

**SERIES:** God's Prisoners

**SERMON 6:** "Challenging Questions for Christians: The Bible on Slavery and Racist Christians" (Part 1)

**TEXT:** Philemon

**DATE:** July 20/21, 2019

## **ORIENTATION**

Series...

Sermon Application Guide...

"Challenging Questions for Christians: The Bible on Slavery and Racist Christians" - Philemon as a case study in the larger theological picture...

BLOG OFFER MORE RESOURCES...

## **FIRESIDE**

Baptism - next week... If you've made a commitment to follow Christ as Lord and Savior, this IS your next step... Maybe you've been putting it off...

## **PRAYER**

Ephesians 2

Heavenly Father,

We thank you that you have made a way for us to be a part of your family.

You know us by name and you call us your own.

As we look to your Word we ask that you would speak to us.

Open our hearts to the work of your Spirit.

Give us wisdom and understanding

May our identity as your children lead us to be more like you.

Bind us together as the unified body of Christ so that we might reflect your heart to the world around us.

- Mission Team

## **SERMON**

### PICTURE

The picture is of Henry Bibb who was born in 1815 and died at the young age of 39, but not before having an impact as an abolitionist. He had been a fugitive slave from Kentucky and became a leading abolitionist, eventually having to move to Canada to avoid being arrested and returned to Kentucky. In his mid-30's he wrote a book called Narrative of the Life and Adventures of an American Slave, a story about his own experience.

One of the issues facing those who were trying to overturn slavery in our country before the Civil War was convincing a certain kind of slave owner or defender of slavery that slavery was wrong. These were owners and advocates who argued for treating slaves well or defended themselves by saying they, unlike so many others, treated THEIR slaves well and lovingly and like family or like employees. This was a common way that professing Christians, back in the days when slavery was legal, for example, defended owning slaves, or, even if they didn't own slaves, defended the institution of slavery.

So Henry Bibb, in his book, writes an account of a slave auction to show one of the fatal flaws in this kind of thinking. Here is a condensed excerpt from his book:

Mr. Young [a devout Methodist] never was known to flog one of his slaves or sell one. He fed and clothed them well and never overworked them. He allowed each family a small house to themselves with a little garden spot whereon to raise their own vegetables; and a part of the day on Saturdays was allowed them to cultivate it. [He's the poster boy of a benevolent slave owner and as we learn in his narrative, many of his slaves were even member in his Methodist church, which was a rare thing.]

In time, he became deeply involved in debt, and his property was all advertised to be sold by the sheriff at public auction. It consisted of slaves, many of whom were his brothers and sisters in the [local Methodist] church.

The first man offered on the block was an old gray-headed slave by the name of Richard. When they had bid him up to 70 or 80 dollars, one of the bidders asked Mr. Young what he could do, as he looked very old and infirm? Mr. Young replied by saying, "He is not able to accomplish much manual labor,

from his extreme age and hard labor in early life. Yet I would rather have him than many of those who are young and vigorous; who are able to perform twice as much labor because I know him to be faithful and trustworthy, a Christian in good standing in my church. I can trust him anywhere with confidence."

This giving him a good Christian character caused them to run him up to near two hundred dollars. His poor old companion stood by weeping and pleading that they might not be separated. But the marriage relation was soon dissolved by the sale, and they were separated never to meet again.

After the men were all sold they then sold the women and children. They ordered the first woman to lay down her child and mount the auction block; she refused to give up her little one and clung to it as long as she could while the cruel lash was applied to her back for disobedience. She pleaded for mercy in the name of God. But the child was torn from the arms of its mother amid the most heart-rending shrieks from the mother and child on the one hand, and bitter oaths and cruel lashes from the tyrants on the other. In this way the sale was carried on from beginning to end.

There was each speculator with his handcuffs to bind his victims after the sale, and while they were doing their writings, the Christian portion of the slaves asked permission to kneel in prayer. [What he's talking about here is after the sale was ended and papers and receipts were being completed.] While bathing each other with tears of sorrow on the verge of their final separation, their eloquent appeals in prayer to the Most High seemed to cause an unpleasant sensation upon the ears of their tyrants. They were soon raised from their knees by the sound of the lash, and the rattle of the chains, in which they were soon taken off by their respective master—husbands from wives, and children from parents, never expecting to meet until the judgment of the great day.

**Having thus tried to show the best side of slavery that I can conceive of, the reader can exercise his own judgment in deciding whether a man can be a Bible Christian and yet hold his Christian brethren as property, so that they may be sold at any time in market, as sheep or oxen, to pay his debts.**

We're going to look at two really challenging questions for Christians regarding slavery and racism this weekend and next weekend.

