

Jason Upchurch - Selected Scriptures - What Does the Bible Say About Slavery?

Before we get to our passage in Ephesians this morning, **turn to James 3:1.**

I want to apologize to you for sharing incorrect information two weeks ago during my sermon. I did so unknowingly, but it's very important to me to correct the record.

During the sermon on fathers in Ephesians 6, I mentioned a statistic done by Lifeway that said if a child comes to faith first, there's a 3.5% probability the rest of the family will come to faith. If a mother comes to faith first, there's a 17% probability the rest of the family will come to faith. And if a father comes to faith, there's a 93% probability. And the idea is that the role of the fathers in their family is outsized. Later that evening someone asked me if I could share the links to those statistics - sure, no problem.

So the next day I was getting the links all ready to text and I realized I was sending him a link to where the study was cited, but hadn't actually seen the study itself. I had seen several references to the same study, but not the actual data. So I tried looking for the study itself and couldn't find it. And while I was looking I came across a article critiquing the study itself as being non-existent. It turns out the statistics are most likely a complete fabrication that have been repeated so often that people just take them as factual. People from Lifeway and Baptist Press - which are associated with reputable-ish sources - repeat them as well. But what became clear is that when people were citing these statistics, they never showed the study.

Ironically, I mentioned in my sermon then my general dislike for statistics and now I like them even less. But I feel it's important for you to know these things. As a teacher, I want you to be grounded in truth. It does us no good to rest in statistics or narratives that are untrue. Things that are not true are called what? Lies. And we don't want that. We need to be people of integrity and especially from this pulpit God expects truth. **Read 1-5**

Teachers will be judged with greater strictness. We will be held to a higher account because what we say and do affects the lives of many people. Added to that reality is that we all sin with our mouth. Everyone does.

So we've got these 2 realities: everyone stumbles with what they say and teachers will be judged more severely. It's like an intersection of 2 freeways, there's bound to be collisions.

So two things: 1, I stumbled with passing along these fake statistics when I should have dug deeper - so I apologize. Maybe you think this is a small detail, but I want you to understand we're committed to truth.

2 - This is an encouragement to all of us to ensure that the information live by and we pass along is grounded in truth. We want to make sure every aspect of our lives and what we're sharing is the truth. It doesn't just go along with our narrative, or sound good at first glance. We don't want to say something just because it's culturally correct and fear what the world might think of us. We want to do due diligence in live by the truth in every aspect of life.

With that, let's **turn to Ephesians 6.** And we're going to talk truthfully about a very difficult topic: slavery. **Read 5-9**

We've been looking through this household code in Ephesians, how wives and husbands are to treat one another. How fathers and children are to relate to one another. Those have been controversial enough and are often controversial even among professing Christians. The idea that wives would submit to husbands in every area of life is really hard for people to wrap their minds around even though the command is simple. Husbands loving their wives sacrificially and leading in the home is rejected as much verbally, but functionally men just simply don't do it. Children obeying, fathers being responsible. What are we? Ogres? The world looks at all of this as though we are backwards, products of some bygone era.

But if you look around the world, for all the claims of progress and equality and pop-parenting models we're kind of a hot mess. Modern therapeutic techniques for marriage and child-rearing haven't made society any better. Turns out the Bible's view on the family is actually better.

Well, if that wasn't enough we come to another issue that is not only foreign to us but also a difficult subject to talk about in polite society which is slavery.

Just as a way of heads up, this morning is going to feel more like a Bible study than a sermon. We're going to look at this passage briefly, but I want you to see the landscape of the Bible and how the Bible treats slavery so we can sort of get our bearings.

Big Picture: We need to be honest with what the Bible says about everything. Here, we need to be honest about slavery.

Americans somehow think that we are the only civilization in the history of the world to have dealt with slavery. It's just not true. Slavery exists right now. If you use any electronic device at all somewhere in the supply chain is slavery: gold, precious metals, batteries. If you wear shoes made in China there's a good chance the conditions the workers live is something awfully close to slavery.

The government has told us that there are hundreds of thousands of children missing that came across the southern border. It doesn't take a genius to realize where those kids have ended up. Slavery exists in all areas of the world, some areas are just more open about it than others.

I am not pro slavery in any way. Even talking about how the Bible approaches slavery with other people - if you don't give enough caveats - people will accuse you of being pro-slavery or racist or whatever. But as we'll see, some types of slavery were very functional for the survival of society and the protection of people. And God regulated it.

