

Roman Slavery & Modern Implications

So we've got our work cut out for us with today's passage. The fact that Paul talks about slavery, and says *anything other than* "abolish the whole system of slavery" is really difficult for us as modern Americans. It's hard for us to comprehend why Paul instructs people from *within* the system of slavery, rather than simply outright calling its demise.

In fact, many people will point to passages like this one as evidence that the bible is no longer trustworthy or relevant as a source of instruction for our culture today. Can't tell you how many conversations I've had with people who don't follow Jesus, and as soon as I mentioned something about what the bible says, they respond by saying, "yeah, but doesn't the bible also condone *slavery*?" And it's really easy to see why, at at least at first glance at this passage, people might say that.

So before we get anywhere with what Paul is saying here in *this passage*, we have to do some work. We have to clear some of the weeds out of the way so we can understand what's being said. We're gonna need to try and wrap our minds around why Paul says what he says, why he *doesn't* say what we'd want or expect him to say, and *then* we can get to what (if any) applications his words have for us today. So just as a warning, the first section of today's teaching is going to be just a tad dense. But I think it's important for us, since this is such a major pushback to the bible, to be able to understand and respond to it well. So off we go...

First, we've talked on Sundays before about how understanding context is essential to reading the bible. Really, **in order to understand what the bible is saying to us, you have to first have some understanding of what it was saying to its original audience.** This is a letter written two millennia ago to people on a different continent in a different culture than ours. Which means we can't just read a word like "slavery" in this passage and automatically assume it means the same thing to them that it does to us. We can't import our modern understanding of slavery directly the word Paul uses in this passage.

I'll give you a silly example of why we can't do that, just to illustrate the point. In Luke 17, we're told that Jesus "traveled" from Nazareth to Jerusalem. The shortest route between those two cities was about 64 miles. So when it says Jesus "traveled" a distance of 64 miles, we could assume that Jesus hopped in his energy-efficient Prius (because everybody knows Jesus would drive a Prius), put on his Sufjan Stevens Spotify playlist (because duh), and zoomed about an hour up the road to Jerusalem. Because that's what the word "travel" means to us. But that's not how people traveled back then. Back then, they traveled by foot or by animal—not by Prius. **I think all of us understand that we can't just import our definition of "travel" onto the word "travel" in that passage.** We can't just assume it meant the same thing to that ancient audience, because it *didn't*.

And in the same way, we can't just read the word "slave" in *this* ancient context and assume it means the same thing that "slavery" means to us today. We can't assume that what Paul has in mind here is the type of slavery practiced in colonial America. **If we want to talk about early American slavery, I would argue the bible outright opposes everything about it.** I think that for many reasons, but I'll just give you two this morning for time's sake:

1. American slavery was racially motivated.

Slavery in early America was driven by one race thinking that another race was inherently inferior to them. Many white European Americans understood an entire ethnicity of people to be naturally subservient to them. And because they saw them as being *less human* than *they* were, they thought it was acceptable to rule over them as slaves. There's plenty of documentation in our history books that demonstrates this is how proponents of slavery thought at the time.

Now, if it's not already clear from the book of Ephesians, Paul would be *very opposed* to that mentality. In this very letter to the Ephesians, Paul spends substantial blocks of text driving home the point that **any kind of social hierarchy based on ethnicity is directly opposed to the way of Jesus.** It's incompatible with the gospel itself. You can go back and read why he says that in ch. 2 of Ephesians. But it's not just in Ephesians that he deals with this issue. It's also in Galatians. And Romans. And plenty of other places in the bible as well: racism in all its forms is antithetical to the gospel.