Why doesn't the Bible prohibit slavery? (Week 1)

How could Christians have ever been defenders of and participants in European and American slavery? (Week 2)

We're exploring these questions today because we're in a series working ourselves through highlights of the Bible, we've been doing this for almost three years and we're coming to an end, and today we find ourselves in a little New Testament book, an epistle called Philemon, where the subject of slavery is featured and provides an opportunity for us to explore some tough questions.

The fact that the Bible doesn't prohibit slavery and the fact that many of our theological forebears owned slaves should bother us. If we're going to be people of God's Word, as most of us want to be, we need to get our heads around this.

- We need to be able to address this question cogently and sensitively because these issues are a stumbling block to a lot of people, including the next generation in our churches, often keeping them from following Jesus. Parents, this is huge for the next generation.
- We need to address this and learn to respond to this because it can't be ignored by a church seeking to be even more multicultural and multiracial.
- And we need to address this and really learn to respond because of our tendency to offer simplistic, insensitive, ignorant, or arrogant responses.

In fact, one of goals for this sermon and next week's sermon is to raise our sensitivity and to equip us to respond. I don't imagine that simply listening to this sermon and even taking notes will equip you, but I do hope I help set the tone of what such a response might look like. I've prepared a post for Sunday/today with lots of easily accessible resources, many that I used in preparing this sermon. I hope you go and take a look and read at least a couple of them. I've also attached the manuscript of this sermon since I'm going to speed right past some very important points that won't even be in the notes.

Philemon is the shortest letter of Paul that made it into the New Testament. It's only one chapter, so there are no chapter/verse identifiers, just verses. 25 verses.

The apostle Paul is in prison, most likely in Rome. He wrote a letter to the church in Colossae, located in what is today modern Turkey. At the same time, he wrote a letter to Philemon, a member of the church there, a rich man that hosted the church in his house.

He wrote to Philemon because one of his slaves, named Onesimus, had run away and had probably stolen from Philemon. We don't know how or why Onesimus, the runaway slave, ended up meeting Paul in prison. The best guess is that he wants to go back to Philemon, maybe he feels guilty or his prospects aren't good as a runaway slave, so he probably goes to Paul, to get help, and Paul leads him into a relationship with Christ. He's now a Christian.

So Paul writes this letter to ask Philemon to accept Onesimus back without reprisal. To receive him back as a brother, not a slave, which may or may not be a request to set him free.

Here are a few things to notice as I read.

First, Paul is going to use some of the most emotive language of all his letters when he describes his love and personal connection with Philemon's slave, Onesimus.

Second, Paul is going to pull out all the stops in trying to persuade Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a brother in Christ without penalty. It could be read as rhetorically manipulative, but too much is on the line. A man's future is on the line.

Third, don't read this through the eyes of American chattel, race-based slavery. Chattel mean ownership. Onesimus isn't enslaved because of his race or ethnicity. Slaves had some rights, they weren't property, unlike slavery in hour past.

Let's read, starting in verse 8.

**Philemon 8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— 10 that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.**

**11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. [Play on words...]**

**12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.**

**17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. 20 I do wish, brother, that I may have 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 ask.**

**22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.**

**23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 24 And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.**

**25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.**

### **Why doesn't the Bible prohibit slavery?**

The first thing you need to notice with this question is that the Bible doesn't prohibit it.

NT slavery was different and more regulated than American and European slavery of Africans. The same for OT slavery. In fact, it was progressive compared to other cultures of it's time when it came to slavery for Hebrew people.

But there's BIG problem. **There is ethnic-based, chattel slavery in the Old Testament law.** And it's really difficult to know how to address it.

Leviticus 25: **44** “Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. **45** You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. **46** You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly.

And it doesn't seem like foreign slaves are included in the release of slaves on the year of Jubilee. Periodic release seems to be restricted to Israelites.

So you have ethnic-based, chattel slavery. This is similar to the kind of slavery we had in our country.

Okay, what's an answer to this? Why doesn't the Bible prohibit slavery and instead chooses to regulate it and even condone it, as it does in this verse?

1. The OT law for Israel as a whole mitigates abuses of foreign slaves. It does so in at least two ways: the abundance of OT laws that protect foreigners living among them certainly apply to foreign slaves as well, and there are constant reminders that they (the Israelites) were once slaves. It's hard to imagine that these laws and reminders would have applied to ALL foreigners living in Israel, slave or free.

Just one example from an abundance of laws like this one—Exodus 22:

**21 “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.”**

This is very different from the chattel slavery of our past.

But it's still troublesome. After all, isn't owning someone oppressing them?

And why not just abolish slavery of foreigners right from the start?

I don't know.

But I suspect this is part of larger questions about how God's laws functioned in the OT (it's very different than most of think), larger questions about God's judgment on the nations around Israel, and larger questions about how God brings salvation through judgment and suffering.

[On how the OT laws functioned very differently from what we think, listen to a six episode series on The Bible Project Podcast starting [here](#).]

