

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 4, 2020**

**SLAVERY AND THE BIBLE:
WHATEVER YOU DO (11)**

Colossians 3:22-4:1

Slavery is not a pleasant subject. The word “unpleasant” doesn’t even begin to describe the history of slavery in America – the involuntary servitude of African-Americans that began in 1619 with the arrival of 20-some Africans in Jamestown. It is a stain on our national soul. America’s “original sin,” it has been called. It was a heinous evil perpetrated against a people group created in the image of God solely on the basis of the color of their skin for the economic benefit of those who enslaved them.

By the time of the Civil War, out of a total US population of 31 million (22 million in the North and 9 million in the South), there were nearly 4 million black slaves in America. The whole economy in the southern states (and, to a significant degree, the economy of America as a whole) was built on the foundation of this “peculiar institution,” which dehumanized an entire race of people. It took a Civil War at the cost of more than 600,000 American lives (possibly as many as 800-850,000 according to a new estimate) to abolish slavery in America. Not that the abolition of slavery righted all the wrongs done to African-Americans, or brought an end to racism in America; far from it. As we know all too well, though we have made great strides forward in combatting the evils of racism, we can’t pretend that discrimination, prejudice, and injustice based on race do not still exist.

If you want to know what life was like for a slave in ante-bellum (pre-Civil War) America, you may want to watch the movie *12 Years a Slave* or read the book of the same title by Solomon Northup. It is not a pleasant film to watch. But it is definitely eye-opening. Or, read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which had a profound effect on popular opinion about slavery, especially in the North, in the years leading up to the Civil War. If you’ve read it before, read it again. When President Lincoln met her in 1862, he reportedly said: “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this big war!” Like *12 Years a Slave*, it is eye-opening. Or, you might want to read the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass’s autobiography, published in 1845; or, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, by Harriet Jacobs, originally published in 1861. A more recent book is Colson Whitehead’s novel, *Underground Railroad*, which tells the story of two runaway slaves and their journey to freedom.

From the arrival of the first African slaves in America in 1619, the institution of slavery became part of the American way of life, especially (but not only) in the South. By 1804, all the Northern states had abolished slavery or adopted laws for its gradual abolition. In the South, many pastors and theologians defended the institution and practice of African-American slavery on the grounds that Jesus and the writers of the New Testament never specifically condemned slavery or called for its abolition, and that slavery actually benefitted

slaves who, if they had remained in Africa, might never have heard of Jesus or been introduced to the teachings of the Bible. Church leaders and church members alike, possibly including some of our own ancestors, convinced themselves that enslaving other human beings created in the image of God was compatible with the message of the gospel and the teachings of God's Word.

Here is what we have to say about that: *They were wrong. Period.* There is just no way to reconcile the practice of slavery in America with the message and teachings of the Bible. They had a blind spot that had terrible, horrible, evil consequences – not only for the millions of persons who were enslaved but for themselves as well.

We could wish that Jesus had addressed the question of slavery directly. We could wish that Paul and Peter and James and John had laid out the implications of the gospel as it relates to slavery more definitively. I wish they had. But the fact that they didn't doesn't mean we are left in the dark about it. Nor does it mean that the involuntary enslavement of human beings by other human beings is somehow a non-essential of the faith that should be left up to the conscience of the individual.

America is not alone in its complicity in slavery. Slavery in America began, of course, when what became the United States were British colonies. Due largely to the tireless efforts and influence of William Wilberforce, the British Parliament outlawed the slave trade in 1807 and finally abolished slavery in the British Empire in 1833, just 3 decades before our Civil War. Slavery has existed in one form or another in virtually every empire throughout history. Sadly, it still exists today, particularly in the forms of human trafficking for sexual purposes and economic slavery, in which poor and powerless people are forced to work in sweatshops for little or no wages in other parts of the world. One Christian ministry engaged in the effort to rescue people trapped in sex trafficking and economic slavery is the International Justice Mission (IJM). Mary Sue and I have tremendous respect for IJM and support its ministry.

In the 1st century AD, at the time when Jesus lived and when the New Testament was written, slavery was embedded in the structure of life in the Roman Empire. According to John Stott, "slavery seems to have been universal in the ancient world." It is estimated that there were as many as 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire (Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, 250). As much as one-third of the populace of cities such as Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus were slaves (Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 544; quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 203). Slaves largely made up "the work force, and included not only domestic servants and manual laborers but educated people as well, like doctors, teachers and administrators. Slaves could be inherited or purchased, or acquired in settlement of a bad debt, and prisoners of war commonly became slaves. Nobody (questioned) or challenged the arrangement." It was simply an accepted fact of Mediterranean economic life (Stott, 250).

This is not to suggest that slavery in the 1st century was a picnic. It was not something to be desired. At the same time, while the abuse of slaves by their masters was not uncommon, by the time of Jesus the conditions and treatment of slaves had improved measurably. Slaves under Roman law in the 1st century could generally count on eventually gaining their freedom.

Almost half of slaves were set free before the age of 30. Unlike slavery in America, 1st century slavery was not based on race. Nor was it, for most, a lifetime sentence.

