christ is our Master, we have true freedom to walk in righteousness and grow into maturity.

Jesus said we cannot serve two Masters; We will be devoted to one and despise the other. We must reject the master of sinful captivity and count ourselves dead to that life. We must hate it with all our being. We must no longer give ourselves over to sinful habits and behavior that lead only to misery and death. Obedience to Christ brings **true** liberty, life, and joy. Slavery to Christ is true salvation. Because He has rescued us and redeemed us and claimed us as His own, we owe Him our total and complete allegiance and devotion. Our whole lives should be devoted to His service. Only then do we truly gain our life.

But Christ does not reckon us as slaves only. In John 15, Christ tells us, *“¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ These things I command you, so that you will love one another.”*

He calls us His friends. He lets us in on what our master doing in the world. He also calls us sons and heirs. We have the Spirit of sonship, so that we can cry out Abba, Father. We have the promised inheritance of resurrection bodies and a glorious life in the new heavens and new earth. There is no greater joy and freedom than being a slave of Christ. Not slaves in any cruel or inhumane sense, but devoted servants of our good and merciful Master, who are called friends and sons, heirs of the promised life to come. This kind of slavery is truly our salvation. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.