

A Hard Word to Hear - Part 1

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[0 : 00] Amen. Amen.

It just seems fitting that the preamble to our nation's constitution.

But I also read it because as I was preparing, I sensed that it just came to mind.

I sensed the Lord brought it to mind because it makes a connection. It helps me to establish a point in the sermon for this morning. Our nation's preamble, the preamble to the constitution reads as follows.

Whereas 481 years ago, the rediscovery of this family of islands, rocks and keys, heralded the rebirth of the new world.

[1 : 58] And whereas the people of this family of islands recognize that the preservation of their freedom will be guaranteed by a national commitment to self-discipline, industry, loyalty, unity, and an abiding respect for Christian values and the rule of law.

Know ye therefore, we the inheritors of and successors to this family of islands, recognizing the supremacy of God, and believing in the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, do hereby proclaim in solemn praise the establishment of a free and democratic sovereign nation founded on spiritual values and in which no man, woman, or child shall ever be slave or bondsman to anyone or their labor exploited or their lives frustrated by deprivation and do hereby provide by these articles for the indivisible unity and creation under God of the commonwealth of the Bahamas.

The preamble to our nation's constitution makes a very solemn promise. When you read the words, it really makes just one promise. And the promise is this, that we will be a nation in which no man, woman, or child should ever be slave or bondsman to anyone or have their labor exploited or their lives frustrated.

When I read those words, I can't help but think back to one of the darkest eras in human history, which is the transatlantic slave trade, also called the Euro-American slave trade, which resulted in the enslavement of our forefathers on these islands, rocks and keys.

Time nor my emotional capacity will allow me this morning to talk about the horrors and the evils of the transatlantic slave trade and the slavery it supported.

[4 : 43] But I think it's sufficient to say that those horrors and those evils inflicted by one group of humans on another group of humans are perhaps unmatched in demonstrating the depths of human depravity and the sinfulness of man.

And this morning, as we continue our sermon series in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we come to a passage in which slaves are commanded to obey their masters.

It's in verse 5 of chapter 6. And I wonder, how do those words land on your ears when you hear them?

Many people do not read passages in the Bible like this one that we have come to this morning that calls slaves to obey their masters without connecting what they read to the transatlantic slave trade and the slavery it supported.

and they wrestle with how can such a command, this command, be in our Bible. And what makes it worse is that there is well-documented evidence beyond dispute that within the European and American enslavement of Africans, the Bible was commonly used as a tool to keep slaves obedient to their slave masters.

[6 : 38] Indeed, some Christians, notable Christians, undoubtedly Christians, owned slaves. the call in this passage before us for slaves to obey their masters is a hard word to hear.

And some people, including Christians, struggle with it. And perhaps you may be one of those who struggle with it. Well, this morning, I want to ask that you would give me your ear as I seek to address this hard word from these verses that we have come to this morning in our week-by-week study in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians. And I pray that by God's grace at the end of this sermon and as I will explain a bit more next week's sermon, if you do struggle with these verses by the grace of God, you will not.

So please follow along as I read from Ephesians chapter 6 verses 5 through 9. And I'm reading from the English Standard Version, but I'm reading from the 2007 text, not the 2011 text, because in the 2007 text edition, the word slaves is used rather than born servants.

So please follow along as I read Ephesians chapter 6 beginning in verse 5. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart as you would Christ.

[8 : 44] Not by the way of eye service as people pleasers, but as servants of Christ doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man.

Knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.

Masters, do the same to them and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven and that there is no partiality with him.

Let's pray together. Father, we bow our hearts this morning asking that you would speak to us from your word.

Lord, would you cause us to hear your voice in the preaching of your word? Would you help me to stay within the four corners of your word?

[9 : 58] Would you help me to be faithful to the truth of your word? Lord, I pray for any who may struggle with this passage that you would help them to so posture their hearts that they would hear what you will say to them and indeed to all of us.

