

**Does the Bible  
Condone Slavery?**  
*The Word of God, Pt. 7*  
*Philemon*

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*July 22, 2018*



# **I. PRAYER**

- i. Would you continue to illuminate our hearts and our minds to the unity and sufficiency of your Word given to us in the Bible.

# **II. INTRODUCTION**

## **a. We are going to continue in our summer study on the doctrine of the Word of God.**

- i. And this morning, I want to do one more sermon that is designed to teach us that the Bible is a unified whole that tells one unified story about God's redemption.
  - That every passage and every verse in the Bible points to this story of redemption.
    1. And this fact helps us to interpret parts of the Bible that we find difficult.
  - Two weeks ago, we practiced this by seeing how this one unified story helps us interpret and apply the Old Testament Law.
    1. If you missed that, find it online.
- ii. **But this morning, I wanted to grab another difficult topic. A topic that many critics of the Bible see as the Bible's most devastating flaw...**
  - And that is the Bible's apparent condoning of the institution slavery.
- iii. **Does the Bible condone slavery?**
  - And the reason why I want to teach on this topic because not only is this a good question that needs a good answer...
  - But also, because this is going to show us that when we see our Bibles as one unified story about God's redemption...



1. ... we are going to see that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the most powerful anti-slavery force in the world.

## **b. So, here is our plan...**

- i. First, let's take an honest look at what the Bible actually says about slavery and think about that within its actual historical context.
  - Once we do that, I think we'll have some clarity but also some more questions.
- ii. And then, secondly, we're going to apply some Biblical Theology.
  - Everyone say: BIBLICAL THEOLOGY...out loud.
  - When I say we are going to apply Biblical Theology to this topic, what I mean is that we are going to see how the unfolding story of God's redemption in the Bible helps us to rightly interpret what the Bible has to say about slavery.
  - And as I said before, I think what we'll see is that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the most powerful anti-slavery force in the world.

## **III. SO, WHAT DOES THE BIBLE ACTUALLY SAY ABOUT SLAVERY?**

**a. Well, in the OT, the Hebrew Word for slave or servant is EBED and in the NT the Greek word for slave is DOULOS and the word for servant is DIAKANOS (Deacon).**

- i. In both these languages, these words are used in all sorts of various situations and contexts both positive and negative.



- So, in Exodus 2:23, we see the word EBED used for slavery.
  1. *“During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their **slavery** and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from **slavery** came up to God.”*
- But we also see the word EBED used in a more positive sense in a passage like Isaiah 54:17.
  1. *“...no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the **servants** of the Lord and their vindication from me, declares the Lord.”*
- We see the same kind of uses in the NT for DOULOS. So, in Titus 2:9a, we see the Apostle Paul use it for the word slave or bondservant.
  1. *“**Bondservants** are to be submissive to their own masters in everything...”*
- But, Paul also uses the same word, DOULOS, to call himself a bondservant of Christ like in the first verse of Titus...
  1. *“Paul, a **servant** of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ...”*

**b. So, I want you to see from the beginning that the morality of someone being a slave or a servant in the Scriptures is highly dependent on the context.**



i. Romans 6 is a great example of this.

- Romans 6:20...
  1. *“For when you were **slaves of sin**, you were free in regard to righteousness.”*
  2. Paul is saying that before our sins were forgiven on the cross, we were enslaved by sin.
  3. And sin is a terrible master.
- But look at Romans 6:22...
  1. *“But now that you have been set free from sin and have become **slaves of God**, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.”*
  2. Same word. Same meaning. We are enslaved to something. But what has changed is who we’re enslaved to.
  3. Because of Jesus Christ, we are no longer enslaved by sin but we are enslaved by God.
  4. A better way to put it is that sin is no longer our master but God is!
- Here is the point...this idea of being enslaved by something is considered a good thing or a bad thing based on the who or what you are enslaved too.
  1. When sin is our master...it leads to death.
  2. When God is our master...it leads to life!

ii. So, as we look into what the Bible says about slavery, we have to understand that the morality of these words in the Bible is entirely judged by the conduct and intentions of the master.

- So, when Paul calls himself a slave to Christ...that is a good thing.
  1. When the Old Testament recounts the time when the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians, that is a bad thing.