So we need to talk about it, we need to be grounded in what the Bible has to say. As we've said with other issues, we should never be ashamed of what the Bible has to say about something. We don't have to apologize or even caveat the truth that the Bible says that Christian slaves need to be good slaves. And that Christians masters need to be good masters.

Turn to Genesis 12. The Bible is not shy about slavery at all. It openly talks about it basically from cover to cover. The best I can tell the earliest mention of slaves are those owned by Abram in **Gen. 12:4, 5** "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people they had acquired in Haran and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. **Gen 12:4,5.**

And just in case "people he had acquired" is too vague **Gen 12:16** talks about Abraham going down to Egypt where Pharaoh "dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels."

He had multiple male slaves, multiple female slaves and they are listed among his property. His assets and possessions along with donkeys.

Later in Genesis he takes some 318 men - both kinsmen and slaves - and goes to rescue Lot who is captured. We don't know the exact number of each, but given that Abram doesn't have any children, and his nephew is the only other family member we know about - he probably owned a lot of slaves. This is not a small operation.

Just for comparison he had more slaves than most of the founding fathers. George Washington controlled almost the exact same amount - 317- at Mt Vernon. Some he owned, some he leased from other people, some were sort of inherited from his wife's late husband. Jefferson had between 200-600, Madison had 100 or so, Patrick Henry had maybe 90. These are all guys we're supposed to cancel today because they owned people.

Compared to Abram those were rookie numbers, he put most of those guys to shame. And he is the father of our faith. In fact, the only way you get to heaven is if you are a child of Abraham. And the only way you become a child of Abraham is through faith in Jesus Christ. It's by faith in Jesus that we inherit the blessings and promises God gave to Abraham, the slave master. And God never tells Abram to release any of the slaves as a condition of his covenant. Never tells him to release them as a mode of obedience as an heir.

By the way, all your favorite Bible heroes had slaves too. Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, David, Solomon, Philemon.

The reality was common that the Bible says in **Romans 6** that everyone who has ever been born is a slave. We are conceived as slaves - doulos - of sin. Sin is our master, our owner and we do the will of sin.

Once we become Christians we're set free, aren't we? Well, sort of. We're no longer slaves of sin, we're slaves of what? Righteousness, slaves of Christ.

That word doulos in Greek or ebed in Hebrew simply means slave. It's used over and over throughout the Bible to refer to the people of God in reference to God and his people. It's not the only term used, but it's a common one. And we should be okay with it.

Many translations try to soften the language using the term servant or bond servant. As much as I love the ESV, on this particular translation issue I am disappointed. The ESV actually has a whole paragraph in the preface explaining how they try to avoid using the word slave because "the word "slave" currently carries associations with the often brutal and dehumanizing institution of slavery particularly in nineteenth-century America. For this reason, the ESV translation of the words ebed and doulos has been undertaken with particular attention to their meaning in each specific context." (ESV Preface "Translation of Specialized Terms")

I know you might think we're in the weeds a little here, but what they're saying is the ESV translation is influenced by how people feel about a word. That's kind of crazy. Especially since the US isn't the only place on the planet or in history where slaves existed.

I actually appreciate the NIV, NASB and LSB for just saying slave. Because that's literally the word that's used.

Why make a big deal of this? Because this is one more area that people reject the Bible. And they expect us to walk on eggshells when talking about the subject of slavery all the way down to the translation philosophy of our Bibles. We need to push back on that.

I don't need to apologize for slavery in the Bible or in America. I've never owned slaves, my dad didn't, neither did my grandpa or great grandpa. No one alive today was a slave, nor their fathers or grandfathers or great grandfathers. The civil war was 150 years ago. We don't need to cow tow to anyone. We can just look at what God says.

Look at Exodus 21. Exodus is broken up into 3 parts. There's the Exodus story itself, in chapter 1-19. That's Israel as slaves in Egypt, the plagues, the Passover, the Red Sea. Then there's the law in 20-34, then there's the building of the Tabernacle in 35-40. Well right after God delivers Israel from Egypt and gives the 10 commandments, the very first set of laws God gives is about slavery. **Read 1-11**

Now if this is the first time you've read the law this could sound kind of crazy because of our modern context. But you need to understand that Israel was just slaves in the land of Egypt. In fact, look at the beginning of the 10 commandments really quick: **Read 20:1-2**

So God says: You were slaves, I rescued you, I delivered you - now I own you and you're going to do what I say. And that includes how they treat their own slaves.

