

Slaves and Masters Addressed (6:5–9)

The stains of slavery in America color our perspective on ancient slavery and impact our interpretation of biblical passages on the matter. Retaining slavery after the Revolutionary War was the great failing⁶ of the founding fathers, who admitted as much even to themselves but left p 147 it to subsequent generations to rid the country of such terror. From our perspective today, it seems common sense that no person should own another, so how did the early Americans justify the practice? A second question follows, namely how did later pro-slavery and abolitionists read their Bibles concerning slavery? These questions will be examined after looking at Paul's injunctions to slaves and owners.

In Paul's day, slavery was not based on race or religion, but on fate, chance, or birth. Defeated armies and peoples were enslaved, those captured by pirates were held as slaves, and many slaves were born to slave mothers. Slaves might be better educated than a free man or woman, have better living accommodations and might hope to gain their freedom, and with it, Roman citizenship. These slaves were household slaves living with wealthy families, and might even own slaves themselves. Other slaves rowed in galley ships, worked in mines or in fields, and died in the gladiatorial games. Yet all slaves shared this in common: they were owned by another. Their low status extended to the marketplace and public venues, where they were expected to honor all free and freed people. For many, the slave was an animal with a voice that could be abused with impunity. Owners had sexual access to both their male and female slaves, and their behavior towards slaves was known to be rough and indecent. Many prostitutes (male and female) were slaves. Husbands were not to treat their wives as they did their slaves, as seen in a first-century CE divorce filing wherein the wife defended the separation because her husband treated her as he did his slave.⁷

In Paul's injunction to slaves, several points should be noted. First, Paul speaks directly to slaves, something not seen outside the New Testament. Greco-Roman authors spoke to masters about treating slaves kindly, but never addressed slaves directly. Second, Paul commands that slaves obey their masters, but he does not stop with that injunction for he would be telling them nothing they did not already know. Paul expounds on what this obedience looks like. He asks that they assume a posture of fear and trembling. A similar request was made to wives, that they fear (respect) their husbands (5:33). In Phil 2:12, Paul asks that all believers work out their salvation with fear and trembling, a posture suitable before God. Thus in Paul's time, fear or respect is that which is owed to the person p 148 above you in the social hierarchy. Paul stresses that fear and respect is the proper attitude owed by humans to their God.

Paul observes that slaves actually have two masters: the earthly master, who may or may not be charitable and kind, and a heavenly Master who is just, good, rewards generously, and who is the Master of their owner as well. They should look to this second master when performing their tasks in obedience to their earthly owner. As is true of any believer doing a task, the focus is on humility of heart before Christ. Paul cautions them not to serve only when the master is watching, thereby giving a false impression of their work ethic. Their service should come from their heart, which is set on Christ's promises that good and faithful labor will be rewarded. He uses similar language when writing to the Galatians about his apostleship. He asks them whether his gospel message indicates that he is trying to please people (Gal 1:10). He answers that, far from pleasing people, his gospel indicates that he is a slave of Christ. To both the Romans and the Philippians Paul introduces himself as Christ's slave (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1). This association became a marker of Christian leaders, as seen in Jas 1:1 where the Lord's brother identifies himself as a slave of God and of the Lord.

So far what has been said about working humbly for Christ and not for others would apply

⁶ The failure to establish longstanding treaties with the Native Americans is a second, closely related failure, which was likewise recognized by Washington, Jefferson, and others.

⁷ Glancy 2002: 21.

to any job situation. But Paul is speaking here about slavery, not simply particular tasks an employer might require. The slave had no rights, no freedoms, no hope outside of his owners' goodwill. She had no opportunity to marry, and could not raise her children as she determined, for both depended upon her master. The male and female slave's life was not their own; even more, their life was judged by the honor culture as the most shameful. To this reality I wish our text had cried out "Freedom for all." Perhaps a close reading reveals as much, as we turn to examine Paul's charge to owners.

Paul commands masters to do the "same things" to their slaves (TNIV: "in the same way"). Paul has connected owners and slaves under one Master, Christ Jesus. He now asks that masters treat their slaves with the same humility and sincerity (see Col 4:1), with the knowledge that Christ expects just, fair, and kind treatment. Paul elaborates that masters must cease from intimidating their slaves, frightening them with threats of beatings, abuses, separation from their birth children, and bodily injury. Such cruelty was not outlawed, although some philosophers such as Seneca spoke against such abuses. Paul declares that owners who treat p 149 their slaves harshly should expect similar treatment from their heavenly Master, who shows no favoritism to someone with a higher social status. Before God, in other words, the owner is stripped of all social privilege and is judged on how they treated another human being, who might also be a believer. With this underlying assumption, Paul undercuts the power of the institution of slavery and its attending reliance on social rank and status. However, it would be another 1700 years before the church engaged in serious reflection on the institution of slavery. The discussion between abolitionists and proslavery proponents is instructive as a window into reading the Bible as faithful followers of Jesus.