On the other hand, the slavery that Paul writes about generally *wasn't* racially motivated. Slaves were from any and all races, any and all ethnicities. **No one particular people group was more common than another within the slave population.** And that's because it wasn't primarily motivated by race. Instead, it was often motivated by *financial need* from the slave himself. Back then, there were no bankruptcy laws, there was no welfare state, none of the social safety nets we have today. So if you or you and your family got into debt or financial trouble, you had two options: 1) let you and your family starve to death, or 2) find a wealthy benefactor to pay your debts, and in return become their slaves to pay them back. Yes, you would be enslaved. But on the bright side, you and your family get to *stay alive* and be taken care of. You would likely have food, water, and shelter provided by the person you worked for while you were enslaved. And because this is how it worked, a person generally did not remain in Roman slavery permanently. They were there until they paid off their debt. And if they found another source of income where they could make enough money, they could pay the rest of their debt at once, buying themselves out of slavery and becoming free. This happened *frequently* in the Roman world. But the point being that much Roman slavery was substantially different than the type practiced in early America, **in that it wasn't primarily racially motivated.**

That's one reason I know that Paul would oppose early American slavery. The other is that...

2. American slavery was forced.

I don't think this comes as a surprise to anybody, but the **slave trade in America was entirely involuntary.** It involved the capture of millions of human beings from another continent against their will, and then used physical, emotional, and mental abuse to force them into hard labor. In case you are wondering how God would feel about *that type* of slavery specifically, we don't really have to look much further than verses like Exodus 21:16:

Whoever steals a man and sells him [that would be precisely what early American slave traders did], and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.

I don't know how you read that, but I'm gonna mark God down as a "strongly against" when it comes to American slavery. **The bible here is condemning a type of slavery that sounds a lot like what was practiced in early America.** We see this not just in the Old Testament, but the New Testament too. In 1 Timothy 1, Paul says this:

*We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful... [and then he launches into a long list of the types of people that fit that description, among which are...] ...**slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.***

The word for “slave traders” there is literally “man-stealers”—it’s a reference back to the verse in Exodus. So in 1 Timothy, which was written by Paul—the same guy who wrote Ephesians, **there’s this very clear opposition to anyone who profits off of the capture and sale of human beings.** Which means to try and make Paul’s instructions in Ephesians 6 justify the existence of the American slave trade is deeply problematic.

But here’s my point: **given both of these characteristics of early American slavery, and how the Bible clearly speaks against them, there is absolutely zero doubt in my mind that the bible would not condone that type of slavery.** Now, were there people in our country who claimed it did? Were there those who claimed to be Christians and used the bible to support the institution of slavery? *Absolutely.* Just as there are people today who would use the bible to support violence, injustice, discrimination, sexism, racism—and any number of other things. **The bible has never had a shortage of people trying to co-opt it to their cause.** But from what we’ve covered so far, I think this is pretty evident: **the people who used the bible to justify early American slavery were outright wrong.** They were reading their bibles selectively at best and downright ignorantly at worst. They were plucking verses out of their context and making them say only what they wanted them to say. **Because a thorough and thoughtful reading of the bible shows it outright opposes the very mindsets and practices that fueled slavery in America.**

Now, with all that said, there were still *some* destructive aspects of Roman slavery. Sometimes physical intimidation and violence were still used from masters to their slaves. Sometimes long days and grueling hours were demanded. And at the end of the day, you were still considered another person’s property. So your question might still be “well, why does it seem like Paul is okay with *any* type of slavery? Even if it wasn’t the same as the African slave trade, shouldn’t Paul still be opposed to it? Shouldn’t he still be opposed to treating people like property? Shouldn’t he still be trying to do away with the institution of slavery?”

The short answer to that is yes he should and yes he is. But you do have to remember that at this point in history, the Church was still very much a fringe movement. Christians were not a “moral majority” by any stretch of the imagination. And this type of Roman slavery was a major player in the Roman economy. The biggest, baddest, cruelest empire of the world at the time relied on this system of slavery to make their economy work. So in that setting, realistically, a fringe movement of followers of Jesus is not going to get very far in calling for the outright abolition of the institution of slavery. They’re just not. It’s great, it’s needed—it’s just not very practical or realistic. Now, I know that’s really hard for us to comprehend in a day when social change can get started just by a tweet or Facebook post—but this group of Christians single-handedly tearing down the Roman institution of slavery was just not a realistic expectation in their context.

