



DOES THE BIBLE ENDORSE SLAVERY? EPHESIANS 6:5-9

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Our primary focus today is on the massively controversial issue of whether the Bible, and Ephesians 6:5-9 in particular, endorses slavery. What makes this such an important topic for us is the undeniable fact that largely due to the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, our country is perhaps now more racially divided than at any other time during our lifespan. Debate about the definition and presence of racism has reached an all-time high, sometimes erupting in tragic violence in our street

But before we dive into that topic, a few introductory words about our text today are in order.

It is quite clear that Paul understands those who are enslaved to be equal brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. They are Christians, no less so than those who are their masters. The first indication of this is in v. 5 where Paul says that slaves are to obey their earthly masters as they “would Christ.” We see this again in v. 6 where they are called “bondservants of Christ” who are called upon to do the “will of God from the heart.” Again, in v. 8 Paul says that slaves will be judged and rewarded no less so than those who are “free.” Finally, in v. 9 Paul clearly asserts that Christ Jesus is the “Master” not only of those who are free but also of the enslaved.

In Colossians 3:22 Paul says much the same thing. In fact, he exhorts slaves to obey their masters “with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.” Or consider Paul’s comments in Titus 2:9-10. There he encourages slaves to be submissive, showing all good faith, “so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.”

Slavery in the Ancient World vs. Slavery in the 19th Century

The challenge for us right from the start is that the terminology of “slave” and “master” is highly offensive. And the reason is that our concept of “slavery” today is quite different from what existed, for example, in the time of Paul when he wrote Ephesians 6:5-9. So let’s proceed carefully as we try to understand what the Bible actually says about this controversial topic. Needless to say, this is far from an exhaustive treatment.

It’s important to remember that slavery existed everywhere in the ancient world. It was, quite literally, *universal*. Over one third of the population of Rome in the first century were slaves. D. A. Carson cites the work of Thomas Sowell on this point:

“until the nineteenth century, slavery in one form or another had been part of every major civilization. Various Chinese dynasties had slaves; Indians had slaves; the dominant African tribes had slaves (substantial numbers of slaves sold to the Western world and to the Persian Gulf were sold by other Africans); the Israelites had slaves; the Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans all had slaves. The major ‘barbarian’ tribes of Europe had slaves. The Arab world had slaves. So there is a sense in which, from the vantage of history until about two centuries ago, the phenomenon of slavery was not itself viewed as shocking” (Love in Hard Places, 89-90).

This is not to say that slavery was therefore good or morally permissible. It is simply to point out that ***the presence of slavery in the world of the NT was not a historical novelty.***

Immediately upon hearing the word “slaves” we run into a problem. People today can’t think of that word without associating it with the racial, chattel slavery that was so prevalent in the early years of America until the Civil War. The enslavement of black people in this country is such a reprehensible and nauseating chapter in our history that steps have been taken by English translators of the Bible to remove it entirely. That is why you see in the ESV the word “bondservants” instead of the word “slaves.” Few people will flinch when they hear that term, but “slaves” is another matter.

We must remember that the slavery that existed in the ancient world, especially in Paul’s day, ***rarely if ever had anything to do with race.*** The color of one’s skin was irrelevant when it came to the issue of slavery in the first century. In the period of 3000 BC to 400 AD, slavery was *never* based on race or class. The vast majority of slaves were white, not black. No single ethnic group was associated with slave status or with the descendants of slaves.

Slavery was almost entirely the result of **military conquest or economic indebtedness**. A conquered people could be enslaved by their enemies and forced to work in service to them. More often, when an individual incurred massive amounts of debt that couldn't be repaid, he could actually sell himself into slavery to his debtor until such time as his labor paid off the amount he owed.

Others were slaves because they were born of slaves. But in general, they were well-treated. Yes, there were instances of brutality and oppression, but many of the sort of people Paul addresses were educated and professionally trained and were often paid for their services. They could even purchase their freedom. Provision was also made that once a slave reached the age of 30 he/she could be set free.

Another thing to remember is that slavery in the ancient world never suggested the moral or intellectual inferiority of the enslaved. Slaves were often quite well educated and extremely competent. There was never the thought that one was subjected to slavery because they lacked human dignity or worth or were in some sense of an inferior quality of existence. So please put out of your mind altogether any link between Paul's use of the word in Ephesians and the race-based slavery that provoked our Civil War here in America.