- Let me repeat this...
  1. In the Bible, the morality of these words that are translated to mean slave and servant are entirely judged by the conduct and intentions of the master.

**c. So, what does the Bible actually say when it uses these words in reference to a slave that is owned or controlled by another person as a master?**

- i. In the Old Testament, we have laws that govern the conduct of slave masters.
  - In Exodus 21:2, one's slave must work for six years but in the seventh year, the slave must be freed.
  - In Deuteronomy 23:15, if a slave escapes his master and he comes to you, you are not allowed to give him back to your master but rather let him stay on the run!
  - In Job 31:13-15, the Bible affirms the equal dignity that a slave and his master shares.
    1. *<sup>13</sup> "If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me, <sup>14</sup> what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? <sup>15</sup> Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?"*
  - Lastly, in Jeremiah 34, God is explaining to His people why he removed them from the Promised Land and put them into exile...and one of the reasons that God gives in v.14 is that His people mistreated their slaves.



- ii. So, in the OT, we see God give instructions to his people on how they were to participate in the institution of slavery...
  - And God demanded that slaves were treated with equal dignity and that they were not oppressed.
- iii. ...but we do not see a specific text that offers a clear and direct repudiation of the institution of slavery in the OT.
  - And to be honest with you, we're going to see the same thing in the NT.
- iv. In the New Testament, we see all kinds of instructions to slaves and masters on how they are to conduct themselves in a godly way while participating in this, but no one specific text that offers a clear and direct repudiation.
  - Ephesians 6:5-9 is a good example.
    1. *"<sup>5</sup> Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, <sup>6</sup> not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, <sup>7</sup> rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, <sup>8</sup> knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. <sup>9</sup> Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him."*



- Again, the NT commands that slaves are treated with equal dignity and are not oppressed, but no repudiation of slavery.
- v. **As we said, the Bible judges the morality of this idea of slavery based on the conduct and the intentions of the master.**
- But even with that said...I know I really have not comforted anyone in answering the question if the Bible condones the institution of slavery.
    1. Because based on a quick and honest reading of the text, it seems that the Bible does condone slavery...sure it may put some qualifications in regard to the conduct and intentions of the master...but does that really make it better?
  - Why does the Bible just not clearly come out and say that the very idea of one person being owned by and living their life serving another person is just wrong?!?!

**d. Well, first of all, one thing we must understand is that the institution of slavery was very different in the first century compared to what we think of today in regard to slavery.**

- i. When I think of slavery today, I think of our country's history with slavery where a particular ethnic group was unjustly, inhumanely, and forcibly removed from their home against their will, shipped across the Atlantic, and forced into a brutal kind of slavery where they had no rights.



- I think the Bible does clearly repudiate any kind of slavery that was oppressive.
- ii. **In the first century, slavery was based on economic class and not ethnicity or the color of your skin.**
- There were people forced into slavery as a consequence of war but many slaves voluntarily sold themselves into this kind of occupation as a way of economically surviving.
    1. Although I am sure that many slave masters were abusive and oppressive to their slaves...which would be sinful.
    2. There were also slave masters who treated their slaves with equal dignity, did not oppress their workers, and allowed this to be an opportunity for them to work and make a living.
    3. So, in the first century as compared to the kind of slavery that went on in our country's history, freedom was not always a good thing for the slave. Freedom for many meant poverty and homelessness.
  - So, what we see in the New Testament especially, is a call for slave masters to be the kind of slave masters that treated their slaves with dignity and cared well for them.
- iii. **But even with some of the historical context and the understanding that this kind of slavery was different from the enslavement of Africans in our country...does it still make it better?**
- Again, it still seems the Bible condones the institution of slavery...even if it was a softer form of slavery that did not discriminate based on ethnicity and was not oppressive.



## **IV. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

**a. So, here is what we have done so far. (Remember, the point of the sermon today is to use this topic of slavery to teach us how to read our Bibles correctly).**

- i. We have done a word study to discover how the Bible uses the words for servant and slavery.
  - Through that study we've determined that the Bible judges the morality of these words based on the conduct and intentions of the master.
- ii. We've done an overview of the many texts that specifically speak to the institution of slavery.
  - We discovered that no one passage offers a clear and direct repudiation of the institution of slavery.
  - We've just seen a repudiation of an oppressive institution of slavery.
- iii. We've thought about the historical context a bit and ensured that we weren't reading our own historical context into the Bible.

