

Sermon: The Problem of Slavery Ephesians 6:5-9

Our sermon study this morning is on is on Ephesians 6:5-9.

Earlier in the week, as I wrote our email update, I thought that our focus in this passage would be on work.

Yet as I started to really dig into it, I found that it would be more appropriate to deal with the most jarring issue in the passage and that is it's dealing with the behavior of slaves and masters.

Of course the subject of slavery is particularly charged because of the historic abuses that were inherent to the institution.

I remember when I first read the New Testament at the age of 16, I found it odd that the bible did not explicitly condemn the institution of slavery entirely.

And so this morning, as we consider Ephesians 6:5-9, we will deal with the issue head on.

So, let us read God's word in Ephesians 6:5-9. Paul writes:

Ephesians 6:5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, **6** not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, **7** rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, **8** knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. **9** 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.

This is God's word.

The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God stands forever.

No other institution in American history has been more destructive to the fabric of the country as the institution of slavery and the racism that animated it.

Long before the civil war, churches and families were divided over the issue.

The civil war only articulated the divisions.

Slavery in the American colonies and states existed for three main reasons.

The love of money,
The belief in white supremacy
and a willful ignorance of the Christian

scriptures.

These are the primary conditions that kept race-based slavery alive for so long in the United States.

The dehumanization of slavery and the racism that fueled it have had a lasting impact on the psyche of many Black Americans.

To this day, these effects are being felt.

In many ways, America in 2020 is reaping what the first colonists had sown 400 years ago.

Sinful behavior begets sinful behavior.

That is, unless the Gospel of Jesus Christ breaks in.

As Christians, we might wish that the bible spoke more clearly and unequivocally about the wrongfulness of slavery.

While the New Testament offers no defense of slavery, it certainly doesn't explicitly prohibit the institution outright.

And so, as Christians who believe in the truthfulness and timelessness of God word, what are we to do with the New Testament passages that direct slaves and masters in how they are to behave?

Wouldn't it have just been better for the Apostles to condemn the institution entirely?

This is the question we will seek to answer as we study Ephesians 6:5-9.

You have a sermon outline and the first point there is...

I. The Problem of Slavery

The most obvious problem of slavery is that one person owns another person.

This ownership is severely restrictive in that the slave does not have the freedom to come or go on any agreed upon terms.

Most, if not all of the slaves rights are swallowed up by the master's right of ownership.

In a work relationship, the worker may not like their working conditions but they are at least able to choose their workplace under their own free will.

In the master-slave relationship, there is no such freedom.

At best, this lack of freedom militates against the golden rule of Matthew 7:12 which states:

...whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Throughout history, I imagine few slaves would remain slaves if they had other options.

Therefore, the entire institution of slavery, in any of its historical forms, is not a loving one.

Yet there are some important distinctions to be drawn between Roman World Slavery and New World Slavery.

In his commentary on this passage, Clinton Arnold identified five characteristics of Roman Era slavery:

First, Racial Factors Played No Role.

"...Roman era slavery had nothing to do with race or a particular people group. Roman slaves were of virtually every race of people in the Mediterranean region and involved people from every country."

Most slaves became so by being taken as prisoners of war"

Some infants were raised as slaves because they were rescued from exposure- that is being abandoned by their parents.

Others sold themselves into slavery because of debt.

Finally, some we're forcefully enslaved through kidnapping or man-stealing.

Kidnapping was perhaps the primary way New World slaves entered the slave trade.

This practice is explicitly condemned in **1 Timothy 1:10.**

Second, Many slaves could reasonably expect to be emancipated during their lifetime- often before they were 30 years old.

Roman Slave Owners often paid their slaves an occasional sum of money and by saving that money, the slave could purchase their freedom. "By contrast, slaves in the new world had no hope of manumission and freedom.

Third, many slaves worked in a variety of specialized and responsible positions.

Many served in unskilled labor, but many others served as doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries and sea captains." New World slaves however were seldom entrusted with responsible positions and were seldom taught valuable skills.

Fourth, Many Roman slaves received education in special skills.

Roman slave owners thought it beneficial to have highly skilled slaves and these skills could pay off later in life if the slave purchased their freedom. New world slaves, however, were often prohibited from receiving any sort of specialized education.

Fifth and finally, freed Roman slaves often became citizens and developed a client relationship to their former masters.

Thus they were able to make a full transition into the life of a free person. In the New World, however, slaves were owned, generation after generation with no hope of a free life.

Arnold writes:

"In spite of these substantial differences...it is important not to construe ancient slavery 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..., it still involved the coercive ownership of another person."

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

"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, could not keep their own children born to them while in slavery, could be separated from their spouses by their masters 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."

This is the context into which Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians.

Slavery has been a part of many cultures throughout world history.