Many slaves became quite skilled as "doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries and sea captains" (Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 123). It was not uncommon for a liberated slave to be granted Roman citizenship

But let's not paint too rosy a picture! Slavery was still, in most cases, involuntary and their legal rights and economic choices were greatly limited in comparison with those who were free. To be bought and sold like an animal, at any time in history, is horribly degrading and a violation of a person's right to be treated with dignity as created in the image of God.

Progressive Revelation

In order to better understand the perspective of the Bible, we must recognize what is known as **progressive revelation**. This simply means that **God does not always reveal his full and final will to us all at once, but instead he does so gradually, incrementally, over a long period of time**. The content of God's revealed will in a very real sense grows. It develops from early seed form into the full flower in the NT. So, we must be careful that we don't pull a single verse out of its context and then assume that this is what God intended for all of human history.

When God did reveal himself and his will to his people, he often would accommodate his revelation to particular cultural and historical contexts. In other words, as Paul Copan explains,

"Sinai legislation makes a number of moral improvements without completely overhauling ancient Near Eastern social structures and assumptions. God 'works with' Israel as he finds her. He meets his people where they are while seeking to show them a higher ideal in the context of ancient Near Eastern life. . . [Thus] Given certain fixed assumptions in the ancient Near East, God didn't impose legislation that Israel wasn't ready for. He moved *incrementally*" (*Is God a Moral Monster?* 61).

The Mosaic Law was designed to help God's covenant people, Israel, live in the midst of a perverse and wicked world. God's instruction to Israel was thus often adapted to this reality to enable them to survive amidst the pagan nations that surrounded them. Again, Copan is helpful:

"God didn't banish all fallen, flawed, ingrained social structures when Israel wasn't ready to handle the ideals. Taking into account the *actual*, God encoded more *feasible* laws, though he directed his people toward moral improvement. He condescended by giving Israel a jumping-off place, pointing them to a better path. . . In fact, Israel's laws reveal dramatic moral improvements over the practices of the other ancient Near Eastern peoples. God's act of incrementally 'humanizing' ancient Near Eastern structures for Israel meant diminished harshness and an elevated status of debt-servants, even if certain negative customs weren't fully eliminated" (61).

This means that often times God's revealed will served to **regulate and restrain immoral behavior rather than immediately and instantaneously abolish it**. God tolerated or permitted polygamy in Israel, but never endorsed it as the ideal toward which people should strive. God tolerated and permitted divorce for a variety of reasons in the OT, but did not endorse it. That is why when Jesus was asked about the grounds for divorce, he said: "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:8).

What this means is that *Scripture is known to regulate undesirable relationships without condoning them as permanent ideals* (see Matt. 19:8; 1 Cor. 6:1-8). Paul's recommendation for how slaves and masters relate to each other does not assume the goodness of the institution.

We must also recognize the difference between what is *described* in Scripture and what is *prescribed* in Scripture. In other words, often times certain practices are simply described or portrayed as occurring without any suggestion that what is described is good. We must never think that everything recorded in Scripture is designed to tell us how to behave or how to believe. We read in the book of Job of the counsel of his friends, most of which was in error about the nature of God. Simply because the Spirit records for us in Scripture the beliefs of Job's counselors does not mean we are to believe what they said about God. The author of the book simply *describes their beliefs without endorsing them* (see Job 42:7-8).

Someone might still object and say, "Okay, even if we agree that we are dealing in most cases with a less egregious form of slavery, and that perhaps God is accommodating his revelation within a historical context, I still don't understand why the Bible doesn't say *more* against slavery and simply abolish it altogether." That's a perfectly legitimate question.

One answer is that *the authors of the NT, including Paul, were reluctant to call for immediate social or military action to overthrow unjust cultural structures lest they be the cause of civil and social unrest*. The early church was an oppressed people, living largely under Roman rule and law. Therefore, they chose not to advocate social upheaval that might potentially smear the reputation of the gospel. So it is clear that *Paul is adapting to a temporary and ultimately repugnant social construct*.

Another response to the question is that the authors of the NT, and Paul in particular, did go to great lengths to articulate principles that would eventually undermine and abolish any and all forms of slavery. His strategy was to teach a theological perspective that sowed the seeds for the end of slavery; a spiritual atmosphere, if you will, incompatible with slavery and thus one in which slavery would eventually die out.

