

# Slaves and Masters

Ephesians 6:5 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.

(Eph 6:5-9)

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## The Hostess City of the South

[Savannah](#), Georgia. Oldest city in Georgia, first planned city in the United States. Founded in 1733, it is nicknamed the “[Hostess City of the South](#).” Its beautiful squares, antebellum (“before the war”) architecture, and one of the largest National Historic Landmark Districts in the nation attract millions of tourists a year. Savannah is the home of

Christ Church, the “Mother Church of Georgia.” Established in the same year that Georgia became a state, its famous early rectors include both John Wesley and George Whitefield. It is a city steeped in southern Christian hospitality.

It is also a state steeped in slavery. For nearly 50 years, from 1751-1798 when it was finally outlawed, tens of thousands of Africans were imported to the states through Savannah, where they were sold in the open streets to the highest bidder only after confining them to quarantined buildings where many died of diseases, just as many of their brothers did on the long voyage over, when so many were so brutally contained under the ships and often unceremoniously tossed over the railing into the sea because they were sick or dead. If they were healthy, they made it auction where they could expect a life of involuntary servitude, separated from family and friends, working in whatever conditions the master wished for the rest of their lives.

Slave selling continued right up to the end of the civil war. Perhaps the largest mass sale of enslaved Africans in US history took place in Savannah on March 2-3, 1859 when Pierce M. Butler sold 436 men, women, and children in a

breakup of families that became known simply as “[the weeping time](#),” not merely for the sorrow of the people, but because it was said that the sky opened up and poured down rain for the entirety of the two-day auction, for they said the heavens were weeping at the inhumanity being committed. A story is told on a monument in Franklin Square (I can’t remember if it was at this time or not) of a man whose family was sold in front of him, and he put up such a ruckus that they beat him to death right there on the street.

Perhaps an [even worse](#) event took place just one year earlier. In what historian Jim Jordan calls, “[One of the most brazen crimes of the \[19<sup>th</sup>\] century](#),”<sup>1</sup> on December 2, 1858, [Charles Lamar](#) illegally imported 409 blacks, an acceptable loss of only 20% from the 487 that set out west Africa. What’s 78 negroes dead when you have 400 more? At any rate, this was the first successful smuggling of Africans in the United States for close to forty years, and he stood to make a fortune.

Someone has said of Lamar, “[If the word scoundrel ever truly applied to an individual, Lamar would be that](#)

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<sup>1</sup> [Jim Jordan](#), *The Slave Trader’s Letter-Book: Charles Lamar, The Wanderer, and Other Takes of the African Slave Trade* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 1.

person.”<sup>2</sup> A Savannah-born businessman of dubious dealings and deep in debt, Lamar decided to purchase *the Wanderer*, one of the fastest vessels on the high seas, in order to illegally import Africans in an attempt to reopen the Atlantic Slave Trade which had been outlawed by Congress some 50 years earlier. One he made land-fall, *word quickly spread* what was happening. Within a couple of months, authorities arrested three of the crew and tried them along with several of the partners, including Lamar, in a federal district court in Savannah. However, the prosecutors could *not gain even a single guilty verdict* related to the importation. In fact, the man acted “*with brazen defiance during the legal proceedings, even plotting other illegal slaving voyages.*”<sup>3</sup>

Everyone today knows the wickedness that was slavery in America. What is so troubling is how you could have this *Christian ethos side-by-side with African slavery*. In fact, it is even more than an ethos. Often brought up in this respect are people like the Southern Presbyterians of the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Kristopher Monroe*, “SavArtScene: Historian Uncovers Illegal Slave-Trader of Savannah’s Dubious Dealings,” *Savannah Now* (Mar 17, 2018), <https://www.savannahnow.com/entertainmentlife/20180317/savartscene-historian-uncovers-illegal-slave-trader-of-savannahs-dubious-dealings>.

<sup>3</sup> *Jonathan W. White*, “Trader’s Letter-Book (2018),” *The Civil War Monitor* (5-2-2018), <https://www.civilwarmonitor.com/blog/jordan-ed-the-slave-traders-letter-book-2018>.

century who vigorously defended the American institution of slavery.<sup>4</sup> Their arguments are biblical. Their arguments are rational. Their arguments are not taken seriously today, perhaps in part because they lost.