But here’s what I want you to see: that doesn’t mean Paul did nothing about it. It just means he went about it differently than we might. **While Paul doesn’t call for an end to the *institution* of**

slavery, he does give the Church instructions that, when followed, will absolutely begin to dismantle the most destructive parts of it from the inside out. But the way he goes about it is a little more subtle and subversive than we might expect.

To understand this, a metaphor might help. To my knowledge, there are two ways to tear down a building. (If you're in the room and you work construction, please forgive the gross oversimplification I'm about to set before you.) One method is the *wrecking ball*. Invented in the late 1800s and made famous by Miley Cyrus, the way a wrecking ball works is that it's this massive ball of forged steel, that you swing at a building over and over again as hard as you can. Eventually, it makes a crack, then it makes a hole, and then over time, collapses the entire building. That's *one* way to tear down a building. The other way to tear down a building is by *implosion*. The way an implosion works is that you set up small explosives at strategic parts of the building, and then you detonate them simultaneously, and the building collapses in on itself because the main structures that were holding it up are no longer in place.

Now, here's how the metaphor connects. **The way we usually like to go about social change—tearing down harmful systems and structures in our world—is the wrecking ball method.** We like to tweet, and blog, and protest, and write our senators, and sign petitions, and hold rallies. And we just swing that wrecking ball as many times as we can until we start to make a dent. And listen, *sometimes that is exactly the type of change that is needed.* That's not a *bad* way to go about social change. It's just not the *only* way. You see in this passage, Paul knows the cultural climate around him. He knows that if he were to go the wrecking ball method, he wouldn't get very far at all with it, he would probably get himself and most of the other Christians killed in the process. But that doesn't mean he doesn't *go after* the harmful, destructive parts of slavery—it just means he uses a different method. Instead of a wrecking ball, Paul with this passage is rigging up these little explosives to the most destructive qualities of slavery. Because he knows that when those get detonated, the institution of slavery will begin to crumble in on itself. Or at least will be completely transformed from the inside out. **And the way he does that is by talking about how Christian slaves and masters are to interact with one another.**

And *that*—I think—is what *this* passage is all about. So if you have your bibles, go ahead now and turn with me to Ephesians 6. Now that we're finished with *the longest introduction to a teaching in the history of the world*, we I think are finally ready for our passage. You guys still alive out there? Ephesians 6. Page 569 in our bibles, gonna be reading out of the NIV today. Chapter 6, beginning in v. 5 :

*[5] Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, **just as you would obey Christ.** [6] Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but **as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.** [7] Serve wholeheartedly, **as if you were serving the Lord, not people,** [8] because you know that **the Lord** will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.*

So look at what Paul does here. He tells followers of Jesus who were slaves in Ephesus, “**your master is not your ultimate boss anymore.**” You are now officially under new management. Sure, listen to them—sure, do what they ask. But don't do it because of *them*. Do it because of *God*. When you work, understand that you're working for God, not for man. Go about your day to day life doing faithful, consistent, quality work—not because you're intimidated by your owner, but because your work is an opportunity to serve God. Your master has no ultimate power over you anymore, because he's not your ultimate boss. *God is.*

And then, he goes on to speak to the masters, v. 9. And don't miss this verse because this is maybe the most provocative part of it all:

*[9] And masters, **treat your slaves in the same way.***

Wait—treat slaves in the same way as *what*? What's he referring back to? *In the same way that they should treat you.* So **just like the slaves are to interact with their masters with fear and respect, the masters are called to interact with their slaves with fear and respect.** Just like the slaves are to see their ultimate aim as serving Jesus, the masters are to see what *they do* as ultimately serving Jesus. And the masters are to interact with their slaves knowing that God will repay them for whatever good (and we know from elsewhere in the Scriptures, *evil*) that they do, whether slave nor free.

So please do not miss this. **Paul just told slave-owners that they are to conduct themselves in fear and respect towards their slaves.** Do you realize what that forced them to do? *It forced them to see their slaves as image-bearers of God. To see them as co-humans. To see them as equals. He's forcing them to acknowledge that however they treat their slaves will be rewarded or punished by God himself.* For people who owned slaves and started doing this, can you imagine the type of life-giving dynamic it would've created? Can you imagine how *normal and non-hierarchical* these relationships would've looked? How much they would've *not* looked like the relationship we think of between a slave and a master? They would've looked like the relationship between brothers, between co-workers, between *equals*. Because you've got two human beings who treat one another with *complete and utter respect*.

