

The Bible and Slavery  
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The sermon this morning is going to be a little different than most of the sermons you hear at Grace Church. Usually we are working our way through a book of the Bible, or at least through a particular passage. But this morning I'm going to address a specific topic, and we'll be looking at several different passages. The reason I decided to do this is because we've just spent 4 weeks looking at Paul's letter to Philemon, where he is asking Philemon to forgive his runaway slave Onesimus. And as I preached those sermons I didn't speak directly to the issue of slavery. I think a sermon series on Philemon would be inadequate without discussing this issue, therefore that's what I want to do this morning. I want to talk about the Bible and slavery. What does the Bible say about slavery? What does the Bible refrain from saying about slavery? Most pointedly, why doesn't the Bible clearly condemn the institution of slavery? As we're going to see, these questions are more than just interesting. I believe as we wrestle with these questions, we'll glean some profound insights into what Christianity is all about.

Let me begin by reading you the passages in the New Testament that speak directly to slaves.

Ephesians 6:5-9

Colossians 3:22-4:1

1 Timothy 6:1-2

Titus 2:9-10

1 Peter 2:18-21

Also see Tom Steller's talk on slavery that he gave here at Grace Church last October.

I want to make a few general observations about these passages and a few other passages related to slavery, and then we'll come to the main question of why the Bible does not directly attack slavery.

1) The first observation is simply to notice that the Bible does NOT condemn slavery. In the passages I just read, there are instructions for slaves to obey their masters. It nowhere says, slaves unite and rebel. And in the commands to masters, they are not told to release their slaves, although we could argue that Paul was encouraging Philemon to free Onesimus. But slavery is not clearly condemned. There's not a verse that attacks slavery and calls it an evil institution.

2) Secondly, slavery is not endorsed either. There's nothing that says slavery is a God-ordained institution that should be preserved. Unfortunately, there have been pastors and biblical scholars who have tried to argue that in the past. But it simply isn't there. The Bible does not endorse slavery.

The Bible doesn't condemn slavery. It doesn't endorse slavery. It doesn't say it's wrong. It doesn't say it's right. It simply assumes it. But it also, as we see in these passages, transforms it from the inside out. The Bible doesn't attack slavery directly, but it speaks to the individual heart, of slave and master, and thus sparks an inner revolution.

In these passages Paul and Peter are speaking to individuals right where they're at in society. They're not addressing the societal structures, but they're instructing individuals how to live godly lives in whatever position they find themselves.

3) A third observation that is helpful to make is to contrast the master / slave relationship with the husband / wife relationship. Because the marriage relationship *is* a God-ordained institution, and the specific roles of husband and wife are part of God's plan from creation. But the institution of slavery is an evil institution which the Bible accommodates, similar to the way the Bible accommodates the practice of divorce, or polygamy in the Old Testament. These things are wrong, but as Jesus says in Matthew 19 in response to the Pharisees' question about divorce: Jesus says, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8).

We find these examples of evil practices that were accommodated in Scripture because of man's sinfulness. They were "allowed" in some sense, but not because they are good things. We can't argue for polygamy simply because the patriarchs were polygamists. Nor can we argue for slavery simply because we find these commands to slaves and masters. It's an evil institution the reality of which the biblical writers simply assumed. Slavery was such a fundamental piece of their society, they could hardly conceive of it being abolished. So we see that the Bible accommodates the reality of slavery, and instructs masters and slaves how they ought to live as Christians in their respective roles.

4) Fourthly, we need to understand some of the differences between first century slavery and American slavery. All slavery is evil. But it also seems to be true that the slavery of Paul's day was not quite as appalling as the slavery that was practiced here in the United States. First of all, in Paul's day slavery was not based on racism. Race was not a factor in who became a slave. There was not one group of people who were forced to be slaves. All different kinds of people were slaves, and all different kinds of people were masters.

Secondly, slaves could gain their freedom, and regularly did. In fact, most slaves were freed by the time they were 30 years old.

Thirdly, many individuals would actually sell themselves into slavery in the hope of moving up the ladder of society. They knew that after seven years or so they would be free again, and if they had served a well-to-do master, then they would probably have many more opportunities than they did before becoming a slave.

And fourthly, slaves served in many very high positions in society. There were many slaves who did menial labor, but there were also slaves who were tutors and professors of higher education and philosophers. Slaves worked as business agents, accountants, and doctors. In many cases, there were slaves who were better educated than their masters.