But back in 21, we see that God regulates slavery. There are servitude limits. 6 years was the max. However you came in, that's how you went out. Sometimes slaves got married to other slaves and had babies. There were exceptions there as well. If you had been a slave for 5 years and your new wife was a slave for 2 years you couldn't just take her with you. There had been an arrangement - we'll see that a little later.

And when you got married, you understood those arrangements. You went in eyes wide open. And, if you loved your master, there was a reasonable option for you just to be a slave all your life. Maybe he was radically

wealthy and treated you well and provided security and your whole family was tied up there, you could have him drive an awl through your ear and serve him forever.

That sounds beyond the pale to us, but it imagines an indentured servitude that we just don't understand.

A man selling his daughter as a slave sounds abhorrent until you realize she's not to be mistreated in any way. She could end up being the heir of the estate. If you're a poor father and want to ensure a good life for your daughter, you might arrange with the rich guy down the road for her to work for him with the hopes that one day she marries into the family. And then she is afforded all the protections of the rich man.

But it says he might sell her! Or the son might not like her. You realize, the rights she would have as a slave are basically the same as what she would get right now as a divorced woman. Food, clothing, more children. This is actually greater than the rights of most women in America right now when they get divorced.

This is actually God's means to keep her safe and protected and provided for. We might not like it, but when you compare the actual situation then to what we deal with now, are we actually saying it's a bunch worse? I don't think it is.

Notice this in **Vs. 21:16. Read**

What do we do with this information? Well, what we need to understand is that man-stealing - which is basically what chattel slavery was all about - is in fact wrong. You don't just go kidnap people or plunder people and keep them and own them. When we think of the Atlantic slave trade triangle there were a lot of guilty parties. The Africans who sold the slaves, the English who shipped the slaves, the Americans who bought the slaves. That's all man-stealing.

The act itself is wrong. Punishable by death. All of Joseph's brothers should have been executed. Jacob should have just offered all of them. But what happened? Joseph was the best slave he could possibly be, God was with Joseph the slave and made him into Joseph the king. What the brothers meant for evil - and it was truly, truly evil - God meant for good. That's **Genesis 50:20**.

Now, we've seen that slaves have rights. There's a time limit, there are marriage opportunities, there's even the opportunity to become a permanent willing servant. And masters need to treat slaves well. **Read 20-21**

What seems to be discussed here is the difference between first degree murder of a slave - which is not allowed - and corporal punishment of slaves, which could be harsh.

This is the ugly reality that slaves are actually very hard to motivate. If you read George Washington's diaries he is often lamenting how lazy his slaves are unless he's right there watching over them.

Why are they lazy? Because it's hard to get motivated to do work when it has no lasting benefit to you. So how masters usually motivate slaves is through corporal beatings or threats of beating.

But these beatings had to be regulated. **Read 26-27**

Slaves - just like other people in Israel - were subject to corporal punishment. Beatings and lashings. Our society is used to the penitentiary system. If someone commits a crime, you lock them up. That's actually not biblical - there's no precedent for warehousing humans in the Bible.

And it's not historical. For most of human history that's not what you did with criminals.

In Israel if someone did something wrong, there were basically four options. You could fine them. You could expel them from the country. You could beat them. Or you could kill them. Those were basically the four options. There's no jail or prison.

So **Deut. 25:1-3** says if you've got a guy who's guilty the judge can sentence him to lashings in proportion to the offense, but not more than 40 lashings. Forty or more lashings, God said, would degrade the person - it would be humiliating.

I remember being a kid and reading the news of Michael Fay who got caned in Singapore. Do you remember that? He was an American who was in Singapore and he pled guilty to stealing road signs and vandalizing cars. So he was sentenced to 6 lashings - basically beatings. We cringed - how barbaric! This is how the world worked forever.

The US army beat soldiers who were out of line for the longest time. I'm reading a book on Magellan and sailors used severe corporal punishment to keep order. There was no adult time out in prison that's just not a thing.

Honestly, I think public corporal punishment might do our society good, but I digress.

There was no jail, there was lashing. But there were limits. Well, what about slaves? They're your property. And so if there's rebellion or theft or whatever you don't take your slave all the way to the town elders, the master just doles out the punishment. With limits.

And something we need to understand is that the fact that there were limits to punishment, and release structures for humiliation, was wildly different than the world around them. That fact that slaves had any rights at all was very different than the pagan world.