But this is a real problem. In fact, it has **recently hit close to home** for me as a friend of mine has been struggling with the issue of slavery in the Bible so much that he is literally turning his back on the Faith he grew up with and was even recently teaching from the pulpit. He says, because of this issue, he can no longer believe in God. His basic argument is this. If God is **All-Powerful**, couldn't he have stopped slavery once-and-for-all? If he is **All-Good**, why would he allow Moses to incorporate the practice into the Law? I mean, he is make a brand new law-code. Why not just tell Moses that all slavery is forbidden because it is inherently wicked? Even more, not only is the practice condoned in

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<sup>4</sup> For example, **Robert L. Dabney**, *A Defence of Virginia, and through Her, of the South, in Recent and Pending Contests against the Sectional Party* (New York: E. J. Hale & Son, 1867); **James Henley Thornwell**, *The Rights and the Duties of Masters: A Sermon Preached at the Dedication of a Church* (Charleston, SC: Walker & James, 1850).

**Going Deeper.** In that speech, Thornwell made the following famous provocative point, “**The parties in this conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders—they are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, jacobins, on the one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battle ground—Christianity and Atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity the stake.**” Never mind the likes of William Wilberforce or Charles Spurgeon, who was almost killed when he came to the South. The hard facts of slavery are that it was a profoundly economic and political as it was religious. Even today, we see the institution through as political of eyes as we do religious. Perhaps even more so! Even we are not able to be as objective about it as we should.

the OT, it is never condemned in the NT. This is precisely what we are looking at this morning.

## Slaves and Masters in Ephesians

**Ephesians 6:5-9** is one of the longer sections of the NT that deals with slavery. As we have seen, it is part of the so-called “household code” that began at the end of the last chapter. In it, Paul talks about various relationships in the house. First, he singles out **wives and husbands**. Next, he goes to **children and fathers**. Finally, he moves to **slaves and masters**.

The text is straight-forward. **Vv. 5-8** address **slaves**, or what the ESV calls “**bondservants**” (we’ll look at that later). **Vs. 9** addresses **masters**. Slaves are given one command. It is the same given to children: “**Obey**” (*hupakouo*). Perhaps because this is such a difficult command, he takes the next four verses to unpack it. On the other hand, to the masters he says, “**do the same to them**” (9). The question becomes, what does this mean?

The nearest referent is “whatever good anyone does” (8).<sup>5</sup> Thus, he would be commanded here to do whatever good he can to the slave. However, it is possible to see it referring back to the obedience, not that the master is somehow supposed to obey the slave, but that he is to obey his Master, the Lord Jesus.<sup>6</sup> It is to be, as we will see later, that both are to act in accordance with the mind of Christ in love towards one another.

But just here is where my friend would say we run back into our problem. For how can there be any “love” in God in commanding anything other than obliteration towards an institution that is inherently immoral? To answer this, we are going to take a rather lengthy detour. Another reason why is honestly because in our culture, at least in the sense that Paul is dealing with, we simply do not have slaves and masters any more. It isn't that we can't apply it, but we have to apply it very differently. However, this larger question is looming regarding the very idea of the

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<sup>5</sup> William J. Larkin, *Ephesians: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 153.

<sup>6</sup> Chrysostom on Eph 6.9. “*The same things*. What are these? “With good-will do service.” However he does not actually say, “do service,” though by saying, “the same things,” he plainly shows this to be his meaning. For the master himself is a servant. “Not as men-pleasers,” he means, “and with fear and trembling”: that is, toward God, fearing lest He one day accuse you for your negligence toward your slaves.” Lincoln thinks it refers to the attitude, but it amounts to the same thing. See Lincoln, 423.

institution in the first place. So let's turn to consider the idea of slavery in general.

## Preliminary Thoughts

Before looking at the institution itself, let me make to preliminary comments. First, [difficult questions](#) like this certainly do arise from the Bible; slavery is not the only hard question we have to deal with. But you should also remember, this is hardly unique to the Bible. Every worldview has its seeming (and often real) absurdities.

I would argue that every other worldview has many more of them than Christianity does, because Christianity is true, because Christ raised himself from the dead and proved that he is God. I do not say this to try to soften the difficulty with slavery, but it's still a fact. For instance, the whole idea that absolutely [everything](#) came from absolutely [nothing](#), that order, beauty, and natural laws came from mindless unthinking chaotic chance ([Atheism](#)), is absurd. The idea that such an origin to the universe should then give us some kind of sense of objective right and wrong by which we are to be outraged about things like slavery in the first



place is absurd. Why should an atheist care at all about slavery in the first place? And that's just one worldview.

