

The sermon

Intro

Slavery is one of the most despised and vilified institutions in human history. Have you noticed how often the Bible uses slavery language to describe the gospel?

Some negative. Slavery to sin. Some positive. Bondservants of Christ. Ransom. Redemption.

This morning we'll consider the nature of 1st century slavery, what Paul's instructions to slaves and their masters mean for us today, and we'll look at the slavery language in the gospel.

READ PASSAGE

Body

Point 1: What was slavery?

(sources: primarily David Pao's *Colossians* commentary, Clinton Arnold's *Ephesians* commentary, and the *Dictionary of New Testament Background*)

how many?

Estimates suggest that 1/3 of the Roman population were slaves. So a good % of the Ephesian population were slaves. Some members of the church were slaves. Some were masters. Slaves and their masters in the same church.

where did slaves come from?

The greatest source for slaves was prisoners of war. As Rome expanded the empire and conquered lands, they enslaved conquered peoples. It's reported that between 58 and 51 BC, Julius Caesar shipped nearly one million slaves from Gaul's prisoners of war (Western Europe including modern day France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Northern Italy, Germany).

Other sources included convicted criminals sentenced to slavery (e.g., mines), kidnapped people, abandoned infants, those who sold themselves into slavery because of debt or poverty, and reproduction within the slave population.

Sometimes slavery was involuntary. Sometimes slavery was chosen. Any race could be enslaved.

what did they do?

Most slaves were laborers (manufacturing, agriculture) or domesticated slaves (served in someone's home). Some slaves performed specialized tasks and possessed significant responsibility (e.g., doctors, teachers, architects, sea captains). One slave's experience was remarkably different than another's.

how were they treated?

Slaves were bought and sold, punished according to the master's whim, labor was compelled by flogging. They couldn't be married. Couples married prior to enslavement could be separated from each other by their master.

Generally laborers (e.g., prisoners of war, convicted criminals) were treated much more harshly than domestic slaves. Household slaves were valuable contributors so there was motivation to treat them well.

In Ephesus, we're talking about domestic, household slaves.

how were they freed?

Some voluntary slaves were under contract for a time (seven years) and when their time was up their master released them. Other domestic slaves were rewarded for good work with sums of money which was used to purchase their freedom. Most slaves, especially laborers, never experienced freedom.

did Paul support slavery?

- 1) Paul didn't endorse slavery.
- 2) Paul taught Christians how to live as Christians within an existing institution.
- 3) Legal reforms fell outside the scope of Paul's mission.

Reforming unjust laws falls to Christians working in government, not pastors. The church's mission is to make disciples and teach them to obey all that Jesus commanded, not to labor for public policy.

- 4) Paul's interaction with slavery is similar to the Bible's interaction with divorce and polygamy.

*And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"⁴ He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'?⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."⁷ They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." – **Matthew 19:3-9***

Under the Old Covenant, Moses permitted divorce. But this doesn't mean these divorces agreed with God's will.

Jesus answers the 1st question ("is it lawful?" – 19:3) no, it isn't lawful to divorce your wife for any cause. God's intent is a man and woman joined in marriage should never separate.

Jesus answers the 2nd question ("why then" did Moses give the certificate of divorce – 19:7) by saying that Moses allowed these divorces because of human sin, not because of God's design.

This explains why things like polygamy and slavery were tolerated. God's laws for Israel didn't overthrow every evil practice (e.g., polygamy). Sometimes Moses' law regulated what God didn't approve. **Allowance wasn't approval!**

American slavery

Let's consider American slavery. That form of slavery is explicitly condemned in 1 Timothy. American slavery resulted from kidnapping. Africans captured Africans (captured during war, village raids, etc.) and sold them to Europeans = kidnapping.

*understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers,¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, **enslavers**, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, – **1 Timothy 1:9-10***

The ESV has a footnote on "enslavers" that says, "That is, those who take someone captive in order to sell him into slavery."

By calling kidnapping sin, Paul condemned one of the sources of slavery. Paul's helping Christians know how to live in fallen cultures that don't fear God. Not endorsing American slavery.

Point 2: Make the gospel attractive by honoring non-Christian supervisors (6:1).

Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. – 6:1

There were slaves in the church who had non-Christian masters.

Bondservants

The ESV “*bondservants*” indicates “someone in the Roman Empire officially bound under contract to serve his master for seven years...When the contract expired, the person was freed, given his wage that had been saved by the master, and officially declared a freedman (ESV preface).”

Yoke

Yoke = a harness put on oxen to join them for the purpose of pulling a load. The picture is being a bondservant is like having a burden on your neck. Life lived under a weight that’s pushing you down. Restriction. Controlled by another person’s whims.

Instruction

In oppressive circumstances, duty remains. Regard, consider your non-Christian master as worthy of honor.

Honor isn’t conditional on the character of the master. Whether they’re compassionate or horrific. Paul offers no exceptions.

Purpose

The reason for honoring your non-Christian master is gospel advance. We want people to think well of the gospel. We want to live in a way that attracts people to Jesus. If a disrespectful bondservant were to be converted and remained disrespectful, the master would conclude the Christian faith makes no practical difference in a person’s life. If a hard-worker were to be converted and their work ethic decreased after conversion because they thought they were entitled to special privileges as a child of God, their master would conclude Christianity is bad for business.

If a Christian bondservant is disrespectful, lazy, sloppy, etc., they’ll give God and the Christian faith a bad name.