Pastor and author Tim Keller says that slavery in the Greco-Roman cultures of the New Testament was more like indentured servanthood. It is not what we normally think of as slavery. When we see the word “slave” in the Bible, we may immediately think of the race-based, African slavery in 17th, 18th, and 19th century America. When we do that, Keller says, when we read the Bible through that prism, we are likely to misunderstand the Bible’s teaching. Keller cites theologian Murray Harris, who wrote a long chapter in his book *Slave of Christ* on what slavery was like in the 1st century Roman world. Harris points out that slaves were not distinguishable from anyone else by race, speech, or clothing. In most cases, they looked and lived like everyone else. They were not segregated from the rest of society in any way. In addition, this may strike us as very strange, but slaves were sometimes more educated than their masters and in many cases held high managerial positions. From a financial standpoint, slaves made the same wages as free laborers and were often able to accrue enough capital to buy their freedom. And, as already noted, very few persons were slaves for life in the 1st century. Most expected to be freed after about 10 years or by their late 30s at the latest.

In contrast, slavery in America was race-based, and its default mode was slavery for life. In addition, as we know, the African slave trade was started and sustained through kidnapping, which the Bible unconditionally condemns in 1 Timothy 1:9-11 (where Paul names slave traders along with adulterers, murderers, liars, and perjurers among those who are ungodly, unholy, and living contrary to the gospel) and both Exodus 21:16 and Deuteronomy 24:7 (where Moses declares that kidnapping and enslaving or selling another person is punishable by death; that is how serious it is).

So, while the leaders of the New Testament church, like Paul, encouraged slaves to “get free if you can,” they didn’t go on a campaign to end it. But many 18th and 19th century Christians (like Wilberforce and John Newton in England, and ant-slavery advocates in America) did work for the complete abolition of both the slave trade and “New World-style” slavery itself, because it could not be squared in any way with the teaching of the Bible (Sermon by Tim Keller, November 5, 2006; Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ*).

You may wonder: “Well, why didn’t Paul and the other New Testament writers call for the abolition of slavery as it existed in the 1st century?” It is not an easy question to answer authoritatively, since Paul and Peter and the other New Testament writers do not tell us. I share with you John Stott’s answer to the question, because I think he has much wisdom and insight:

“If the New Testament does not explicitly condemn slavery, it does not condone it either. Although there have been varying degrees of degradation in slavery at different times and places, and although [African]-American slavery was worse than Roman, Roman [worse] than Greek and Greek [worse] than Hebrew, yet the Christian conscience must condemn slavery in every form. Its evil lies neither in the servitude it involves (for Jesus voluntarily made Himself a slave to others, and so did ... Paul), nor even in the element of compulsion, but

rather in the ownership by one human being of others which degrades them into subhuman goods to be used, exploited and traded, and in the cruelty which often accompanied this.”

There is a pragmatic reason, Stott says, why the New Testament did not advocate for the abolition of slavery: “Christians were at first an insignificant group in the Empire. Their religion was itself still unlawful, and they were politically powerless.” There were other reasons, too, such as the availability of means for Roman slaves to gain their freedom and the more humanitarian treatment of slaves in Roman society in the 1st century (Stott, 255-256).

That the relationship between a *doulos* and a *kurios*, between slaves and their masters, was a relevant issue is seen in the fact that both Paul and Peter speak directly to it. Peter speaks to Christian slaves in 1 Peter 2:18, urging them to “be good servants to your masters – not only to good masters, but also to bad ones” (MSG). That wouldn’t be easy to do, would it?

Paul, in addition to what he says in Colossians (3:22-4:1) and Ephesians (6:5-9), gives Titus instructions for Christian slaves (2:9-10). Perhaps most significant, the New Testament includes a letter from Paul to Philemon, a leader in the church at Colosse, about a runaway slave named Onesimus, whom Paul led to faith in Christ, and how this alters the landscape of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. No longer are they simply master and servant. Now they are brothers in Christ.

As far as we know, there were far more slaves in the New Testament church than slaveholding masters. Philemon was in the minority. Most of the followers of Jesus in the New Testament church were from the lower classes of society. But, as Paul declares in Galatians 3:26-28, writing not just to the believers in the Galatian churches but to all of us who belong to Christ: “You are all sons [and daughters] of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” *The Message* says this: “In Christ’s family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are in a common relationship with Jesus Christ” (3:28).

Do you hear that? Do you see that? It is not that distinctions of race or ethnicity or language or sex or age or social status or political influence don’t exist anymore. They still do. It is, rather, that in the church, where Jesus is Lord and every person counts, these distinctions do not matter. The ground at the foot of the cross is level. *Everyone*, regardless of social position, is invited to come to Jesus. *Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord in faith will be saved (Romans 10:13). *Everyone*.

Let there be no doubt that slavery in America was a stain on our national soul, a stain that remains long after the end of the institution of slavery. There is no doubt that many churches, pastors, and Christians wrongly tried to justify slavery on biblical grounds and were guilty of mistreating men, women, girls, and boys created in the image of God and endowed by God with dignity and worth.

They – those who defended slavery in America and engaged in it – were wrong. Just as anything short of opposition to racism in all its forms is wrong.

Lord, may our hearts be right with you. May our hearts be right in all our relationships. May we rightly understand Your Word. May we apply it rightly in every area of life.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.