Would you glorify yourself in the preaching of your word? We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. This passage that we have come to this morning reminds me of an important characteristic of the Bible that we would all do well to remember and it is this.

The Bible does not address everything we want to hear, but it does address everything we need to hear. And that's because Scripture is sufficient.

Scripture is not inadequate. Scripture is sufficient. It is sufficient for everything that we need that pertains to life and that pertains to godliness.

And it's true about this passage we have come to this morning. This passage which gives us instructions or which gives believing slaves and believing slave masters instructions about how they should live in the context of slavery in the ancient Roman world.

[11 : 34] It does not address every single thing that we may want to hear about slavery, but it does address what we need to hear about how God called believing slaves and believing slave masters to conduct themselves in the system of slavery that existed at that time.

When I began to prepare this sermon, it was my intent to preach a single sermon, but it soon became clear that I would better serve you by separating it into two parts, and rather than have two sermons that hopefully would have been, will be short, or rather than having one long sermon that definitely was going to be long, we'll now have two sermons, which hopefully will be short.

So how should we approach this passage that calls slaves to obey their masters? And I believe a two-part approach is best.

First, we need to consider the passage historically, and ask the question, what did this passage mean in Paul's day? And then second, we need to consider the passage contemporarily, and ask the question, how does this passage apply in our day?

And so my goal this morning is to answer the first question, the historical question, and then the Lord willing, next week I'll seek to answer the second question, the contemporary question.

[13 : 15] So let's consider the passage historically. What did this passage mean in Paul's day? And to get into the answer to our first question, I believe it's important to ask an even more basic question.

And the basic question is this, what does this passage say? Now that might seem like an unnecessary question, but it really is an important question, it is a foundational question.

We don't have a chance of correctly understanding the meaning of this passage in Paul's day, or how it applies in our day, if we misread what the passage actually says.

I remembered, as I was preparing, it came to mind, this is a number of years ago, I was talking with a brother, and we were discussing a particular passage, we were on the phone, and each time he would refer to this passage, he would misquote the passage.

And I said to him, it doesn't say that. He said, what do you mean it doesn't say that? I said, it doesn't say that. And he went, and he read it, and he misread it again, missing out a very important word.

[14 : 35] And I said to him, it doesn't, he said, what do you mean, I just read it? And I said to him, no, you're missing that word, and that word made all the difference. And the truth is that what we're saying about the Bible is not just unique to the Bible, it's relevant to any literature that we would read.

If we don't accurately read what is written, we have no sure foundation of an accurate interpretation and an appropriate application when it comes to God's word.

So closely looking at this passage is important first to understand its meaning back in Paul's day, and then its application in our day.

So why do some people say that passages like this one support slavery? I think they do so because they make two critical errors.

The first critical error that they make is that they say that, well, when they read a passage like this, is what comes to mind is the transatlantic slave trade.

[15 : 52] that's what comes to mind when they read a passage like this. They have in mind the brutal slavery which our forefathers endured, that our Constitution's preamble says and promises that no one ever again in this nation would be subject to that kind of slavery.

slavery. They have in mind modern slavery. They have in mind a slavery that is foreign to what this passage and similar passages in our Bible speak to.

They have in mind something that took place 2,000 or so years after what the Bible actually speaks to. they don't have in mind ancient slavery, they have in mind modern slavery.

And there are some major differences between ancient slavery that was practiced during the times of the Old Testament and the New Testament and modern slavery which we are familiar with.

Modern slavery was based on race and it resulted in the enslavement of black people. On the other hand ancient slavery, the slavery in Paul's day was not based on race.

[17 : 18] Slaves came from all races of people so no one race was enslaved. Modern slavery was based on the kidnapping of African men, women and children by kidnappers who traded in human cargo.

And they sold these bodies to slavers from Europe and America. However, the kidnapping of people for enslavement was prohibited in Bible times.

For example, the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy chapter 1 verses 8 to 10 wrote these words. Now we know that the law is good if anyone uses it lawfully.