In some times and places, it was more prevalent than in other times and places.

But slavery was always around and it was always bad. And in the New World, slavery was especially cruel and dehumanizing.

To make matters worse, in the American South, slavery was given biblical justification by many in the church.

Now to be fair, there were many American Christians, many in the South and almost all in the North, who were sickened by the institution of slavery. It's why the Civil War was fought.

And so we might wonder as we approach this text, "If slavery was so bad in every age, why did the apostles not explicitly condemn slavery?"

And the answer, of course, is complex.

The first thing to keep in mind is the primary mission of the Apostles and the church.

The primary mission of the Apostles and the church is not the reformation of social institutions, however sinful they may be.

The primary mission is the conversion of sinners through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Every other issue is secondary when it comes to the church's message to the broader culture.

And Paul had this mission in mind.

His business was not to be about reforming culture and reshaping institutions.

Those would have been the down-stream effects as more and more people became converted.

Paul's primary mission was the conversion of sinners.

And so, neither Paul or any of the Apostles ever explicitly condemned the institution of slavery.

Instead, in speaking to the church, the Apostles condemned virtually all of the practices that made ancient slavery so heinous:

The Love of Money

The abuse of people made in God's image

Pride and exploitation

Sexual immorality

And every form of a lack of love.

Notice in Ephesians 6:9, Paul writes:

9 Masters, do the same to them [that is treat them with Christ-like good-will], 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.

The only hook that Paul has in these masters is that they are In Christ.

His authority over them is entirely spiritual.

And so, instead of calling for a church wide ban on slavery, he calls for the masters to be kind to their slaves, to stop their threatenings and to treat their slaves with Christ-like good-will.

It is important to note that Paul knew what he was up against.

At the time of Paul's writing Ephesians, it is probable that fully one-third of the population of the Roman world were slaves.

If Paul would have explicitly banned slavery in the church, he would have put an impediment in front of the Gospel.

I believe Paul did not explicitly condemn the institution of slavery wholesale because condemning it would not further the mission of the Gospel.

Imagine how slave owners would receive the message of the gospel if they knew that if they converted, they would have to immediately free all their slaves? They would have never given the gospel a hearing. Paul's ministry to them would have never had a chance.

It would be sort of like you trying to evangelize Russian communists in the 1960's if all the communists knew about you is that you were against communism. They would have given you no hearing because you led with the wrong message. The main problem with Russian communists in the 1960's was not their communism. Their main problem was that they were sinners in need of a Savior.

Whenever the church's message to the world is primarily of a political or moral nature, the effectiveness of the gospel suffers. Groups of people become walled off from the gospel because they are primarily offended by the church's stance on some political or moral issue.

Would that the world was offended by the church for the right reason and not for the wrong reasons. That our proclamation of the gospel of would be so front and center- the need for repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ. Yet too often, the message the world receives from the church is the need for moral reform.
To be done with immoral living of all sorts.
To stop supporting unbiblical political causes.

Yet these are never to be the church's message to the world. The church's message to the world must be only and ever Jesus Christ and him crucified.

If the world is to be offended by the church or by Christians, may it be the offense of the gospel and nothing else.

Think of Paul when he first came to the city of Corinth. That city was as immoral a city as any in the Roman empire. And yet even in this cultural context, Paul had missional clarity. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:
1 Corinthians 2:2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Paul was not impressed by their wisdom. He did not recoil at their sin.

Instead, he "decided to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

He did not preach the need for moral reform. He preached Christ.

So whether it be the evils of communism, the evils of environmental destruction, the evils of corporate greed or the evils of abortion, the church is not to lead with these issues in its message to the world.

The church's primary message to the world is to be repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The main goal is not institutional reform, no matter how depraved the institution.

The main goal is creating disciples of Jesus who think, feel and live like Christ.

And this Brings us to our next point in the outline...

II. A Dramatic Example

Isn't it remarkable just how a-political Jesus and the Apostles were? They seldom, if ever, weighed in on the hot topic political discussions of the day. Think of how little Jesus said in respect to the corruption and mistreatment of the Roman government. He said virtually nothing about it. But then, in another sense, his every word applied to them.

The same is true of Paul. I can think of no place in all of Paul's writings where he complained about the government. And this silence speaks volumes. Because in Paul's day, the Roman government was responsible for an extreme amount of human suffering. At the time that Paul wrote Ephesians, it was none other than Nero who was the Emperor. One would think that Paul would have ample reasons to complain about the government, that his complaints would be justified and that they would at least show up a little bit in his letters. But you never hear Paul complaining about or denouncing the government.

Why is that?
It's because he is a man on a mission. Paul's aim is not to reform a worldly institutions. His aim is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

And when he does write about the government, he writes the most startling things.