I don't want to paint a rosy picture of first century slavery. Many masters were extremely cruel and mistreated their slaves in various ways. Other masters, though, were like loving fathers. A slave's experience depended immensely upon the character of the master. It was a mixed bag. But I do want us to see that the slavery of Paul's day was very different than the slavery that plagued our country not so many years ago. Before we criticize the New Testament writers too harshly for failing to condemn slavery, we need to understand these differences. There *are* significant differences.

5) One more observation about slavery in the Bible is that the Bible *does* give pointers to the abolition of slavery. As I already said, we don't find a clear attack on slavery. But in various ways there is an undermining of slavery. Paul's letter to Philemon is a great example of this. Paul doesn't directly come out and tell Philemon to free Onesimus. You

certainly get the impression that Paul would love to see that happen. But he doesn't say so explicitly. And that's not even the real issue of the letter. It's about forgiveness. It's about Onesimus coming home, and being received graciously by his master, whom he had wronged.

In this way Paul undermines slavery without directly calling for its abolition. F. F. Bruce says this about the letter to Philemon: "The letter throws little light on Paul's attitude to the institution of slavery." And then he writes, "What this letter does is to bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution could only wilt and die" (*Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 400-401). Paul isn't concerned to confront the institution of slavery directly. But the attitude he conveys his letter to Philemon speaks much more deeply than a message of social reform ever could. He speaks to the individual heart, rather than speaking generally to the social institution. And as the hearts change, then the institution of slavery can only wilt and die.

There are a couple other passages that undermine slavery. In 1 Timothy 1, Paul lists various vices which are condemned by the law. In verse 10 he lists, "the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, *enslavers*, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine." Here he condemns enslavers, kidnappers, those who would steal people and then sell them into slavery. Paul cites this as an offense against God's law.

Another interesting verse is 1 Corinthians 7:21, where Paul does encourage slaves to gain their freedom if possible. He writes, "Were you a slave when called? [meaning, when you became a Christian, were you a slave?] Do not be concerned about it. [in other words, physical slavery and physical freedom is not the most important thing; but then he adds this little parenthesis] But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity." He's not telling slaves to runaway from their masters. But he's telling them, if your master offers to free you (which happened at some point for most slaves), jump at the opportunity.

Paul is very sensitive in how he presents this. He doesn't want slaves to think of physical freedom as salvation. If you're a slave, don't be concerned about it. It's not the most important thing. But, freedom from slavery is a *good* thing (though not of ultimate importance), and if you can gain your freedom, by all means, avail yourself of the opportunity.

Finally, we also see in verses like Galatians 3:28 that master and slave are one in Christ. They may have different roles in their working relationship, but the two are on equal footing before God. There's nothing about being free that makes a person more important, and nothing about being a slave that makes a person less important. The verse says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

In these ways the Bible undermines slavery without explicitly condemning it. And this brings us to our main question for the morning, which is, "Why *doesn't* the Bible directly attack this evil institution of slavery?"

There are a couple pragmatic reasons as we consider this issue from the human perspective of the early church, and then we'll look at a much more fundamental reason.

First of all, as I mentioned, there was already a system for the manumission of slaves. Slaves would work for several years, and would eventually earn their freedom. They would be released. So, while slavery is always evil, the total abolition of slavery

was not an urgent burden on the hearts of the first century Christians, partly, it seems, because of the way the system worked. Many people would sell themselves into slavery, work for a number of years, and then be released.

Related to this is the fact that slavery was such a predominant feature of their society, it was hard to imagine life without it. This was how the economy worked. And even if some did imagine life without slavery, the fledgling church was in no place to abolish it. They would have been shut down, and the early Christian movement would have been seen merely as a rebellious group that undermined the structures of society (see Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ*, 66-68). And that perception would have been counterproductive to the main mission of the church. If non-Christians equate Christianity with a particular social cause, then they've missed the heart of the Christian faith.

This leads to the deeper reason of why we don't find in the Bible a direct assault on slavery. The reason is this: Christianity is not a religion of social revolution. This is not primarily what Christianity is about. Christianity is primarily about how sinful human beings can be reconciled to a holy God. This is the message that the Bible presents so clearly. We must understand that we are all sinners, as Paul writes in Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We need to see our desperate condition as sinners, that we deserve God's just punishment for our sins: Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death." We deserve death because of our sin, eternal death, eternal separation from God. That's the bad news. The Good News is the second half of that verse. Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." And Romans 5:8, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." And Romans 10:9, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." This is the Good News, that those who trust in Christ will be forgiven. We will be saved from that punishment, and instead receive an eternal inheritance in heaven. *This is the Gospel. This is Christianity.* And this is the focus of the Bible. Not primarily, how do we correct the injustices of society. That's important, but it cannot come first. The Gospel has to come first. The proclamation of the Gospel is the primary work of the church.