Understanding this, the law is not laid down for the just, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.

those of you who have the English Standard version would notice that there's a footnote number two after the word enslavers, and the definition at the bottom of the page is those who take someone captive in order to sell him into slavery.

[18 : 49] If you have the King James version, instead of enslavers, the word men-stealers is used. If you have the international version, instead of enslavers, the word sorry, in the new international version, the term slave traders is used, and if you have the new American Standard Bible, the word kidnappers is used.

So in biblical times, kidnapping people for the purpose of slavery, it certainly did take place. That's why there's a law against it. That's why scripture prohibits it and condemns it.

But it was not something that scripture supported. Scripture condemned it and therefore it is condemned forever.

Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 8-10 that the law is laid down against such sinful conduct, like the kidnapping of people and their forced enslavement.

But modern slavery was based on kidnapping, and so the Bible would not support that. And so it is a gross misrepresentation of scripture to read passages like the one that we have come to and to bring to mind modern slavery, the face of which is the African slave trade.

[20 : 17] Scripture clearly and explicitly is against that, against the enslavement people by kidnapping.

Another aspect of modern slavery that is different from ancient slavery is that modern slavery was eternal slavery. Ancient slavery was not.

Except in very rare cases in modern slavery where a slave owner, for any number of reasons, maybe he's dying, or some other reason, may free his slaves.

The norm was in modern slavery, it was eternal. Many were born slaves and they died as slaves. And even in cases where they may have been freed simply because of the society and the view that people of a particular color were to be enslaved, they were seen as runaways and they would be either killed or they would be pressured back into slavery.

On the other hand, ancient slavery was not eternal. No doubt some people did experience being born slaves and died as slaves, but that was not the norm.

[21 : 45] The vast majority of those who were slaves were only slaves for a period of time, a specified period of time. For example, in the nation of Israel, Jewish slaves could only be slaves for up to six years.

And on the occasion of the year of Jubilee, it didn't matter how long you had been a slave, all the slaves were set free. And so you may have been intended to be a slave longer than a particular period, but if you became a slave one year before the year of Jubilee, you were set free when the year of Jubilee came around.

Now, since the slavery of Paul's day was not modern slavery, as we know it, what was it? Well, first of all, in the context of the Roman Empire, which was the context in which Paul was writing these words, about 25% of the Roman Empire comprised of slaves.

And in those days, people were slaves for various reasons. One was, they were just captured in war. And while that might seem cruel, you think about it.

If there was a war and your conquerors, those who defeated your nation, they said, listen, you have a choice. You could be our slave or you could, we'll kill you.

[23 : 18] And I think most of us know the choice we'll make. Some were slaves also because they sold themselves into slavery, not having the ability to pay their debts.

They face economic hardship and so they sweat the debt off for a particular period of time. And obviously some were born into slavery.

But the experience of slaves in ancient times varied greatly. Listen to the words of Bible scholar Dr. Tom Schreiner as he describes slavery in Paul's day.

He writes, many slaves lived miserably, particularly those who served in the mines. Other slaves, however, served as doctors, teachers, managers, musicians, artisans, and could even own slaves.

It would not be unusual for a slave to be better educated than the master. And Dr. Schreiner goes on to say, those who are familiar with slavery from the history of the United States must beware of imposing our historical experience on New Testament times slavery, or New Testament times sin slavery, in the Greco-Roman world was not based on race.

[24 : 48] And American slave owners discouraged education of slaves. Still, slaves in the Greco-Roman world were under the control of their masters, and hence they had no independent existence.

They could suffer brutal mistreatment at the hands of their owners, and children born in slavery belonged to their masters, and masters could beat them, brand them, and abuse them physically and sexually.

So ancient slavery was a mixed bag in many different ways. Different races, different circumstances that brought them into slavery, some temporary, some permanent, some well-educated professionals, and generally treated well, and others were manual workers, and regularly mistreated and abused.

