

“Is God Okay With Slavery?”

Ephesians 6:5-9

Introduction:

-The topic we are dealing with today is slavery. This is a topic that I probably wouldn't address if I were just picking topics, but that is part of the value of expanding books verse by verse in that it forces you to take things as they come and address tough topics.

-But, you may be thinking, “How is this relevant to me today?”

- 1. It is currently one of the most common challenges to the Bible and Christianity by non-believers, particularly atheists.**
- 2. The history of this in America, particularly related to religious justifications and denominations being founded to defend it.**
- 3. The existence of slavery, particularly manifested by sex trafficking, in the world today**
- 4. What does this say to us about who God is and how He works in the world?**

-The Importance of Context: We have to cross back into the original setting in Ephesus and then apply the truths to us today.

1. Context of Ephesians: The first three chapters are doctrinal and the last three are practical application. The big idea that has governed our study of the second half of the book is, “We live out what Jesus expects of us by living out of what Jesus has done for us.” Also, the particular section this is in is the “household section” of Ephesians where 5:22-23 addresses husbands and wives, 6:1-4 parents and children, and 6:5-9 slaves and masters. Slaves were considered to be part of the household then.

2. History of slavery: Dr. Thomas Sowell in an essay entitled, “The Real History of Slavery” in his book, “Black Rednecks And White Liberals,” writes this, “Slavery was an evil of greater scope and magnitude than most people imagine and, as a result, its place in history is radically different from the way it is usually portrayed. Mention slavery and immediately the image that arises is that of Africans and their descendants enslaved by Europeans and their descendants in the Southern United States-or, at most, Africans enslaved by Europeans in the Western Hemisphere. No other historic horror is so narrowly construed. No one thinks of war, famine, or decimating epidemics in such localized terms. These are afflictions that have been suffered by the entire human race, all over the planet-and so was slavery . Had slavery been limited to one race in one

country during three centuries, the tragedies would not have been one-tenth the magnitude that they were in fact.”

“It takes no more research than a trip to almost any public library or college library to show the incredibly lopsided coverage of slavery in the United States or in the Western Hemisphere as compared to the meager writings on the even larger number of Africans enslaved in the Islamic countries of the Middle East and North Africa, not to mention the vast numbers of Europeans also enslaved in centuries past in the Islamic world and within Europe itself. At least a million Europeans were enslaved by North African pirates alone from 1500 to 1800...During the Middle Ages, Slavs were so widely used as slaves in both Europe and the Islamic world that the very word ‘slave’ derived from the word for Slav... China in centuries past has been described as ‘one of the largest and most comprehensive markets for the exchange of human beings in the world.’ Slavery was also common in India, where it has been estimated that there were more slaves than in the entire Western Hemisphere...In some of the cities of Southeast Asia, slaves were a majority of the population. Slavery was also an established institution in the Western Hemisphere before Columbus’ ships ever appeared on the horizon.”

“For most of its long history, which includes most of the history of the human race, slavery was largely not the enslavement of racially different people, for the simple reason that only in recent centuries has either the technology or the wealth existed to go to another continent to get slaves and transport them en masse across an ocean. People were enslaved because they were vulnerable, not because of how they looked...Before the modern era, by and large Europeans enslaved other Europeans, Asians enslaved other Asians, Africans enslaved other Africans, and the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere enslaved other indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere. Slavery was not based on race, much less on theories about race. Only relatively late in history did enslavement across racial lines occur on such a scale as to promote an ideology of racism that outlasted the institution of slavery itself...To make racism the driving force behind slavery is to make a historically recent factor the cause of an institution which originated thousands of years earlier.”

3. The nature of slavery in the Roman Empire at that time:

Clinton Arnold writes of slavery in the Roman Empire:

- (1) *Racial factors played no role.*
- (2) *Many slaves could reasonably expect to be emancipated during their lifetime.*
- (3) *Many slaves worked in a variety of specialized and responsible positions.*
- (4) *Many slaves received education and training in specialist skills.*
- (5) *Freed slaves often became Roman citizens and developed a client relationship to their former masters.*

“In spite of these substantive differences between Roman-era slavery and New World slavery, it is important not to construe this ancient form as more humane or as a morally justifiable economic system. Although we can point to some features that make it appear better than slavery in the Antebellum South of the United States, it still involved the coercive ownership of another person. Bradley summarizes the situation well:

“The bare record of fact shows that Roman slaves, like those in the Americas, were bought and sold like animals, were punished indiscriminately and violated sexually; they were compelled to labour as their masters dictated, they were allowed no legal existence, and they were goaded into compliance through cajolery and intimidation. They were the ultimate victims of exploitation.

Arnold goes on to say, “Slaves possessed few legal rights, lacked honor, were subject to whatever punishments their masters deemed appropriate (and were sometimes treated with hideous cruelty), were permitted no legally sanctioned marriage or family bonds, could not keep their own children born to them while in slavery, could be separated from their spouses by the slave master, and were not allowed to own property of any kind. Few, if any, would willingly want to live in this disempowered, exploited, and subservient state. It is in this context that the apostle Paul casts a vision for how slaves and slave owners should live out their Christian lives within the constraints of this prevailing social and economic system.”

4. The particular context is that Paul is giving pastoral instructions to Christians living under laws that they had no standing to change (examples of us and abortion and homosexual marriage). The Bible does something similar when it comes to persecution. It tells Christians how to respond. That does not mean God is endorsing it. Paul could not directly attack the institution of slavery at this moment. Thomas Sowell has written, “Moral principles may be timeless but moral choices can be made only among the options actually available at particular times and places.”

Ephesians 6:5-9

1. The Command To Slaves: Obey their masters with a Christ-honoring attitude(they could disobey them if obeying earthly matters required disobedience to God but they may have to face consequences).

That attitude is:

- A. Respect and fear**
- B. Pure Motives**
- C. Obey as they would obey Jesus**
- D. Serve not to impress people but to serve Jesus**

- E. Do the will of God from the heart**
- F. Look for a reward from the Lord**

2. The Commands To Masters

A. Treat their slaves like the slaves had been commanded to relate to them.

Clinton Arnold writes of this, “It is probably best to see Paul commending the various virtuous attitudes he has exhorted the Christian slaves to display as having equal applicability in the lives of believing slave owners. This would include having a positive attitude and good-will toward their slaves (6:7), wholeheartedly committing themselves to doing the will of God (6:6b), and living under the recognition that they, too, are slaves of an ultimate master, the Lord Jesus Christ (6:7).”

B. Stop Threatening Slaves

Applications:

1. So is God pro-slavery? Is the Bible presenting slavery as a morally acceptable option as non-believers assured or even as religious people have argued in the past? I am going to argue that the answer to this is no. Why?

A. Passages in the Old Testament are regulative instead of eternally prescriptive. They were part of the civil law of Israel. “Slavery” of Israelites was really indentured servitude. Slavery of foreigners related to their enemies and was sometimes even a result of war.

B. The New Testament does not actually approve of slavery but is dealing with an established reality in the world at that time and lays the groundwork for its eventual demise.

C. It was Christians who brought about the abolishment of slavery to the degree it has been abolished though the application of biblical principles.

2. Most religious denominations have repented of it.

3. Make a difference today.

4. “We live out what Jesus expects of us by living out of what Jesus has done for us.” Adapt it to: No matter what circumstance we find ourselves in (even slavery), we can live out what Jesus expects of us by living out of what Jesus has done for us.

Sin enslaves

Jesus sets us free.

(John 8:31-36)