**Second**, perhaps the biggest mistake people make is that they **assume, without argument**, that the very idea of slavery is inherently wicked. If you assume something without an argument, it is called a presupposition, and there's no arguing with those. In this case, the presupposition enters a person into a deadly duel with God and his Word, and only one can come out the victor. For this presupposition is **contradictory** to the fact that God's word does not, *per se*, ever condemn slavery. Which will win out?

To deal with this, you have to consider what is the **proper stance towards God's Word**. If Jesus rose from the dead, and he did, and he did this by his own prediction and power, which he both said before hand he would do and then proved by doing it, then he is God. Furthermore, if Jesus claimed to be the Word, the Name, the Glory, the Angel, the Right Hand of God, and more from the OT, that is the figure that all of the saints in the OT worshiped, and he proved it, which he did, then he is God. Finally, if this same Jesus **gave the law to Moses** in the OT, and he did, and he is God, then we are obliged as

the creation is to the Creator to give the benefit of the doubt on a subject like slavery when our minds are not readily understanding why he permits it.

This is a **basic posture towards the Scripture** that I am advocating. It is a posture of extending grace, a posture that refuses to pass condemning judgment, a posture that remains humble in the face of extraordinarily difficult topics. In other words, it assumes that I am not the final arbiter of right and wrong, but God is. It assumes that God knows what he is doing. It assumes that I do not. It assumes that perhaps I do not know all that there is to know, but God does.

What it doesn't do is **pretend** that answers are necessarily easy—easy to understand or easy for me to hear. It doesn't wave a magic wand and pretend that there aren't actually hard things in God's word. Nor does it suppose that I may at the end of the day I will necessarily find a satisfactory answer to my question. I may well not. It does, however, believe that there are answers, that God knows them, that we can certainly come to a better understanding, almost always satisfying, and that all that he does is by definition both just and good.

My question to you is, therefore, what is your posture towards God's word? Do you stand in judgment over God, putting God in the dock as C. S. Lewis put it? Is he **on trial** and you are his Judge, Jury, and Executioner? If so, then you have not come to see both the immense **power** that this God has, nor the greater **love and grace** that he has shown to you every day of your sinful, rebellious life towards him. Nor have you contemplated hard enough just what this God did to **overcome** your rebellion to bridge that hostility and infinite distance that exists between you and him for your sin. You have not thought of the cost to him. You have not thought long enough nor hard enough on the one who shows us the very face of God in his person, the **Lord Jesus** who is the Yes and Amen to all things. You have not considered well enough his **death** that he did not deserve nor his **resurrection** that no man could stop, nor his **ascension** which gives him all authority in heaven and earth. I bid you to do that now, to bow your knee to King Jesus, to put your faith in him and to follow him all the days of your life. Faith means that sometimes I need to let him do the leading even when I do not understand. Become his disciple, do not make him be yours. Fear the Lord and it will be for you the beginning of wisdom and knowledge.

# Slavery in the Bible

With that now behind us, we need to take a sober look at slavery. The most important thing I can tell you about slavery in the Bible is that you must not import modern American ideas of the kind of slavery that was engaged in here to that. Someone has put it this way, “The term ‘slavery’ in the modern western [meaning] has been influenced by the course of the African slave trade and its ultimate manifestation in the American South. For Americans in particular, then, caution must be exercised in discussing slavery in the context of antiquity.”<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, you can’t compare biblical slavery to the forms of slavery practiced in places like Greece and Rome. They were very different things.<sup>8</sup> Slavery in ancient Greece and Rome was a complex thing, but in general slaves in the Hellenistic-Roman period were their owners’ chattel.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dexter E. Callender, “Servants of God(s) and Servants of Kings in Israel and the Ancient Near East,” ed. Allen Dwight Callahan, et al., *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 68 [67-82].

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin G. Wright, III, “Ebed/Doulos: Terms and Social Status in the Meeting of Hebrew Biblical and Hellenistic Roman Culture,” ed. Allen Dwight Callahan, et al., *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 83 [83-111]; see Richard A. Horsley, “The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and Their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars,” ed. Allen Dwight Callahan, et al., *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 19-65.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, III, 87.