We might think: why didn't God just abolish slavery? He could have made it illegal, he could have outlawed any ownership. Why doesn't he.

And the answer is that we have societal structures around us that make it somewhat unnecessary. **Turn to Lev. 25:39-46**

One reason slavery was financial protection. This sounds odd to us, but what happens in now if you become destitute? You could get social security, get food stamps, welfare payments. Just go get another job somewhere. That stuff didn't exist back in the day. And so if you became poor, one option was to go sell yourself and your family to a rich neighbor to provide for you. **Read Lev. 25:39-46**

So we see that slaves were to be treated like brothers. What about foreign slaves? What's that about? Well, what that's about is that Israel was to go destroy the nations in the promised land. There was to be no mercy for those inside the Promised Land. And they were to defend against foreign invaders. Well, if you captured foreigners - outside the land - in war you could either kill them or make them slaves. Buy them, sell them, whatever. The limits to abuse still existed, but the timeline didn't. Why? Because they were foreigners.

God made a distinction between the covenant people and those outside. Those outside the covenant very rightly could have been put to death. Instead they were to live as slaves.

You could buy people out of slavery. **Read 47-55**

We call this the right of redemption. You can redeem people in slavery and set them free. This is actually an amazing picture of the gospel: Jesus is our kinsman redeemer. He took on flesh to buy us out of slavery. His redemption becomes our Jubilee. He paid the price we owed to be set free from sin. It's a beautiful picture and it comes from this very passage.

What about the NT? Maybe this is just OT rules, how does the NT treat slaves? **Turn to Luke 7:1-10**

When we enter the NT, Israel is under Roman control and estimates were that 1/4 to 1/3 of Rome's population was a slave of some kind. Either a debtor slave - someone who owed money and served their time.

Or a punitive slave - someone who had committed crimes, or was a prisoner of war - and served as a slave.

There were lots of reasons for slavery, some of which were man-stealing, others were just part of the system. And we see some of this. **Read 7:1-10**

We're familiar with this, but I think it's instructive on a lot of levels. First, the centurion loved his servant enough to ask Jesus to heal him. He was valued - or loved is the idea - by this guy. We often have this adversarial idea of slaves and masters. Sometimes that was the case, but many times it was a good arrangement, like we saw in the OT. The rich man was taking care of the poorer brother, like an actual brother. This seems to be the case here.

Jesus also doesn't demand The slaves, release. The word used here is doulos, slave. And there's no emancipation demanded by the Lord. "I'll heal him if you set him free." None of that. Just healing and gratitude.

Actually, this gentile is commended for his great faith. He has more faith than anyone in Israel. How can this slave master be a brother? Because he believes. Jesus isn't interested in our common hand-wringing about slavery, he shows genuine human compassion.

Turn to Acts 12:12-17. This is the somewhat funny story of Peter being released from prison by an angel. Remember that? And so he goes back to where the believers are praying for him. Watch this. **Read**

This is interesting. Who refuses to open the door? A Slave girl. Paidiske. A younger girl who is a slave. This is John Mark's mom. How can she own a slave and the apostles just be okay with this? How is that possible? Why wouldn't Peter and John and the other apostles denounce her for owning a girl?

This is the Roman world. Christianity was not a social movement, but a Kingdom that grew and included slaves and free, male and female, Gentile and Jew.

Last one. **Turn to 1 Cor. 7.** This little gem is actually buried in a chapter that is primarily about marriage and divorce. Paul says don't get divorced and if you do don't get remarried. Either reconcile or stay true to your vow.

That's a principle from a great teaching that it's okay to simply live as you're called, even if you're a slave. **Read 7:17-24**

So what do we see? If you're a slave, don't worry about it. If you can obtain freedom, do what you can. But don't stress about it. Their slavery is actually a picture of the gospel.

If you're a slave and a Christian, you've been freed by Jesus from sin and guilt.

And even if you're a free man, guess what? You're a slave to Jesus.

The only rule here is don't become a slave. Why? Because you were already bought by Jesus.

And like Paul says, be best slave you can possibly be. Bloom where you're planted. That's the Christian ethic. No matter where you are in life, you can please the Lord in your situation.

Jesus didn't come to free all the slaves. Jesus came to buy slaves for himself. Every one in this room is a slave. Either a slave to sin, in which case you need to repent and come to faith. Or a slave to Jesus in which case you need to honor him in every aspect of your life.

We'll look more at Paul's teaching in a couple weeks.

Pray