Application

We’re not slaves. Modern application would be Christian employees working under non-Christian supervisors. Or even more extended, Christian children under non-Christian parents or Christian children under non-Christian school teachers.

Respect with your mouth. Honor the position. Obey every order unless ordered to sin. Honor by working hard. Honor by doing quality work.

The motive here is I want to make God look good. I want to show people the gospel is a good thing. Stereotypes abound today. We’re a bunch of hateful, uneducated, backwards weirdos. I want to show people the new birth is true. They might reject my beliefs, but they’ll see a different way of doing life. And they might be attracted to it.

That’s a reason to wake up in the morning. To infiltrate the world with hope infused lived out godliness. To make God look God. Is this your life purpose?

Point 3: Honor Christian employers because you love them (6:2)

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. Teach and urge these things. – 6:2

Imagine a scenario where a non-Christian bondservant has a Christian master and gets converted. They were a respectful, hard-worker as an unbeliever, but now that they're a Christian they're lazy. How could this happen? Maybe the bondservant thinks they're equals because they're both brothers in Christ? Doesn't becoming brothers in Christ erase social distinctions?

Illustration

My Dad has a distaste for hiring Christians to do work for him. He'd rather hire non-Christians because they'll do better work. His experience in hiring Christians was Christians showed up late, Christians never finished the job, Christians made promises they didn't keep, Christians did low quality work. His explanation? They expect forgiveness and grace. They assume you're a Christian so you have to be merciful and accept low-quality work.

What a horrible witness! What a misapplication of grace! What a rejection of the Bible's teachings on sluggards!

Application

Paul's logic is serve your Christian master even better because they're a believer. And because they're "beloved". "beloved" means loved by another. Brotherly affection. It could mean loved by God. Yes Christians are loved by God. But it likely means loved by the slave. Most uses of the word speak of a Christian's brotherly affection for another Christian. The principle is honor Christian employers. Don't take advantage of them. Serve them even better. Because they're dear to you.

Summary

Paul assumes there's great motivation to serve non-Christians: gospel impact. Paul assumes there's great motivation to serve fellow Christians: they're fellow believers whom you love.

Point 4: Slavery and the gospel

We come into the world as slaves to sin

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. – **Titus 3:3**

The Bible pictures people before believing, before being born again as "*slaves to various passions and pleasures.*" That's ruled by passions. Mastered by pleasures. Under the yoke of sinful desires. Subjected to the rule of sin. In bondage to sin.

Every one of us is mastered by something.

"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. – **Matthew 6:24**

Money is one of the passions that enslaves humanity. If you're mastered by money, Jesus can't be your Lord. Love for money prevents love for Jesus.

But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. – Romans 6:17-18

We're either slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness. The Bible says that every person who's become a Christian was previously a slave to sin. Who's your master? Who or what are you enslaved to?

True freedom is found in Christ alone

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. – John 8:31-36

Jesus assumes everyone ever born is a slave to sin. Freedom comes through the truth. Through Jesus. And only through Jesus. Jesus sets sinners free from disordered passions.

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. – 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

True freedom comes through what Christians call being born again. When the Holy Spirit comes inside of a person, transformation happens. Slavery to sin gives way to slavery to righteousness. New passions and pleasures emerge.

True freedom means no longer ruled by sinful passions.

Christ redeems people from bondage through his death

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. – Galatians 4:4-5

At the appointed time, God the Father sent God the Son (Jesus) to redeem people under the law. Under the law = guilty of law-breaking and worthy of the punishment the law demands.

He [Jesus] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. – Colossians 1:13-14

In Jesus redemption is found, namely, the forgiveness of sins.

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." – Mark 10:45

Paul defines redemption as the forgiveness of sins. **Redemption** is the act of release from the power and penalty of sin. Like a slave is released from their servitude. In order for a slave to be released, a ransom needs to be paid. The **ransom** paid for our forgiveness was Jesus' death on the cross. A substitute (Jesus) took the punishment of many (all those who would ever believe) to secure their release.

Non-Christian

Are you tracking with me? Would you say, I'm a slave of sin. I'm ruled by my passions and pleasures. I'm not ruled by Jesus. I feel anything but free. The weight of my sins is hanging over my head.

Become one of the many ransomed by Jesus. Friend, admit your rebellion. Thank God for sending Jesus to die in your place. Ask God for forgiveness on the basis of Jesus death. And trust you've been forgiven because God forgives everyone who trusts in Jesus. God is merciful to sinners. God rescues!

If you turn from rebellion and believe, you're totally forgiven of every sin you've ever committed and you're born again with a new heart to fight sin.

We're saved to be slaves of Christ

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, – Romans 1:1

Paul self-identifies as “*a servant of Christ Jesus.*” Same word for “bondservants.”

For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. – 1 Corinthians 7:22

Those who were bondservants when called became free in relation to God. Still a bondservant but free in the Lord.

Those who were free (not slaves) when called became Jesus' bondservant at conversion. Free in society but now a bondservant of Christ.

The picture is the Christian is both free and a bondservant at the same time. Free from the ruling power of sin. Every sin forgiven. Ruled by a new master: Jesus Christ.

A bondservant is owned by another. Submissive. Humbled. Subject to the will of their master. An utterly despised institution (slave) is how we're supposed to see ourselves.

Conclusion

Christian, you're free from the guilt and power of sin. Christian, you exist to serve the pleasure of a perfect, flawless, trustworthy, all-powerful, self-giving master. The Lord Jesus Christ. A good master.

Live to make the gospel attractive. Honor those dear to you. Your fellow believers.