So it is a misinterpretation of Scripture to read passages like Ephesians 6, 5 through 9, and think about modern slavery. That's not what is in view, that's not what is being addressed.

That's the first critical error that some make when they come to passages like this. The second critical error that some people make when they come to passages like this is that they make the mistake of saying that the passage says what they believe it means rather than what it actually says.

[26 : 35] This is something that we have to just be so careful about when we approach God's word. We have to ask the question, what does this passage say?

And some carelessly read it and they say, oh, the Bible supports slavery, and in their mind it's modern slavery. slavery. But the truth is that God gave his word, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, in particular contexts which people lived.

And these passages that we have that address words to slaves and to slave masters, for example, it comes to people living in a context where slavery was part of the reality.

And oftentimes what we would find is that the word of God simply comes and it would more so regulate what was being practiced, but is really silent on the issue of commending it or condemning it.

And the truth is, scripture is silent in both directions on ancient slavery. And so what we find in the New Testament, for example, is that writers like the Apostle Paul simply address readers in the situation and in the context in which they lived.

[28 : 04] And I would dare say that they address important realities, more important realities, than the reality of slavery.

And one of the ways I think we should think about this whole issue is that there's nothing that we endure on this earth, even the worst horrors, that is eternal.

Eternity is before us, and everything on this earth is transient, including the worst horrors that we endure. And so when it comes down to the priorities of addressing people in the context in which they live, what we find is that the writers, like the apostle Paul, they appeal to the higher and the greater and more eternal priorities than the particular circumstance that people find themselves in.

That is subject to change, even if it only changes when this world ends. is not written to all slaves. I think it's important to note as well that the apostle Paul in this passage and in other passages, whether it's Peter writing or Paul, they're not writing to all slaves.

This passage that we have come to this morning is not written to all slaves. It is written to believing slaves, it's not written to all slave masters, it is written to believing slave masters.

[29 : 48] And what Paul was doing was Paul was instructing them as groups in the church. And remember we've been working our way through this letter and we saw Paul addressing husbands and wives.

We saw him addressing children and their parents. And now he's addressing slaves and slave masters. He's addressing them in the context of the church because they're part of the church.

And this should give us a window into slavery at the time that these were individuals who, though they had a status in society where they were in some kind of enslaved situation, whether short term or long term, they were part of the church.

if we were to go to ancient Rome at the time, you were not going to see the slaves walking around with chains and shackles.

As Dr. Schreiner pointed out, some are doctors, some are running whole households. You would never tell going into the marketplace to know who was who because you could be of any race and be a slave.

[31 : 03] And so we see that in this particular context, what the Apostle Paul is doing is he is simply addressing a group of individuals in the church.

He's not addressing the issue of slavery. slavery. He's silent on the point, doesn't commend it, doesn't condemn it.

He's directing his words to believing slaves, not all slaves, and his purpose is to encourage them to live godly lives that are reflective of the salvation that they have received.

and it's clear from his instructions to the masters that he's not supporting slave masters over their slaves. And I think we need to recognize that Paul is not addressing them primarily as slaves.

He's addressing them as believers who happen to be slaves. he sees them as the new creatures they are in Christ, and they are defined by that as members of the church, but he recognizes their circumstance of slavery, but he doesn't address them, primarily identifying them as slaves.

[32 : 39] They are members of the church, and they have heard the gospel, and they have obeyed the gospel, they've responded to the gospel, and he's addressing them.

And we can imagine that as this letter came, and as it was read, there were slaves sitting there, and there were slave masters sitting there, and they were hearing this word come to them as members of the church who happened to be whatever they were.

And Paul is simply calling them to be faithful believers. faithful believers living in a hard and a difficult set of circumstances generally, and he's simply saying to them, you live out your new life in Christ despite whatever injustice you may be facing.