And that's a significant reason, I believe, why the New Testament does not directly confront a social evil like slavery. The New Testament deals with the issue of being reconciled to God, and it deals with issues within the church. But social issues outside the church, in the society at large, were not of primary concern.

Now let me try to balance this picture. Because some of you might be saying right now, "Well, aren't the social issues important? Shouldn't we be confronting the injustices of our day? Shouldn't we try to shape our culture? To improve its morals? To uphold biblical values and principles? Isn't that our responsibility as Christians?"

The answer, of course, is "Yes." Yes, we ought to be salt and light in this world. We are to be in the world, but not of it. But *IN* the world. On the one side of this question, we need to be clear that we are not to separate ourselves from the world in such a way that we have no impact on it. We ought to vote. We ought to work for justice and peace and godliness in whatever sphere of influence God gives us. He will call some of us to be very involved in social causes and politics and government and public issues. There's a great need for Christians to be involved in all of these things.

This is an important thing to emphasize, that Christians should seek to influence and shape the surrounding culture. And this is balanced by the truth I've already stated, that the Gospel is primary. We have to see these two things in balance. We have to see them in the appropriate order.

The Gospel is primary, and as the church proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ and calls sinners to repent and believe and continually exhorts believers to grow in their delight of God, the inner transformation that happens in individuals will inevitably have an effect on the surrounding culture. That's the way the Gospel works. The Gospel transforms men and women, and then those men and women transform culture. Thus, the way the church impacts the culture is indirectly, not directly.

What helped me the most as I wrestled with these questions were some sermons by Martin Lloyd-Jones on Ephesians 6. Here's a quote that articulates both sides of this balance, and the need for the right priorities. He says, "We are not to go out of the world, we do not cease to be citizens of this world; and we are to exercise certain functions as citizens while we are in this world. Yes, but we are to keep ourselves in the right place, in the right position. It is always a question of priorities, and of emphasis, of what comes first and of what comes second" (*Life in the Spirit in Marriage, Home & Work: An Exposition of Ephesians 5:18 to 6:9*, pg. 316).

The Gospel transforms our lives. That comes first. And then our lives transform the culture. That comes second. Therefore the church must keep her main focus on the Gospel, and the impact on society will follow. If the church makes social change her main goal, then both are lost. This is what has happened with the Social Gospel. There are pastors and church leaders who make social issues the *primary* focus of the church. Addressing social needs becomes the *gospel* for them. It's a social gospel. It minimizes the significance of personal sin and the need for forgiveness, and believes that the real way to change people is to change the societal structures (see Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pg. 904). And so all the energy is poured into changing society at large.

We agree that social needs are a concern to us, and we want to make an impact for the good of our society. But we also see that the far more significant need is spiritual. We are sinners in need of forgiveness. That's fundamental, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only solution to that problem. Therefore the church must remain committed to the proclamation of this biblical Gospel. And as people are changed inwardly by the Gospel, those lives will impact society.

A wonderful example of this is the life of William Wilberforce, and I'll close with this. William Wilberforce was a member of Parliament in England, and he is responsible for ending the slave trade in 1807 and then finally abolishing slavery in 1833, just before his death. Wilberforce was a man who understood the battle for justice in the world in proper relation to the Gospel. He never separated the two. He never gave first priority to the social issues over the importance of the essential Gospel message. In fact, he said we must cherish Christian doctrine if we are to have any perseverance in doing good. That's why I said earlier that if the church makes social change her main goal, then both are lost. The Gospel is lost, and the potential for deep, lasting social change is lost as well. The precious truth of the Gospel is what kept Wilberforce going for almost 46 years in his battle against slavery. He knew that slavery was not the ultimate problem of the universe. And having that proper, Gospel perspective on life is what enabled him to persevere. He knew that sin is the fundamental problem, and Christ is the solution. John

Piper, in his biography of Wilberforce, summarizes this point: “For the good of society, the good of society must not be the primary good” (*The Roots of Endurance*, pg. 122).

Wilberforce understood the Gospel, and he understood the primary purpose of the church. And as an individual who was radically changed by God’s grace, he found himself relentlessly attacking a grave injustice. It’s in this way that the Bible, and the church, confronts culture. It focuses on a person’s relationship with God, and then changed individuals impact the culture. Next week I want to preach one more sermon on slavery, but from a different perspective. I want to talk about spiritual slavery and spiritual freedom. The Bible teaches us that the ultimate evil in the world is not *physically* slavery, but *spiritual* slavery. And the ultimate good is spiritual freedom, which, ironically, happens when we become slaves of Christ. That will be next week’s sermon.