Although the preceding observations may not fully satisfy our expectations, we must be willing to submit to the wisdom and authority of Scripture and God's way of addressing problematic topics and challenging ethical issues.

*Sowing the Spiritual Seeds that Ultimately Undermined Slavery:
The NT's proclamation of the gospel laid the foundation for the eventual dissolution of slavery*

The Lord and the church did not choose revolution to solve the problem of slavery, but by means of spiritual principles they undermined the very foundations of slavery. In other words, whereas the NT never commands Christians to free their slaves, and thus never fans the flame of violent revolution, it teaches principles that would result in a cultural reformation that would abolish slavery (Andy Naselli). As F. F. Bruce puts it, "What this letter [Philemon] does is to bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution (of slavery) could only wilt and die."

What do we mean when we say that the NT sows the seeds for the abolition of slavery? Simply read and reflect on these verses and ask yourself: Can slavery survive belief in and the application of these statements?

"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" (Gal. 3:28).

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

"Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

"Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity). 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 Cor. 7:21-22).

"Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another" (Eph. 4:25).

"Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11).

"[Paul rebukes] the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers [i.e., those who take someone captive in order to sell him into slavery], liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:10; clearly, Paul condemns slave trading).

"For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant [slave] 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" (Philemon 15-17).

There is simply no way that slavery can exist when Christians obey these commands.

Murray J. Harris, a professor emeritus of New Testament, in his book *Slave of Christ*, distinguishes ancient slavery from modern states:

"In the first century, slaves were not distinguishable from free persons by race, by speech, by clothing; they were sometimes more highly educated than their owners and held responsible professional positions; some persons sold themselves into slavery for economic or social advantage; they could reasonably hope to be emancipated [freed] after 10 to 20 years of service or by their thirties at the latest; they were not denied the right of public assembly and were not socially segregated (at least in the cities); they could accumulate savings to buy their freedom; their natural inferiority was not assumed."

That might sit uncomfortably with us. You might prefer a command for Christian slave masters to free their slaves. And that may well have happened in particular circumstances (kidnapping etc.).

Regardless, here's the point: being in Christ was to fundamentally revolutionize a master's treatment of his bondservants. Knowing that many slaves were also Christians required that they be treated as people and not merely property.

Slavery in the Old Testament

The Mosaic law had a built-in obsolescence. It was never designed by God to be permanent. By its own testimony, it was inferior to and anticipatory of a greater law and greater covenant that was to come (see Jer. 31:31–34). Thus, ***it's a mistake to think of Old Testament laws as a permanent set of timeless ideals***. The law doesn't necessarily reflect God's approval of the behavior that he seeks to regulate. The question most often asked is this: ***Why didn't Moses in the OT and Paul and other NT writers insist on the immediate abolishment of all forms of institutional slavery?*** That's a good question. We must acknowledge that the Mosaic Law regulated slavery in such a way that it was far more humane than the way it existed in surrounding pagan nations. Moses insisted that slaves be set free every seventh year:

"When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing" (Exod. 21:1; see also Lev. 25:39–43; Deut. 15:12).

The Law of Moses also commanded the death penalty for manstealing (Exod. 21:16) and generally sought to limit the institution in protection of the slave.

Slavery in ancient Israel wasn't founded on racism or human theft (see Exod. 21:6) but on economic considerations. In a subsistence economy, if you couldn't repay your debts, becoming a bondservant was one way to survive.

Israelites couldn't mistreat slaves however they wanted. In fact, often times they would have worked alongside their servants (rather than having servants do their work for them). While slaves were often referred to as "property," this language didn't imply that they had no rights or value. In fact, unlike pagan nations of the ancient world, Old Testament law contained provisions to protect slaves from mistreatment. For example, other ancient law codes had prohibitions against harming someone else's slaves, but the Old Testament contained penalties for harming your own servant (Exod. 21:26–27).

Leviticus 25:44–46 allowed the Israelites to acquire foreign slaves.

[44] As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. [45] You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. [46] You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly. (Lev. 25:44–46)

However, the language of “buying” or “purchasing” in this passage doesn’t refer to human theft, and the basis for acquiring foreign slaves had nothing to do with racial or cultural superiority. The basis for this was economic. If we read a bit further, we see that Israelites could themselves become slaves to foreigners living among them.