It would've prevented against the type of behavior Paul *warns* against in v. 10. He says:

Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

Paul says that God will hold you accountable for how you interact with others, *period*. And he's not gonna grade on a curve based on whether you were a slave or a master, whether the people you interacted with were slave or free. He's gonna hold you *accountable* for how you treated them, no matter what. "But I needed to keep them in line..."—then you should've done it with fear and respect towards them. "But I needed to put them in their place"—then you should've done it while still treating them as a co-image bearer of God. "But they're my property"—sure, okay, but first **they were God's treasured possession.** And you should've treated them accordingly.

Are you starting to see how this ethic between slaves and masters, when lived out, would've utterly transformed the whole system of Roman slavery? Do you see how it would've been like rigging up tiny explosives throughout the institution of Roman slavery, that would eventually make the entire destructive system start crumbling in on itself? That's how Paul goes about it. **Paul's goal in writing this passage is to create among followers of Jesus a counter-culture of mutual love, respect, and dignity that would stand in sharp contrast to the cruel Roman empire around them.** And it did just that. It created a community where everyone was on a level playing field.

Over in the book of Galatians, another letter Paul wrote to an ancient church, there's this passage where he is unpacking the implications of what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and he says that "*there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" Now I want to ask you a question that should have a pretty obvious answer. When Paul says there is no longer these different categories, does he mean those categories *don't exist* anymore? Does he mean there's no longer any such thing as different races? *No*. Does he mean there is no longer *any such thing* as different genders?" *No*. That wouldn't make any sense. Just like, in his context, he's not saying there's no longer any *such thing* as slave or free.

But here's what he *is* saying—he's saying **those things are no longer defining markers in God's family**. He's saying that because of Jesus, **we are no longer defined primarily by our ethnicity, our gender, or our place in society**. In the Church, we do not treat people with any more or less dignity because of those things. **In God's family we all stand on level ground. And that ground is located at the foot of the cross**—that's why he says we are all one "in Christ Jesus." Paul says in Romans that there is now no difference between people groups and stations in life, in that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, *and all are justified freely by his grace as a gift.*" **In knowing that we all needed a savior to die for us and him coming to do just that, Jesus obliterated any basis on which we might stand to feel superior to others**. We now are brothers, sisters, co-equals through what Jesus accomplished on the cross. And in light of that, we are called to treat one another accordingly. That goes for slaves and masters, Jews and Greeks, men and women, blacks and whites, and any other potential dividing marker humanity might have. In Jesus, we are all now on a level playing field because of Jesus. That's the good news of the gospel. And that is why Paul is able to say that owners should treat their slaves the exact same way that slaves are called to treat their owners—because Jesus has put them on level ground with one another.

But you might be asking, what does any of this mean for us? We're obviously living in a very different culture than they were back then. So while it may be *interesting* how Paul addressed slavery in his day, what does that mean *practically* for us today? I think there are at least two implications for us:

It changes how we think about work.

Because of how Roman slavery functioned, it was honestly much closer to what we would call "work" than it was to what we think of as slavery. Upon knowing that, I think verses 5-7 help us immensely in how we think about work. Because **it tells us that we now work for Jesus, and not just for man**. Many people's attitude towards work goes something like this: get to work as close to on-time as you can, do the minimum amount of work you have to do to not get fired (or maybe less if nobody's watching), and leave as close to 5:00pm as is humanly possible, and then collect your paycheck and get on with the important parts of life. That attitude towards work mentality is super common—maybe even among some of us. But for those of you who were around for our *Adulting* series, you remember we blew that mentality up a little. According to the bible, work is something we were *made to do*. It's not a necessary evil, it's actually part of God's good creation. I don't have time to unpack all of that, so feel free to go back and listen to it on your own time.