“Chattel” is something that is someone else’s property. It is a very dehumanizing concept when applied to people. In these countries, the slave owned nothing, generally had no independent legal rights, and was obligated to do as his/her master commanded. Failure to obey meant discipline or punishment as the master saw fit.<sup>10</sup> This is very similar to the American concept, except that America and Europe went a step further than even Rome and Greece (at least generally speaking) **by kidnapping people** from another continent against their will.

On the other hand, **in Israel** and the neighboring countries, they **never had** the enormous gangs of chattel slaves that you find in Greece and Rome. Nor was the position of the slave ever so low in Israel or the ANE as in Rome, where Varro could define a slave as ‘**a sort of talking tool.**’<sup>11</sup> Even when true chattel slavery did exist, these slaves were **regarded as human beings** possessing basic inalienable rights, as you find in all the law codes, from Hammurabi to Moses.<sup>12</sup>

Slavery in Israel also had literally **nothing to do with race**. People who became slaves usually did so because they

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Callender, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 69.

needed to pay off a debt (as we will see below with the whole idea of an [indentured servant](#)), or often they were the losers of a particular war. But this was not a racist practice rooted in a belief that someone else is inherently sub-human because of the color of their skin.

Furthermore, in the ANE, “[everyone who has a ‘lord’ is automatically a ‘slave’ of that lord.](#)”<sup>13</sup> Everyone. Thus, whereas the opposite of “[slave](#)” to us is “[free](#),” the opposite of “[slave](#)” to them was [Lord](#), and all of them were viewed as semi-free serfs.<sup>14</sup> A “serf” is an agricultural laborer in a feudal system who works on his lord’s estate. Applied to religion, this means that anyone who worshiped a god or The God was considered a slave of that God, by definition. And since virtually everyone did, virtually everyone was considered a slave. And so we see this as long ago as [Herodotus](#) (484-425 BC) to someone more recent like [Karl Marx](#) say, [everybody is someone’s slave.](#)<sup>15</sup> Even [Jesus](#) is called the “[servant](#)” of the Lord, and the word that is used is the identical word that we find in Mosaic laws on slavery.

Obviously then, in thinking about this issue, it is imperative that we do not impose our understanding back

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Callender, 69.

on the Bible. Just as obvious should be the fact that slavery as a term in and of itself cannot necessarily be an evil word. It certainly can become that, but not in and of itself. **You have to figure out what is being said** about slavery in order to make that determination.

In the Hebrew Bible, the most common biblical word used for a slave is *‘ebed*. As I said, this is the same word Jesus is called in Isaiah’s Suffering Servant chapters. In its basic biblical meaning someone is called *‘ebed* who is **in a subservient relationship to another**. That’s it. This relationship does not have to be one of ownership, but can apply to a god and those who serve him/her, a king and his subjects including his mercenaries, officers, ministers, and even his wives, sons, and brothers. Essentially, it is a social superior and inferior relationship.<sup>16</sup> The Greek *doulos* also has a very wide range of meaning.

When thinking more properly about what ***we would call slavery***, the Hebrew word did not refer to what we think of, chattel kidnapped from another land, given no rights, and who are destined to a life of affliction, poverty, and forced-labor under the worst possible conditions. Rather, it was something more akin to **a debt-slave** or an

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<sup>16</sup> Wright, III, 85–86; Callender, 73.

indentured servant, and they often took care of households.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps you remember from school what an **indentured servant** was. These were people, at the beginning almost always white Europeans, who desperately wanted to **come to the new world**. However, they could not afford a ticket. Thus, **they sold themselves** for a period of time (usually 3-7) years to a master whom they would work for under contract in exchange for safe passage. The bargain ended in their being released as free-men and often included the master giving them land of their own.

In theory, there is nothing wrong with this idea. In fact, to be blunt, this is basically **what we all do today**, except that we do it in a more indirect way (as this practice is, after all, illegal now). We grow up, leave our house, and have to make a living of our own. Thus, most people go out into the workforce and willingly sell themselves to an employer, promising to do whatever they desire in exchange for money which makes it possible for us to feed and clothe and shelter ourselves, and, hopefully a lot more. Many people utterly hate their jobs, which goes to show just how close to this ancient practice what so many do today is.