You live it out differently. And the whole idea would be that since he's not addressing all the slaves, not the unbelieving slaves, these believing slaves would be working alongside the unbelieving slaves, and they would be conducting themselves in a different way, not being I servants, but living and seeking to please the Lord in whatever they do.

and when we consider that passages like this were used in modern slavery as a tool to justify and to control slaves who were enslaved, it is sad that that took place, and it is a dark part of the history of the church.

[34 : 49] And so when we as believers read passages like this one that's before us, if modern slavery comes to mind, not that we read into this modern slavery, but if it triggers modern slavery, if it triggers the thought of it, and if it triggers how others would try to impose and superimpose modern slavery into this text, I think one of the ways that we can appropriately respond, certainly for those of us as we are in this country, and though many of us don't know the lineage and we don't know the history of forefathers who came here and who were enslaved here, we know that we're only here because they came and because they were enslaved.

And one of the things I think we can do is we can use this as an opportunity to thank the Lord for the gospel that has come to us that has changed our hearts and enabled us and enables us to truly not be governed by anger, not be governed by a sense of wanting to have vengeance and having bitterness to grip our hearts.

We can be thankful to the Lord that in the process the gospel has come to us and we can be thankful to the Lord that slavery finally came to an end. We can be thankful to the Lord that it was the witness of faithful men and women over many, many years who fought first for the end of the slave trade and then for the end of slavery itself.

We can thank God for his providential care in the midst of all of that. And for those who may be able to know the sad history of their own family that forefathers were engaged in slavery or supported slavery then like Daniel in Daniel chapter 9 you can identify with those sins not owning them because they're not your sins but identify with those sins and pray to the Lord concerning them and for those who think that this issue falls neatly along racial lines it really doesn't it doesn't the only reason that the trans Atlantic slave trade was possible was because Africans on the continent kidnapped their fellow brothers and sisters sold them into slavery and the reality is that there were also black slave owners in the history of the slave trade so things don't fall neatly on racial lines although there's predominance they still don't fall neatly along those racial lines and in truth there's enough sin to go around and there's enough reason for all of us to be broken by this horrific tragedy that took place over many centuries but not only did the apostle

Paul in this passage address slaves he also addressed slave masters and we will consider what he says to them next week when we turn our attention more directly to what he says to both of them I'll end this sermon by saying what I said at the beginning if there is ever a case study in the depravity of man and the depth of our sinfulness it must be the ability to take a person made in the image of God and enslave them and mistreat them without regard for the fact that they belong to God and while my aim this morning primarily was to show that there is a distinction between modern slavery and ancient slavery and this passage does not address modern slavery slavery it is in no way to paint a picture that ancient slavery was still some desirable way to live it was not because that's not what

[40 : 13] God intended created when he created mankind that's a part of fallenness that's a part of brokenness it is a part of a sovereign God who has allowed a humanity to go the way of their sin and sometimes we wonder about why does God allow this or that again without even knowing the reason we can land on the point of saying he is all wise he is all good and so for whatever the reason is though we may not know it it is a wise reason but let me just offer a thought in the direction as to why the Lord allows some of these difficult horrific things that we experience in this earth to go on and it's simply this God allows us to see the effects of disobedience one of the worst things that could ever happen to us brothers and sisters is for

God to give us our own way one of the worst things and God said before Adam and Eve the options of obeying him or disobeying him they chose disobedience and what we experience every bit of hardship that we experience on this earth slavery is the result of Adam's sin but the good news is that the last Adam has come and the last Adam has succeeded where the first Adam failed and we have this hope that we don't have in the last Adam in the last Adam all of us who have put our trust in him and when we put our trust in him we are better able and positioned to see these things as we ought to see them not be bent out of shape over them and to trust the sovereign

Lord in the midst of them all as I said next week we will turn our attention to part two and we will in earnest direct our attention to what Paul says both to slaves and the slave masters let's pray heavenly father we thank you for your word this morning and Lord we ask once again that you would speak to our hearts help us to put in perspective these words help us Lord to remember that there is coming a day when you will return and you will make all things right and I pray Lord that you help us to look for and to long for that day in

Jesus name amen