2. **Slavery in biblical times (Old and New Testament) was not as open to the abuses of the chattel, race-based slavery of our nation's past.** For instance, in NT times, urban slaves were often highly educated, owned homes, and in many cases even received salaries. In fact, it had a lot of similarities to someone who had been drafted into the military then and now. Both are a form of forced labor except slaves had the advantage of being able to buy their way out and those drafted into military service had the advantage of time limits on their service, unless they died fighting, of course. It was not as open to abuses as slavery in this country, but it was still open to abuses because the powerful will always prey on the powerless.
3. **Ownership is always about stewardship in the Bible.** I often use the example of a kid's room in a house to explain biblical stewardship. Parents refer to the room as their room. The kid refers to as "my room." But when they grow up and the parents have turned the room into an office or something else, and they say, "What did you do to my room?" the parents always respond with, "'My room'? It was never REALLY your room." In a biblical worldview, we are never owners, God is the owner of everything, and we are stewards, managers of God's stuff. Biblical principles of good stewardship of what belongs to God would certainly apply to slave ownership.
4. **God reveals more and more of himself and of his wisdom and will as the Bible progresses.** Theologians call this "progressive revelation," meaning that God doesn't reveal the whole picture right away. Progressively through Scripture and over time God reveals more and more of his plan, himself, and his will.

What Paul says to Philemon –"Receive him back not as a slave, but as a brother" (Philemon 15-16)—takes it a step beyond the OT.

What Paul says to Timothy condemns chattel slavery. In 1 Timothy 1:8-11 Paul lists slave trading in a list with murderers.

It's also Paul, reflecting on the truth revealed in Christ, who says, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, you are all one in Christ Jesus" in Galatians 3:26-29.

Which leads to the next next point.



5. **The Bible completely undermines the practice of slavery and actually provided the strongest arguments and motivations for ending slavery.** It does so by what it says about the dignity of humanity in God's sight (made in his image), what it says about slavery and slaves, and by the way it regulates the practice of slavery.

A great case can be made that reason and logic alone (even Enlightenment reasoning) cannot and didn't end slavery. Also a great case can be made that it was people with consciences FORMED by a biblical worldview (even if they themselves weren't Christians) that provided the moral reasoning for ending slavery.

In her book *Confronting Christianity*, Rebecca McLaughlin offers an analogy or illustration of how the Bible and Christianity undermined slavery, even though it never prohibited it.

"In a climactic scene in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the merchant Antonio stands in court in fear for his life. Not thinking all his ships could be wrecked, bringing him financial ruin, Antonio has signed a contract entitling the money lender Shylock to a pound of his flesh if Antonio defaults on a loan. Now Shylock wants to take his bond. Portia, a brilliant woman who has cross-dressed as a lawyer, first pleads with Shylock for mercy. When her persuasion fails, she acknowledges that the pound of flesh is owed. Shylock is delighted. But as he prepares his knife, Portia stops him: the bond, she points out, says nothing about blood. He can take his pound of flesh. But if Shylock sheds one drop of Antonio's blood, his own goods will be forfeited to the state.

"Setting aside the complex anti-Semitism of the play..., this scene offers us a powerful paradigm. Portia affirms the law she cannot change: Shylock can take his pound of flesh. But she construes the law in a way that makes it impossible for him to harm Antonio. She is unquestionably on Antonio's side, and her argument saves his life.

**"The New Testament argues against slavery the way Portia argues against Antonio's death: by cutting the legs out from under it. Jesus inhabited the slave role. Paul calls himself a slave of Christ, loves a runaway slave as his very heart, and insists that slave and free are equal in Christ.**

**With no room for superiority, exploitation, or coercion, but rather brotherhood and shared identity, the New Testament created a tectonic tension that would ultimately erupt in the abolition of slavery."**

That's my best answer to the question, Why doesn't the Bible prohibit slavery? I don't find it satisfying. I don't think I'll ever discover or come up with an answer that's totally satisfying. It's frustrating.

But if we're going to be truly biblical, we need to live with some tensions that we can't resolve. In other words, the best responses to the questions may not satisfy us personally, but we have to understand that our understanding is always limited, especially compared to God's wisdom and knowledge. Our understanding of Scripture should always be held with humble conviction and confidence.

But it helps me to know three things:

- While the Bible never prohibits slavery (for reasons that are only known by God), it does provide the greatest reasons for abolishing it and it played a major role in the abolition of slavery.
- Humanity, not God, instituted the evils of slavery. There was no slavery in the Garden and there'll be no slavery in the New Creation.
- God's Word and God's actions in Christ provided nourishment and hope and even joy to millions of enslaved black people in this country. They relied on the God who became a slave for our sakes. We say servant, but it's the same word for slave. He was shackled and lynched for our sakes. He took on himself the evil of humanity on the cross, willingly and lovingly, the King, dying for his people. And we celebrate it every week as we partake of communion...