[47] “If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you or to a member of the stranger’s clan, [48] then after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him, [49] or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him. Or if he grows rich he may redeem himself. (Lev. 25:47–49)

Paul’s approach to Slavery in his Letter to Philemon

Before we look at the short letter to Philemon, we need to take note of Ephesians 6:9. There Paul prohibits a master “threatening” his slave. It only makes sense that if a master could not *threaten* his slave with violence, he could not *perpetrate* violence on him. Roman law may well have allowed masters to beat their slaves, but the law of Christ absolutely prohibits it.

It’s important once again to remind ourselves that slavery in the NT was not race-based. But slavery in the American South in the 19th century most assuredly was. Scripture clearly and universally condemns anyone who would treat another person as less than human because of their ethnicity. All mankind are created in God’s image and must be treated accordingly. Every person, regardless of race, bears the image of God and should be treated with dignity and honor.

You may wish that the NT would have commanded an armed revolution to banish slavery altogether. But it doesn’t. Instead, the authors of the NT describe a King and his kingdom that will one day overthrow all unjust authorities, principal among which is the practice of slavery in all its forms.

The clearest example of this is the short book of Philemon. Philemon owned a slave by the name of Onesimus. Many believe Onesimus stole money from Philemon. In any case, Onesimus ran away and made his way to Rome where he became a Christian and came into contact and relationship with Paul. If the Bible were in any sense pro-slavery, it would make sense for Paul to order Onesimus to return to Philemon and make restitution to his master and to obey him. But instead, Paul asks Philemon to receive him back **“no longer as a bondservant (slave) but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother; . . . so . . . receive him as you would receive me”** (Philemon 16–17).

This put Paul in something of a pickle. He had a choice to make. Do I send Onesimus back to Philemon and thereby lose a valuable ministry partner? According to Roman law, a person could not employ or provide aid to a runaway slave. But according to the Mosaic law a Jew cannot send a runaway slave back to his master (Deut. 23:15–16). On the other hand, if Paul should choose not to send him back, he runs the risk of offending Philemon. Paul could easily have exerted his apostolic authority and ordered Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom. But he didn’t.

He sends Onesimus back to Philemon with an appeal to release him and send him back to Paul in Rome. That is precisely what happened. According to Colossians 4:9, Onesimus eventually returned to his home base in Colossae and became a leader of the church there. In that verse Paul describes Onesimus as “our faithful and beloved brother.”

In other words, he tells Philemon, don’t look at Onesimus as your slave. Look on him as your brother in Christ. Slavery as a cultural and social institution was still in place, but Christians should no longer treat one another on that basis but as equal brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul’s point is that the logic of the gospel stands opposed to any and all forms of slavery. That is why he envisions and actually encourages slaves to obtain their freedom if the opportunity arises (1 Cor. 7:21–23).

Let's pause at this point and read what Paul wrote to Philemon:

[8] Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, [9] yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—[10] I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. [11] (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) [12] I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. [13] I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, [14] but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. [15] For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, [16] 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.

[17] So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. [18] If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. [19] I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. [20] Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

[21] Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Paul first tells Philemon that if Onesimus owes Philemon money, “charge that to my account” (v. 18). In other words, Paul offers to pay what Onesimus owes. Furthermore, most believe that the “even more” that Paul believes Philemon will do refers to his giving Onesimus his freedom.

The letter to Philemon is a request for him to treat Onesimus as a brother in Christ. Paul is clearly asking for something far more radical than freedom for Onesimus. He's urging Philemon to join as a partner with Onesimus in ministry, so that in this new relationship, the terms “slave” and “master” are transcended. Now, Onesimus and Philemon are equal brothers in Christ.

Philemon did not steal or kidnap Onesimus. In 1 Timothy 1:10 Paul clearly condemns the practice of what he calls “man stealing” or kidnapping. If Philemon had been guilty of this, Paul would no doubt have severely rebuked him for it. Onesimus in all likelihood had agreed to be a slave for a period of time, most likely to pay an outstanding debt he owed to Philemon. But before he had repaid the full amount, he ran away, and in this way he robbed Philemon. But regardless of the circumstances, Paul clearly laid the foundation for equality in the church.

Paul did not advocate for the termination of slavery Empire wide, nor for anything approaching today's insistence on so-called social justice. Instead, he did something far more radical. He preached the gospel and trusted it to work supernaturally in society and in Philemon's heart. So let's conclude by hearing yet one more time the glorious good news which tells us that when it comes to approaching Christ Jesus in faith and receiving all the benefits that he died to secure, “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” (Gal. 3:28).



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