In Romans 13:1-2, Paul writes:

Romans 13:1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. **2** Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ...**7** Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Paul commands the church to respect and submit to the Emperor and all of his underlings. Were they corrupt? Absolutely. Were they violent, petty and repressive? No doubt. Were they manipulative, paranoid and narcissistic? Read the history books.

The Roman Government was extremely flawed. But still, Paul's instructions were to submit to them because Paul's mission was not social or governmental reform. Paul's mission was to make disciples.

And he believed in this mission so much that he never wrote a word in complaint about the government- even though he would later be executed by the Emperor Nero.

The same is true for the Apostle Peter. He too was killed by an unjust government. And yet his words in 1 Peter 2:17 are these:
1 Peter 2:17 Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

The reason the apostles did not seek to reform the government wasn't because they thought it unfeasible or impractical.

The sought not to reform that corrupt government because it was not their Apostolic mission. And it was not the church's mission after they died. And it is not the church's mission today.

The church's mission was and remains to be making disciples of Christ who think, feel and live like Christ.

So let us not think that Paul and the other Apostles did not stand up and denounce slavery because they lacked moral clarity or because they thought it pragmatically impossible.

Paul didn't explicitly denounce slavery because to do so would have taken his gospel message in a direction he didn't want it to go.

He was Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ. Not Paul the abolitionist.

If he would have stood on the platform of abolitionism, his message of the gospel would have been greatly hindered.

This is the same reason he did not denounce the rampant evils of the Roman regime. Evils that the churches he planted and loved were suffering under. Evils that he himself suffered under. He didn't denounce them because He wanted to be known as Paul the apostle of Jesus Christ, not Paul the revolutionary.

Paul's dramatic example of calling for submission to a corrupt and violent Roman state is proof that his mission was to make disciples of Jesus Christ, not reform worldly institutions.

And so it is of the utmost importance that the church lead with the central message of the Gospel. The church's mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ and not reform corrupt social institutions.

And yet, social reform is in view. This brings us to our third and final point...

III. Kingdom Leaven: The Christian Plan for Institutional Change

Paul is under no illusions of being in a position to change the empire wide institution of slavery. But he does see it as his mission to bring the master slave relationship more into line with the rest of Christian teaching.

And so he directs slave masters to treat their slaves with Christ-like good will, to stop threatening, to use no forms of violence, and to remember the fear of God.

He says in verse 9:

9 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.

When he says "do the same to them" he is referring to the Christ-like attitude the masters ought to have. He is not to be domineering or intimidating. Much less are the masters to use physical violence. Instead, the masters are to remember that they too are a servant of Christ. These masters will have to give an account to God who is the judge.

And with this, Paul seeks to remove the most hated elements of slavery and those are the violence and ill treatment.

It is important to note that in his letter to Philemon, Paul writes to a slave owner about his runaway slave, Onesimus.

Paul met Onesimus in Rome while Paul was under house arrest.

Onesimus became a Christian under the ministry of Paul, as did the slave owner Philemon, years earlier in Colosse.

And so, as Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon, he does so with this letter which says in verse 15:

15 For this perhaps is why [Onesimus] 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. **22** At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

And here we see Paul's heart on the matter. He wants Onesimus to be freed and Paul asks Philemon to charge the cost of Onesimus's freedom to his own account.

And then, he puts all of his relational weight behind Onesimus and reminds Philemon that he owes Paul his very life.

Paul was no slavery proponent and we can see here in Philemon, in this semi-private correspondence, that Paul desired Philemon to free his slave- at Philemon's own cost.

I doubt Paul received a bill.

And this reveals to us how Jesus and Paul imagined the kingdom working.

Jesus also never condemned the institution of slavery directly.

He relied on the power of his spirit to change the hearts of his people over time.

In Matthew 13:31, Jesus used a parable to show us how the power of the kingdom works.

He said:

Matthew 13:31 "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.

32 It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

You see that?

The kingdom does not start of great.

It starts off small and diminutive.

It starts off in a way that you never think that it will amount to very much.

And yet, because of its power, it grows.

It is God by his Spirit who causes the growth.

Changing hearts, changing families, changing communities and sometimes changing even the world.

Matthew 13:33 Jesus told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

And we see the fruits of this kingdom leaven throughout the world.

In most parts of the world, slavery is considered to be an unthinkable evil.

How did that happen?

It wasn't the enlightenment or scientific development.

It was the largely through the work of Christians in societies all over the world, pleading the case of the disenfranchised.

Working through political systems and even in the military.

But mostly, God has worked through his people-changing their hearts, softening them and teaching them Christ-like love for their neighbors.

This is how the kingdom of Christ works.

It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

You, brothers and sisters have that leaven in you.

May the love, gentleness and power of Christ work in you to make Christ's kingdom a reality today.

Amen.