In 1861, Philip Schaff presciently wrote that the matter of human equality for African Americans involves more than simply the issue of slavery itself, "the negro question lies far deeper than the slavery question."⁸ But his observation went undeveloped as Americans debated the institution of (black) slavery. Faithful churchgoers turning to the Bible for answers were guided by

several presuppositions. For example, they saw the individual as the supreme authority in interpretation. Common sense guided the reading, which focused on a literal meaning that did not take into account the historical distance between the biblical period and their own. Individual verses read in isolation took precedence over the biblical author's overarching concerns or sentiments. The tendency to see the Bible as holding propositional truths and to downplay both the historical context and the narrative of God's redemptive story further undermined their efforts.

A "straightforward" reading of the Bible crashed against the rocks of the abolitionist claims. Jonathan Blanchard, an abolitionist and the first president of Wheaton College, Illinois, declared that "abolitionists take their stand upon the New Testament doctrine of the natural equity of man. The one bloodism of human kind [from Acts 17:26]:—and upon those great principles of human rights, drawn from the New Testament, and announced in the American Declaration of Independence, declaring that all men have natural and *inalienable* rights to person, property and the pursuit of happiness."⁹ The abolitionist argument was complex and nuanced, and looked to historical context and current philosophical conversations for additional perspective. They argued that the spirit of the p 150 gospel spoke strongly against slavery, while the letter of certain individual passages might admit to its practice. In this they differed from the proslavery position, which believed it came to the Bible with no preconceptions, preferences, or biases. The proslavery proponents urged folks to read the Bible on their own and make up their own minds. If another came to persuade you otherwise, ask them questions about other doctrines. They were sure to be unorthodox in other areas, which indicated they did not hold the Bible in highest esteem. The stress on individualism, common sense, and practical theology were rooted in part in the American experience of democracy and capitalism. Thus was established an either/or argument that gave the false choice of accepting slavery and biblical authority, or dismissing both. The preacher J. W. Tucker said to his confederate audience in 1862 that "your cause is the cause of God, the cause of Christ, of humanity. It is a conflict of truth with

⁸ Noll 2006: 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

error—of Bible with Northern infidelity—of pure Christianity with Northern fanaticism.”¹⁰

The proslavery group believed that they read the Bible without preconceptions but in a common sense manner. Slavery seemed commonsensical because of the underlying belief that the black was inferior. However, even white abolitionists had trouble seeing the black person as fully and equally a brother. Ironically, the black man’s inferiority was not argued from the Bible (aside from the distortion of Gen 9:22, 25, which posited a “curse” of black skin color on Ham¹¹) but from experience.¹² Sadly, proslavery proponents did not recognize their hermeneutical shift, maintaining instead that all evidence for their conclusions came directly from Scripture, even statements such as the following by James H. Thornwell: “as long as that race, in its comparative degradation, co-exists side by side with the whites, bondage is its *normal* condition.”¹³ Later in the same address, he continued that Africans were at the bottom of the social ladder because of their level of aptitude and culture, and “people are distributed into classes, according to their competency and progress. p 151 For *God is in history*.”¹⁴ Here racism is rationalized as God’s plan, which must be accommodated for the good of all by the institution of slavery.

Not until the civil rights movement did the country face head-on the racism that was floating under the surface of the slavery debate. Today racism is widely decried as unacceptable and antithetical to the Christian gospel. Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, the civil rights movement raised questions of gender equality as well as racial equality. The roots of both go back to the civil war arguments, where proslavery proponents warned that freeing the black man would only lead to women desiring the vote. The abolitionists often rejected that charge, but there was truth to it. Facing racism directly opened the way to address patriarchy. A number of American Christians today struggle with questions about the proper role of women in the church and home. The position of male headship is often connected to

issues such as abortion or gay rights, and the claim is made that a denial of the former implies acceptance of the latter. Additionally, male headship is seen as the conservative alternative to liberal theology, which relegates the Bible to secondary status. The similarities to the proslavery argument, which matched the abolitionist position with a denial of biblical authority, are sobering. What is called for is a careful discussion with all cards on the table, including the historical context of the biblical writing, individual readers’ experiences, and a nuanced approach to the biblical text that recognizes the predisposition each reader and every generation bring to the hermeneutical task.

¹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹¹ This was a common argument, but completely misrepresented Gen 9:22, 25, which states that Canaan was cursed.

¹² I purposely refer here only to men, as the arguments about women’s equal standing (black

or white) in society were just beginning to take hold.

¹³ Noll 2006: 63.

¹⁴ Ibid., 63.