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin G. Wright, III, “Ebed/Doulos: Terms and Social Status in the Meeting of Hebrew Biblical and Hellenistic Roman Culture,” ed. Allen Dwight Callahan, et al., *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 86.



Now, clearly, [we have a better system](#) than they did. We have capitalism and a free market and a free society that lets us quit and find another job and move whenever we wish. We are not obliged to one person for a specified period of time, unless perhaps, we decide to go into [professional sports](#) where “owners” (a term now under attack by the “woke” crowd) buy us for a period of time.

Furthermore, [human depravity](#) being what it is, the whole business of indenturing yourself to someone very quickly turned wicked. In fact, indentured servants were often treated *worse* than African slaves. They were cheaper and so the owner had less invested. They were allowed to go free at which period of time the owner had to give them land. Under these circumstances, it isn't hard to see how the practice ended up killing more of the indentured than the slavery we think of did to the Africans. But that's the nature of the human heart, isn't it?

This is precisely why the [Mosaic law says so much about slavery](#). As I've said, slavery is not in and of itself a wicked thing, any more than going to work for an employer is wicked. What *is* wicked is *the abuse* of the thing and the human propensity to turn other humans into our own chattel. Therefore, what you need are laws, laws protecting

the rights of the slave. That's what Justice does. That's what Love does. It doesn't outlaw neutral things; it puts limits on their abuses.

Let's think about **some of these laws**. **First**, the Law will not tolerate a Hebrew owning another Hebrew as chattel. In fact, they were required to try to redeem fellow Jews who had been enslaved in this way. Even when they did own a fellow Israelite who had willingly entered into this arrangement, Moses commanded that he had to be set free on the seventh year (**Ex 21:2**). This was not optional. That should tell you something about the way God views the whole idea of dehumanizing someone else.

**Second**, non-Hebrews could be used as slaves, but their status was better than the chattel slaves of Greek and Roman slave systems.<sup>18</sup> For example, **Gen 17:12–13** requires foreign slaves to be circumcised, and circumcised slaves are permitted to participate in the Passover meal. Circumcised slaves of priests are permitted to eat the priestly rations (**Lev 22:11**). Thus, the foreign slave is at the same time property and **a dependent member of the household**.<sup>19</sup> He was also not someone who had been

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<sup>18</sup> Callahan, 84 n. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, III, 86.

kidnapped. Moses commanded the death penalty for manstealing (Ex 21:16). That would have done away with the entire American and European Slave Trade before it ever began. Even more, you can go to prophets like Amos who sharply indict their own people who had become wealthy creditors because “they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals” (Amos 2:6). In other words, you have to realize that the existence of slavery is not the same thing as the condoning of it, even in biblical times, and even in the Law of Moses. God lets us do all kinds of immoral things and he doesn’t immediately send us all to hell because he is merciful to us. But his Law is holy, and it behooves each of us to figure out what makes a law holy when we don’t particularly see it at the time.<sup>20</sup>

As we make our way to the NT and Paul, it is good to mention that in ancient Israel and the ANE generally speaking, debt-slaves and indentured servants were used primarily in small numbers in households, not in mass

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<sup>20</sup> I would recommend two articles that I consulted online, with some hesitancy in that I think they both probably give too much ground to the implicit notion that slavery is inherently evil. This hurts their apologetic value to some degree. See Gavin Ortlund, “Why It’s Wrong to Say the Bible Is Pro-Slavery,” *The Gospel Coalition* (June 7, 2018), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-wrong-say-bible-pro-slavery/>; Sam Storms, “10 Things You Should Know About Slavery In The Bible,” *Sam Storms* (Feb 18, 2019), <https://www.samstorms.com/enjoying-god-blog/post/10-things-you-should-know-about-slavery-in-the-bible>.

numbers as laborers who worked large agricultural estates or mines.<sup>21</sup> By the very nature of the work, they were therefore treated and viewed as fellow humans. They were not pure-property.

## Ephesians, Slaves, and Masters

In fact, this takes us full circle to our text in Ephesians. We are in the “household codes.” The slaves in mind here are members of a Christian *household*. Presumably, they are therefore Christians. Paul does tell them things like they are to obey him “as you would Christ” (Eph 6:5) or “as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart” (6) or “as to the Lord and not to man” (7). This should tell you how Paul views slaves in another way. He does not think them sub-human, lacking intelligence or an inability to think or to will. These are people who have submitted to the will of Christ, God has saved them, and he views them therefore as brothers.