**b. What more is there to do? Do we have an answer to our question - Does the Bible condone the institution of slavery?**

- i. See, it's right here, now that we have all of our data, where it is time to do some Biblical Theology.
  - Say it with me again! BIBLICAL THEOLOGY.



1. When I say we are going to do some Biblical Theology, what I mean is that we are going to see how the unfolding story of God's redemption in the Bible helps us to rightly interpret what the Bible has to say about slavery.

### **c. The Bible begins at creation in the garden.**

- i. And in the Garden, we were slaves of God.
  - Now, I know that sounds odd.
    1. When we hear the word slavery, we automatically hear oppression.
  - But this was not an oppressive kind of slavery.
    1. We as humans were under the care and authority of God Almighty.
    2. We are not our own but belong to him!

### **d. But while in the Garden, we sought independence and freedom from God.**

- i. We believed the lie that freedom from God would mean that we would flourish and God was actually being oppressive with His Word.
  - And God granted our desire.
    1. He removed us from the garden and separated Himself from us.
  - But freedom is not what we got.
    1. When we rejected God as our master, we voluntarily enslaved ourselves to a truly oppressive master.
    2. We enslaved ourselves to sin.
    3. We enslaved ourselves fear and anxiety.



4. We enslaved ourselves to mortality, pain, and death.
- ii. **See, in God's creation, we are all enslaved to something.**
    - This is why Jesus says in Matthew 6:24 -
      1. *"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."*
    - We all live our lives for something whether it be God, money, approval of others, fame, happiness....
      1. And whatever we live our lives for, that is our master.
      2. So, in rejecting God as our master, we voluntarily enslaved ourselves to another master.

### **e. But our God shows us the heart of a truly benevolent master.**

- i. Although he created us to be under his good and right authority...and although we revolted and demanded freedom from him...
  - He still came after us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- ii. God sends His Son Jesus to rescue us from our slavery to sin...and here is how he does it.
  - Matthew 20:25b-28 (CSB) -
    1. *"...You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them.<sup>26</sup> It must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant (diakonos),<sup>27</sup> and whoever wants to be*



*first among you must be your slave (doulos);<sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

- iii. In the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our true master becomes our servant so that we may be rescued from our sin, be reconciled to God, and go back to the joyful life of God being our master.
- Did you catch that...in the Gospel of Jesus Christ...the master becomes the servant.
  - Jesus comes and gives his own life as a sacrifice so that our sins may be forgiven and we could be made right with God.
    1. Our master! The King of Kings and the Lord of Lords does this for us.
    2. He gets on his knees and washes our feet.
    3. He allows his body to be broken.
    4. He allows his blood to be shed.
    5. So that we might be set free from our slavery to sin.
  - In the gospel, the master becomes the servant.

## **V. APPLYING BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**

**a. And so, when we use Biblical Theology and apply it to this topic of slavery in the Bible, what we see is a pattern.**

- i. What we see is a biblical theology of the use of authority and of the master/servant relationship emerge that we need to use to interpret these various texts that we are reading about slavery.



- So, when Paul commands masters to treat their slaves as Christ would in Ephesians 6...Paul is not just talking about their conduct...he is commanding them to be the kind of master that Jesus Christ is to us as demonstrated in the Gospel!

**b. And I think where we see this Biblical Theology practically applied in the Bible is the book of Philemon.**

- i. Philemon is a small letter written by the Apostle Paul to Philemon, who was a member of the church in Colossae.
  - Philemon was a master who had a slave named Onesimus.
    1. Onesimus had fled from Philemon's house and found his way to the Apostle Paul, who was in prison in Rome.
    2. And while Onesimus was with Paul, he had come to faith in Christ.
- ii. And Paul is writing this letter to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.
  - And Paul tells Philemon he is sending Onesimus back to him but tells Philemon to receive Onesimus back... (v.16-19)
    1. *"...no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. <sup>17</sup> So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. <sup>18</sup> If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it..."*



- iii. What we see Paul do here is demonstrate a Christ-like pattern of the master servant relationship.
  - Paul has authority over Philemon in his Apostleship and also Onesimus.
    1. We see Paul use his authority to serve those underneath him.
    2. He is willing to give of his own resources so that Onesimus might be free from any obligation.
    3. And Paul encourages Philemon to do the same by receiving back Onesimus as a brother and not a slave.
- iv. See, a proper biblical theology of the use of authority helps us to see that anytime someone is given authority in this world, that authority is to be used in such a way to serve those under your authority.
  - Because in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the master becomes the servant.