But I point that out because that's the framework Paul is building off of from here. That work is good. And that **working is not just something we do for a paycheck, or something we do for our boss—but rather something we do for God**. And so when Paul tells *slaves* how they should think about their work,

he uses words like “sincerity of heart,” “wholeheartedly,” “not just to win people’s favor,” “as if you were *servicing the Lord*.” So let me ask, point blank, would those types of words accurately describe your attitude at *work*? Would you say you work with a “sincerity of heart,” a “wholeheartedness” towards your job? Would you say you work just as hard when your boss is watching as when they aren’t? Do you work as though you are serving the Lord? Paul says if your new boss is Jesus, you’re no longer primarily motivated by who’s watching or who’s not.

You know, something I’ve noticed is that most everybody thinks their boss is an idiot. I can’t recall one conversation I’ve had where somebody has told me “you know I just think my boss is the most competent, intelligent, gem of a human being I’ve ever met.” No, for most of us, when our boss says or does something, there’s this immediate, antagonistic posture towards them. Our default reaction is to say or think things like “they’re such an idiot.” “They have no clue what they’re doing.” “I could be such a better boss than they are.” Do you see how that default attitude is the exact opposite of the posture we’re called to have in this passage as followers of Jesus? Let me suggest something: don’t like your boss? Don’t like something they asked you to do? No worries, just pretend Jesus asked you to do it.

And, if you’re more of a manager or supervisor at your job, this applies to you too. Paul tells owners to act “in the same way” towards their slaves. Meaning that their posture should be treating them with honor and dignity and respect. So as a boss or employer, we should be treating our employees, not like just cogs in the machine, but as people with souls. People with stories and hurts and baggage and joys and fears. If you are in a position of authority at your job, does your posture towards your employees reflect that mentality? How often do you ask your employee the simple question “how are you doing?” and listen—*genuinely wait to hear their answer*? **If you follow Jesus, there should be definitive moments where your leadership looks different than someone who doesn’t. This passage changes how we think about work.**

It changes how we think about social change.

But it also affects how we think about social change of all sorts. As we mentioned earlier, we are big fans of the *wrecking ball* method of change in our world. We love calling publicly and vocally for injustice to be addressed or systems to be corrected. And in many ways, I think we should continue doing just that. But—here’s what I want you to make sure of—as a follower of Jesus, you can’t do all that *to the exclusion* of how you live individually. In an old novel by Charles Kingsley, there’s this scene where one of the characters is discussing a friend of theirs. And he delivers this haunting line: he says “*he began by trying to set the world right, when he hadn’t yet set himself right.*” I think that right there is an incredibly accurate description, written way back in the 1800s, of an awful lot of people’s approach to the world today. Especially of my generation and younger. We find ourselves hyper-focused on making things in the world right, but we sometimes do it to the exclusion of being made right ourselves.

Countless people in my generation will give their lives and Twitter accounts and effort and energy and money to fighting sex trafficking, while secretly clinging to a porn addiction that, study after study has shown, actually *fuels* the demand for sex trafficking around the world. Countless people will publicly decry the plight of hunger and thirst and poverty around the world, while changing little to nothing about their own budgets and spending habits. Listen, calling publicly for the eradication of injustice in our world is a *great* thing to devote your time and energy to—don’t stop doing that. Just so long as you don’t do it to the exclusion of fighting injustice in your own soul. If you’re going to **call publicly for the eradication of**

injustice, devote just as much time to the private eradication of sin. Don't think that setting the world right excuses you from setting *yourself* right. Start there.

So at least to me, it turns out there are real-life implications for us, even from a passage that we are at first repelled by. As it turns out, Paul saw the institution of slavery in his day with clear, 20/20 vision. And even if he addressed it differently than how we would have, we can still learn a lot from what he said. So let me just ask you as we close:

- What needs to change about how you think about work? Where have you not seen your job as an opportunity to serve Jesus? Where have you done the bare minimum? Where could you grow in reflecting Jesus to your employees or your employer?
- And where have you focused on the fight against injustice without dealing with the injustice in your own heart? Where have you made a big deal out of the destructive structures in the world while ignoring the destructive tendencies in you?

Those are the questions I'll leave you and your LifeGroup to wrestle with this week. Let's pray.