You can see this better in the short little book of Philemon. In that letter, Paul is writing to Philemon, a slave owner. He is writing about one of his runaway slaves, a man

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<sup>21</sup> Wright, III, 86.

named Onesimus. Onesimus, it so happens, ran into a bunch of Christians, including Paul himself, probably when he was himself imprisoned in Rome for being a “slave” of Christ (**Eph 3:1**).

In the letter, Paul exhorts Philemon to receive Onesimus when he returns “no longer as a slave ... but as a dear brother” (**Philemon 16**), even telling him to “receive him as you would receive me” (**17**). This is similar to the OT rules concerning Jews to fellow Jews. What Paul is doing is “dissolving the slave/master relationship, and erecting in its place a brother/brother relationship, in which the former slave is treated with all the dignity with which the apostle himself would be treated.”<sup>22</sup> This isn’t being one outside the church, but inside it. **We are not to behave like the world**. This is the power and dignity that the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings into a dark world. As Orland says, “Even before the actual institution of slavery is abolished, the work of the gospel abolishes the assumptions and prejudices that make slavery possible.”

Critically, this is **not just some kind of “progressive revelation”** going on, where somehow the NT writers are slightly more enlightened (though still not fully enough so

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<sup>22</sup> Orland.

to eradicate the institution) than the OT saints were. No. **The very same principles** are present right there in the Law of Moses. For instance, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, when Moses gives an option for a divorce to not merely a woman, but a *slave-woman*, he is implicitly giving her dignity as a human being, dignity that comes because “**you were slaves in Egypt.**”

It is not the job of Scripture to overthrow neutral institutions that human beings corrupt. Rather, it is the job of Scripture to teach us about the redemption that comes through the LORD. After all, the Law itself teaches, “**When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ Then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand’**” (**Deut 6:20-21**). God redeems people out of this broken, fallen, corrupt world of the fallen powers and human rebellion, greed, and pride. He does this while keeping us in this world so that we might be a light to it, a light lit by a God who has not seen fit to leave us in the darkness, but to make us the very light of Christ himself.

Remember **Joseph**? His brothers wickedly sold him into slavery. But rather than nuke the Egyptians who took him, God used their wickedness for good (**Gen 50:20**). And through the evil, God saved many more people's lives. This is to be our testimony and witness in the world so that others in the darkness might see the light and be saved too. That's why God doesn't overthrow these things. And he is perfectly consistent in the Two Testaments as it regards this thing called slavery.

It is in this light that we can thus **return to our text** and consider Paul's commands to slaves and masters. For only when you know and believe this gospel will they make any sense at all. The ESV begins with the word "**bondservants**." The older translations say "**servants**." Both of those words are much less harsh and easier to understand in one way than some newer translations that opt for "**slaves**" (NAS, RSV). However, I fear sometimes that in translating *doulos* with these lesser terms that it has an opposite effect upon us. This is what I said earlier about slavery in the ANE. As they viewed it, **everyone is a slave** to someone. Think about that in the backdrop of living in Ephesus and the worship of Artemis/Diana! That puts some meat to the command,

doesn't it? They knew full well what slavery to the gods was about.

But now they are slaves to Christ, and Paul opens several of his letters saying this very thing about himself. It isn't optional. However, it also isn't like **he was kidnapped against his will**. When the Spirit effectually called him, he learned the power of this Jesus on the road to Damascus where he was blinded for several days. He learned that this Jesus is in fact God and now his Lord and King. Therefore, by definition, if he is to follow this Jesus, he must be Christ's slave. But hopefully now you have the tools to understand that this is **not subhuman**, brute-animal, chattel slavery formed by your worst nightmares from the American abuses. Hopefully, you can see that such slavery is not inherently evil.

With that, you can turn to the command. **“Obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling.”** When Onesimus ran away, Paul took him in like his own son. He loved him as his own soul. And yet, he sent him back. He would not overthrow even that kind of relationship, though he could have, because he knew that both Onesimus and Philemon needed to be reconciled as brothers. This is the power of the gospel too, something that the sick and twisted social justice



mindset of reparation and forcing people 150 years removed from a thing to bow for the rest of their lives in repentance for something they never even did will never understand.

