

## **“Freedom and Slavery”**

Ephesians 6:5-9

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### **Slavery on Independence Day**

If I could choose to preach any passage of the Bible on the 4th of July, it would not be Ephesians 6. I would be more comfortable with one of those great stories of the exodus from the Old Testament. Or Galatians 5, where Paul says “it is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (1) and reminds us that we “were called to be free.” (13) I’d even tackle Revelation 1, where we read that Christ, who has “freed us from our sins by his blood” (5) has made us “a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.” (6)

There are so many beautiful parts of the Bible where we read about physical and spiritual freedom and the vision of the kingdom that God designed us to be. Ephesians 6 is not one of those. Our text today is a nice example of the kind of passages that I wish we didn’t have to deal with. It’s the sort of thing that makes non-believers skeptical, and easily comes across as antiquated and oppressive. In a word, it’s a mess. But in a more important word, it’s Scripture. And that means we need to do business with it.

### **A Product of Time and Place**

Paul’s words in Ephesians 6:5-9 have been harshly criticized, widely misunderstood and frequently misapplied. There are two big traps that are easy to fall into with this passage. The first is to under-identify with it and toss it aside as irrelevant. “We aren’t slaves, we don’t have slaves, so Paul’s words to slaves and masters surely don’t apply to us.” The second trap is to over-identify to the passage. “Slaves and slave-owners are just an ancient version of the employee-employer relationships that we see everywhere today, so this is just about having a good attitude at work and being a nice boss.” There are elements of truth in both of those, but neither is the full picture.

The first thing that we need to deal with is the fact that Paul is in fact writing to actual slaves and slave-owners, and he doesn’t handle the situation the way we would like him to. In this section of Ephesians, Paul is explaining how a Christian household should run. For better or for worse, 1st-century Christian households in Ephesus tended to have a husband and a wife, parents and children, slaves and slave-masters. As Christian Americans living in the 21st century, this can and should be an unsettling assumption to us. Slavery, we have come to realize, is an abhorrent practice. There is no place and no situation in which one human ought to own another human. Slavery is wrong, plain and simple. The problem is that what’s “plain and simple” in one time and place is not so “plain and simple” in other times and places.

I think we would all find this passage more satisfying if Paul had used this opportunity to write a bold proclamation about the inhumanity of slavery. Perhaps he could have been the first great abolitionist. But that is not his reality. Paul simply does not condemn slavery like we wish he would. At the same time, he also doesn't promote slavery, as some Christian preachers in America in the 18th and 19th centuries suggested. For Paul, slavery is a neutral and natural aspect of life. Slaves are a common part of the economy and social structure. Some estimates say that up to a third of the population was enslaved. Slavery is so common, so pervasive, so established that it doesn't occur to Paul or the other Christian leaders to confront it as a problem. It's a part of life, and it seems to be assumed that it was an unchangeable, normal part of life.

Hardly anyone considered the system [of slavery] optional or thought of an alternative. In fact, although there were debates about how slaves should be treated... slavery as a social, legal, and economic phenomenon seldom became the object of reflection at all. No ancient government thought of abolishing the institution, and none of the slave rebellions had as its goal the abolition of slavery as such.<sup>1</sup>

One of the unfortunate truths that applies to every person who has ever lived and will ever live anywhere on this earth is that we are all products of the time and place we live in. No matter how enlightened we might feel or how much progress we have made, we all suffer from blind spots -- personal blind spots, cultural blind spots, generational blind spots. I don't have the wisdom or insight to tell you what ours are, but I know enough history to say with complete certainty that in another 100, 500, or 1000 years, if Jesus hasn't yet returned, there will be things that seem very normal to us now, things we've never considered questioning or changing, that the generations who follow us will consider barbaric and inhumane. That's just how the world works.

That realization means we need to give Paul a little bit of grace. Not the kind of blanket excuse that says slavery is no big deal; that's grace without truth. We're still holding on to the truth that slavery is an awful practice and a disgraceful part of the human story. One of my favorite one-liners that I read in a commentary this week was that, "[Slavery] robs the slave of dignity and the slave owner of humanity."<sup>2</sup> Regardless of any economic benefits the system might seem to bring, slavery is bad for everybody. We will not be people who say that slavery is okay. But we can say that Paul is describing the world he lives in, and that he is a flawed product of his time and place.

Although this text is descriptive of Paul's world and not prescriptive of ours, it still has value. If we look closely, I think we might find that there are more points of connection between Paul's world and our own that we immediately realize. And while studying this passage and the history of slavery over the last week, I've become convinced that there are actually some very relevant and urgent lessons for us in Ephesians 6.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1990), 415.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas B. Slater, *Ephesians*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2012), 163.

