

Opening Words

Jesus had a long-range vision, the reestablishment of God's perfect reign on earth where all injustices, like slavery, would be eliminated. He inaugurated the reign of God in a way different than most had imagined. He did not establish the kingdom through force but through forgiveness.

191 Eph Does the Bible Condone Slavery? – Slavery in the Ancient World

One of the criticisms that has been leveled against Christianity is the claim that it does not call for an outright abolition of slavery and some have used certain biblical texts to condone the holding of slaves. One of these texts is the passage we will look at today and for the next broadcast – Ephesians 6:5-9 – which speaks of slaves and masters.

But first, does the Bible condone slavery? I think not, and I am going to explain why it does not and how the Bible even helped to set the course for the abolition of slavery in certain countries. Let's look at the text first, Ephesians 6:5-9.

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; 6 not by way of eye service, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. 7 With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, 8 knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

9 And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

Opponents of Christianity will seize upon this and other passages and say, "See, it talks of slaves and masters. It doesn't tell the masters to set them free, but it tells them how to treat slaves, and it reinforces slavery because it tells slaves to be subservient to their masters."

This is an important topic. We are not just looking at a few verses written 2000 years ago without relevance for today. Even though slavery has been abolished, officially, in most countries, it is still a terrible problem in the world. Let me give you some statistics that may shock you.

- 27 million people are in slavery throughout the world today.
- 800,000 are trafficked across international borders every year. 50% of these are children. 80% are women and girls.
- 1,000,000 children are exploited for sex trade every year.
- Of the women who are transported across borders every year and sold into slavery, 70% are done so for the sex industry while the other 30% are put into forced labor.
- 161 countries are affected by human trafficking. A country could be a country of origin from which the people are taken, a country through which slaves travel, or a country that is the destination for slaves.

- 14,500 to 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the United States each year, and
- \$32 billion – the amount of profit generated by slavery every year.

We have a problem on our hands. This is another modern-day holocaust of human misery, and as Christians we must stand for justice. As we look at this passage, we are going to find that it is a revolutionary passage that was like a lit fuse with a bomb at the end of the fuse that exploded and set freedom into motion. No, the Bible does not condone such slavery. The message of the Bible sets people free.

In the ancient Roman empire, approximately 60 million people were slaves. In the city of Rome, half the population were slaves. Slaves could be inherited or purchased, they could be obtained by war, or they could be received as a settlement for a debt. So common was slavery in the ancient world that it was simply a way of life. For centuries, few, if anyone gave any thought to a “slave problem.” Such a problem was non-existent in the minds of free people. Slavery just was. It was commonly thought that some people were superior to others, and it was fine to subject people to yourself. The philosopher Aristotle could never conceive of having any kind of friendship with a slave. He said, “a slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave.”

In the ancient world, slaves usually had no rights. Their treatment was left up totally to the owners. Now, of course, owners would want to provide some care, but this was less out of humanitarian concern and more out of a desire to take care of one’s property. Slaves provided manual labor and some of the more educated slaves would serve as administrators, teachers, or doctors. And so, if slaves were going to do the chores around the house and work in the field, they had to have care provided for them. But still, they were only property, and if a slave got out of line, the owner had every right, to whip them, imprison them, mutilate them such as knocking out their teeth or gouging out their eyes. If the master wanted to get rid of them, he could kill them, and some would throw them to wild beasts or crucify them. The ancient world was cruel.

This was the world of rebellion in which God was leading his people. It was a world in which slavery was as normal as marrying and having children. It was never God’s intention for it to be this way, but the world refused to listen to God and set up its own systems and ways of living. One of the horrifying results was slavery. When Moses was giving the Law to his people, slavery was an accepted practice, but he instituted laws that provided some measure of protection, and there were ways that slaves could be set free every seven years in the Sabbath year and every 50 years in the year of Jubilee where all debts were cancelled and property rights restored to the original owners. A major step was taken in ancient Israel. But still, the ancient world was steeped in injustice and in the disregard for the rights of certain people. It takes time to change a way of thinking that is so deeply ingrained in individuals and societies.

But when Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God, his long-range vision was the reestablishment of God’s perfect reign on earth where all such injustices would be eliminated. He inaugurated the reign of God in Israel, in a way different than most had imagined. He did not establish the kingdom through force but through forgiveness. The kingdom did not come with a sword but with seed that would penetrate the hearts of people and cause them to change from the inside out. As people

changed, as enough people changed, those changes would work their way out into families and households and communities and villages and nations.

When Paul took this message of the kingdom of God into the Gentile world, he found a world where slavery was rampant. As he preached, some slaves as well as masters found Christ, and his churches were composed of people from every walk of life – the rich and the poor, Jew and Gentile, free men and slaves. Paul had to provide starting points for how these groups were to treat one another as members of the family of God within their slavery-accepting culture

The fact that Paul addressed slaves at all was remarkable. By speaking to them, he was showing that they had worth to God. They were not property. They were people in the image of God. Paul was trying to get them to see that Christ was with them even during their demeaning position in life and that they could perform their duties as if they were doing them for him. In verse 5, he told them to do their work as if to Christ. In verse 6 he said that they should consider themselves slaves of Christ. In verse 7 he told them that they could perform their service as to the Lord and in verse 8 he said that the Lord would reward them for all that they did.

But still, some say, “Fine, but that is not enough. Why didn’t Paul call for the abolition of slavery?” That’s easy for us to say because we are the beneficiaries of centuries of the spread of the Gospel and Christian teaching, of changes in governments where abolition can take place, and of changes in the overall unacceptability of practices such as slavery. But it wasn’t that way in the ancient world. We must remember these facts.

1. Christianity itself was in a dubious position. For a while, it was protected within Judaism, but as it spread outside the bounds of Israel and into the Gentile world, it had less protection and in some places and times in the Roman empire, Christianity was illegal, just as it is illegal in some countries today. We must not think that Paul could just stride into the Roman Senate and propose a bill for the abolition of slavery. Or that while he was on trial before Nero he could say, “Mr. Emperor, I want you to set me free, and while you are setting me free I think it would be a good idea to set all the slaves free too!” That would get his head chopped off. Maybe that’s why he did get his head chopped off. In a way, it is why Paul got his head chopped off because he was preaching allegiance to another king, Jesus, and proclaiming him as Lord and this Lord did have plans to free the slaves. But getting back to the point, we must not think that Paul and any others had any type of political power. They had none. They had only the power of the kingdom of God to transform lives.
2. Second, and closely related, Christians were still a minority. Why should people listen to them? Paul was not going through the world founding mega-churches with community clout. The only so-called mega church in the first century was in Jerusalem. All others were house churches of about 30-40 people scattered throughout the world.
3. Third, slavery was so woven into the fabric of life and so widespread, that it would have disintegrated society to have liberated them all in one motion. It’s not the U.S. where slaves could escape the South and go to the North. In that time, they had nowhere to go.

And so, the apostles did something else. They lit a fuse with a bomb at the end of the fuse. They addressed slaves and their masters and the way they addressed them guaranteed that the fuse would burn and the bomb would go off and the result of it going off would be freedom and a new order in society.

So ... to get back to the original question, does the Bible condone slavery? And the answer is “absolutely not.” Instead the Bible is written to people in which slavery is so rampant that the only way to solve the slavery issue in the long run is to change people’s perspectives on how to treat one another. This is what Ephesians 6:5-9 is about and on our next broadcast, we will look closely at what Paul said.