**c. Let's just veer away from slavery for just a second...all of us will be given authority over others at some point in our lives.**

- You might be parents with authority over your children.
- ...employees that report to you.
- ...volunteers on your team.
- ...students in your classroom.
- ...church members under your care.
- ...whatever it is.



- i. **If you have any authority...whether big or small...you as a Christ follower are called to use that authority to serve those under your authority.**
  - You as the master must become the servant.
- ii. **So, if you have children.**
  - God has called you to use your authority over your children to serve your children that they might flourish in this life.
- iii. **Husbands look at me...the Bible says that you are the head of your household...and your children and your wives must submit to you.**
  - This is not an endorsement of oppressive patriarchy,
  - This is not a privilege that you get to enjoy.
  - This is a responsibility where God has given you authority over your household that you might use that authority to serve your family.
  - This means you're the first to give up your rights so your family might flourish.
  - You're the first to give up what you want to spend money on and how you want to spend your time on the weekends in deference to what is best for your family.
  - You're the first to give your life so that your family may thrive.
  - To be the master of your household means you become the servant of your household.
  - You wake up everyday asking how you can serve and love your family, not thinking about what you need.
  - You can entrust that to your master in heaven.



- iv. Do you have employees that report to you at work?
- A Christ follower who carries authority in the workplace uses that authority to serve those underneath them.
    1. What this means is that you go to work every day not concerned about how you can make your own career flourish but how you are going to use your authority so that the careers of your employees may flourish.
    2. How are you going to encourage them?
    3. How are you going to develop them so they get better?
    4. How are you going to serve them so that they are better for being under your leadership?
    5. Don't go to work worried about your own career. Give that up and entrust it to your master in heaven. Spend your career serving your employees.
- v. That is the biblical pattern of use of authority.

- No matter what authority you have.

**d. See, I believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the most powerful anti-slavery force in the world because it transforms how we use authority.**

- i. And the proper application of the commands to slave masters in the New Testament are for those masters to wield their authority over their servants in the same way that Christ would.



- Do I believe that it was sinful to be a slave owner in the first century?
    1. I'm not an expert on it...but I do think that someone could be a slave-owner without sinning in the first century provided that that person used their authority so that their slaves might flourish...and what I mean by flourish is work themselves to a place economically where one could be set free not just to go into poverty but to support themselves without selling themselves into slavery again.
  - Do I believe that it was sinful to be a slave-owner in early America?
    1. Without question. That type of slavery was entirely oppressive, it targeted one ethnic group, and those people were forced into that slavery against their will.
    2. The only way I could see someone purchase slaves in early America in a godly way...meaning they would want to use their authority to serve...would be to purchase slaves with their money for the expressed purpose of purchasing the authority to set them free.
- ii. **See, the Bible is anti-slavery because the Bible has no category for the use of authority for selfish purposes.**
- A proper biblical theology of the use of authority is demonstrated to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ where the master becomes the servant.
  - And this is why in the letter to Philemon, we see this kind of direct application of Paul using his authority so that Onesimus might flourish and be set free.



## **VI. CONCLUSION**

### **a. So, this morning, I hope we have two take-aways.**

- i. First, I hope we all can walk away challenged to use the authority we have over others to serve them not to be served as Christ has done for us.
- ii. Second, I hope this was a helpful lesson in how the unity of the Bible as one story about God's redemption is the lens through which we must read and interpret the Bible.
  - We must view every single passage through the lens of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
  - Every passage is a part of that story.
  - Every passage is applied in accordance with that story.
- iii. And when we read the Bible with proper biblical theology...what we see is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the most powerful anti-slavery force in the world.
  - It is imperative that we demonstrate this in our own lives and the authority we carry.
    1. ...and we evangelize our nation and beyond.
  - Because only the gospel has the power to transform the oppressor.

## **VII. PRAY**