## **Slaves and Masters in Paul's Context**

Let's start with what Paul meant in his own time. I fully realize that slaves and masters don't seem relevant to our lives today. I also realize that slavery is a very loaded concept, and the things we think about when we hear the word "slavery" may be leading our imaginations in the wrong direction.

Most of us are most familiar with the form of slavery that existed in America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Slavery in the ancient Roman world, where Paul lived and wrote, was different in some significant ways. Unlike American slavery, ancient slavery had nothing to do with race. There were slaves of every race and ethnicity and nationality. Unlike American slavery, ancient slaves were often well-educated and held prestigious jobs. They could receive specialized training and become doctors, teachers, accountants, writers, ship captains, and all sorts of other highly-esteemed jobs. Unlike American slavery, ancient slaves stood a decent chance of being able to buy their freedom. Unlike American slavery, a good number of ancient slaves had sold themselves into slavery in order to obtain a better education or more opportunities than they would have had as free persons.

Lest we consider those differences and think ancient slavery sounds like a good situation, it was not. There may have been some ways in which it was better than the transatlantic slave trade and the version of slavery that existed in American history, but "it still involved the coercive ownership of another person."<sup>3</sup> It was a different reality from our American version, but it was still a tragic reality.

Paul begins this section by addressing the slaves first. This is consistent with the previous two pairs that have come up in this household code (wives/husbands, children/fathers); in each case he starts with the group that is subordinate. Although it keeps his pattern going and has a nice poetic flow to his writing, this move would have seemed somewhat strange to Paul's first readers. The subtle but important move he makes here is to address the slaves directly and to speak to them as members of the church. The slaves and their masters certainly aren't equals in the ancient world, and Paul doesn't manage to upend the system. But he might be making a slight shift toward equality by addressing the slaves as fellow members of the church with their masters.

The actual instructions Paul gives to slaves are pretty straightforward: obey your masters and serve wholeheartedly. He spends a bit more time and energy writing about the attitude the slaves have than their actions. They are to obey with "respect and fear" (5) and with "sincerity of heart" (5). ("Respect and fear" is the same phrase that's sometimes translated "with fear and trembling" -- and in every case, it has to do with having a proper awareness of one's subordinate position, not what we normally consider fear or being afraid.) The bulk of Paul's words have to do with the motivation for this action and attitude. Everything the slaves do, Paul says, should be not for the

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<sup>3</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, ECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2010), 421.

attention or accolades of their earthly masters, but “doing the will of God from your heart” (6), “[serving] as if you were serving the Lord.” (7)

There’s a little bit of wordplay going on in this section that Paul’s Greek audience would have heard immediately. Through this passage, the word master (referring to the earthly master) and the word Lord (referring to Jesus) are the same Greek word. Paul is telling them, obey your earthly lord as though you were working for your true Lord. “It is not that the master represents Christ to the believing slave, but almost the opposite: the master is factored out of the equation and replaced with the Lord.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul next turns his attention to the masters. He tells them to treat their slaves in the same way -- and what exactly “the same way” means is the topic of some scholarly debate. The argument that I find most compelling is that this instruction points back to the very beginning of this household code. Everything we have read up to this point about wives and husbands, children and parents, has been anchored by Ephesians 5:21, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

This means that verse 9 is actually quite complicated, if masters are to submit to their slaves out of reverence for Christ. The one specific example Paul mentions is that the masters are not to threaten their slaves. In the ancient world, like in many other instances of slavery since then, masters had a great deal of latitude when it came to their slaves. They could use nearly any method of discipline or motivation they felt would be effective. The slave had no rights and no recourse for any mistreatment.

One commentator I read this week suggested that Paul is undermining the system of slavery in these verses. If the slave masters submit to their slaves, “The threat of violence is impossible in such an arrangement, and without the threat of violence, the whole system will theoretically collapse.”<sup>5</sup> I think that may be an overstatement, but the basic principle holds some water. Paul is suggesting the kind of mutuality that would certainly make mistreatment of another human difficult. And perhaps, given enough time, the foundation would be laid for people to see the deep, grievous flaws in the institution of slavery. But I’m not sure that Paul himself does much to undermine it.

At best, I think the slave-owners would have heard a message of moderation in this household code. As husbands and fathers, they have just been told not to abuse their positions and their power. The message is consistent when it comes to their role as slave masters. Perhaps the best way to read this is to acknowledge that Paul is urging the transformation of relationships without much regard to the legal system that defines those relationships.

### **What Paul Means Today**

Let’s come back to today. I told you earlier that the two traps we want to avoid are under-identifying with this passage (it’s outdated and irrelevant) and over-identifying

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 406.