He asks them to do this “with a sincere heart.” This is something we saw last time with children obeying parents. It isn’t enough to obey begrudgingly. It has to come from your heart. That is what pleases the Lord. Willing submission to someone else, *because* we know that we actually belong to Christ. Thus, he adds, “as you would Christ.” Can you see how only a Christian could possibly understand this?

He reinforces this in the next verse. “Not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers.” This word eye-service (*ophthalmoudoulia*) is not attested elsewhere, but Hodge seems to get at the point. “It is ... such service as is rendered only when the eye of the master sees what is done; as though the only object were to please men. Servants are required to act as *the slaves of Christ*, whose eyes are everywhere; and, therefore, if their desire is to please him, they must be as faithful in their master’s absence as in his presence.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1858), 365.

If we were to carry this over to today, and it isn't entirely legitimate to do that, since it loses the context of Paul's household commands, the best analogy is probably **where we work**. Certainly, the principle holds true. You are not to begrudgingly do your jobs, as though you were mere slaves of another master. Even more, you are not to do your jobs well *only* when someone is watching you. This is not how servants of Christ behave, not merely because they know he sees all things, but because their desire is in fact to please him rather than men.

Thus, he finishes, “... as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” Chrysostom shows you the power of this motivation. For those who demand that God eliminate slavery today they would do well to heed his words, for they are the glory of the Gospel. “If you serve freely in this way, you are not a slave. If your service comes from your free choice, from good will, from the soul and on account of Christ, you are no slave [of man].” (Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians* 22.6.6). Furthermore, the Reformer Erasmus Sarcerius points you to Christ when you doubt God's goodness in such things. “The way to handle the problems of servitude is to remember that God himself submitted to it, that God is the author of it, that it is his

ordinance and that to serve masters is to do the will of God, to serve the Lord rather than people, and that God approves of the service that servants give to their masters and will reward it” (Erasmus Sarcerius, *Annotations on Ephesians*).

In this way, we are “rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man” (7). It is difficult to think of a more fitting command that the Apostle could give to any of us today. But he finishes it with one more motive. “Knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free” (8). Paul is not holding out to them temporary, temporal rewards promised in this world, but rather the rewards of the world to come. Surely, this presupposes their faith. In these, he is also raises up the lowly slave, soothing his wounded soul, for it is without question that even in all we have said, the whole idea of being lower than another in such a way is always in the mind and weighs upon the heart. So, it is as if he is saying do not be grieved that you are inferior. Slavery is nothing but a name. This mastership is only according to the flesh, brief and temporary. God knows and God will repay. As for you, please your Master

in heaven and you will receive back from the Greater Lord.<sup>24</sup>

Curiously, it is into this thought that Paul switches to the Masters. “Masters, do the same to them” (9). Obey your Master ... Jesus. Do good to them. Do it with a motivation that comes from being in Christ and regarding in your heart your slave as your brother. For yes, this relationship is temporary for you as well, and one day your slave will be side-by-side with you in heaven. God sees what you do, and he will pay you back as well. If you employ people or have people under you at work, this is the obvious parallel in our not so parallel 21<sup>st</sup> century culture.

The biggest negative here is that he demands they “stop your threatening.” Obviously, even in a Christian household, such an institution as slavery will tempt even the strongest believer to think he is greater than he is. Threatening is something men with power do, and they are not to think of themselves in this way. Same goes for bosses today.

Why? Because you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with him (9). In this way, all things end by coming back to the

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<sup>24</sup> This is essentially the point made by Chrysostom.

Lord Jesus Christ—the true King of Heaven. But in this, remember, this King who is now your Master was **once a servant** and a slave to others himself. That’s how he came to this earth. Not overriding human institution, not overthrowing them, but coming into them, as one of us, so that he might know exactly what we ourselves go through when we are on the receiving end of a greater-lesser relationship. **That is the kind of God** we serve. That is the kind of God the Scripture tells us about.

Therefore, when you **struggle** with difficult doctrines like this (and we certainly did not deal with all the difficulties we could have), do not rage against God and throw your fist in his face, demanding he do what you would have him to do. Instead, look to the Son of God, the Suffering Slave who emptied himself, took the form of a slave, in the likeness of man, humbling himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For Jesus truly is the first and last solution to these difficulties. All of them find their answer in him and him alone.

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