<sup>5</sup> Thielman, 410.

with it (we're all metaphorical slaves). Unlike some passages of the Bible that have clear, direct messages for us today (Proverbs 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding" is a good example), the lessons I see for us today in Ephesians 6:5-9 are more abstract, big-picture things:

*We are products of the world we were born into.* Something about our lives that seems so normal we don't even think about it will one day be condemned by our descendants as barbaric or inhumane. It has happened to every generation that came before us, and we will not be the first to escape that fate. We need to remain humble enough to recognize that every generation gets something wrong. We, like all who came before us, are sinners living in a fallen world.

*The gospel has a place everywhere.* Perhaps Paul should have said something different about slavery or child-rearing or marriage in this household code, but he didn't. Paul wrote within his context to encourage people to live out the gospel as well as they knew how. The message is the same for us today. Our charge is not to figure out everything that is wrong in the world and fix all of it. Certainly we can and should work for justice and freedom when we have the opportunity to do so. But regardless of our circumstances and regardless of our successes or failures, our calling is still to live out the gospel as well as we can, right where we are, with whatever we know now.

*Time changes everything.* Paul hits on one of my favorite themes in all of the Bible in this brief passage -- God is in the business of upheavals and reversals. The whole Bible from cover to cover is filled with this theme. God chooses the younger brother over the older, uses the weak to topple the strong, gives wisdom to fools, and tells the last that they will be first. Paul's version of this is to remind the slaves and the masters that they all serve God, and that God shows no partiality. It's a subtle nod to a familiar theme -- God doesn't love you more because you're the one who seems more powerful now. Your position in life is temporary.

*When you're not in control of it all, control yourself.* You and I are not slaves. But we do have times and places where we are not free to do anything we want. In those times, Paul's directives to slaves are helpful. You cannot control everything that happens to you, but you have a lot of control about how you respond and what motivates your response. In whatever circumstance you find yourself, look for ways to do the will of God, working as if you're working for the Lord, knowing that God sees everything.

*When you're the one in control, lead kindly.* Paul reminds the masters that they are also people with a master, God. God alone has ultimate authority and power. Use your limited temporary power as God has used his power. Treat people with kindness and compassion, provide for their needs, and forgive them of their wrongdoing.

### **Independence Day and Modern Slavery**

As American Christians who are studying a passage about slavery on the 4th of July, we are in an odd place. We are a free people who live safe, comfortable lives in a nation

where our liberties are protected by law. In fact, our desire for freedom and independence is precisely why this nation we live in exists. That freedom and that security are good and beautiful gifts from God. Today is a fitting day to celebrate our freedom, and to thank God that “the boundary lines have fallen for [us] in pleasant places” (Psalm 16:6).

But I would be remiss if I didn't pull one more loose thread back into this message. I led you astray a few minutes ago. Slavery is not a thing of the past. The latest figures, published in 2019 and gathered throughout 2018, estimate that 40.3 million people are living in some form of modern slavery. As many as 60,000 of them are believed to be in the United States. Over 70% of those 40.3 million people are women and girls, and up to a quarter of modern slaves are children.

A person today is considered enslaved if they are forced to work against their will; are owned or controlled by an exploiter or “employer”; have limited freedom of movement; or are dehumanised, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as property.... Globally, more than half of the 40.3 million victims (24.9 million) are in forced labour, which means they are working against their will and under threat, intimidation or coercion. An additional 15.4 million people are estimated to be living in forced marriages.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars and researchers believe that there are more people in slavery today than there has been at any time in human history. Paul wrote within his context to explain how slaves and masters should treat one another. But Paul was writing in a world where nobody was thinking about whether slavery was inhumane or unjust. We are not living in that world. We live in a world where every country on earth has laws on their books against slavery. And yet, 40.3 million people remain in some kind of modern slavery.

You and I are free. But it is only by the grace of God that we are. One in every 200 people in the world cannot say that simple sentence. And that ought to be a sobering reminder as we consider a passage about slaves that seems so horrifically outdated. In the same way that it is unreasonable to look at Paul's writings in the first century and condemn him for not speaking out against slavery, it is unreasonable to look at our lives in the twenty-first century and not doing anything about slavery. We know better. We can do better.

Paul's words on slavery do not need to be the end of the church's witness. The first step is knowing there's a problem. You know that now. The next step is up to you. I can recommend a few resources like [End It Movement](#), [International Justice Mission](#), and [World Vision](#) - the last two being Christian organizations that are trying to eradicate slavery in our generation. Paul's words in Ephesians 6 described the reality of his world. We have the opportunity by our actions to transform the reality of our world. We can and should work to end modern slavery as if we're working for the Lord -- because we are.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/feb/25/modern-slavery-trafficking-persons-one-in-200>