

**Colossians 16 – What the Bible says about Slavery**  
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We are in a sermon series on Colossians entitled Christ Above All. Today I am preaching on Colossians 3:22-4:1

*Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye service, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.*

My sermon is entitled What the Bible says about Slavery. I was going to address two major topics today – slavery and work. But my study on slavery yielded so much material that I decided to save preaching about work until next week.

I really want to cover this thoroughly today because many people have a misunderstanding about the biblical view of slavery. They think verses like these from Colossians means the Bible condones slavery.

I read from the New King James Version today because I think it gives a better translation when it uses the word bondservants rather than slaves. When we hear the word “slave” we tend to think it terms of the evil of race-based slavery as perpetrated in America by those of European descent against those of African descent.

It was a horrible evil that was condoned by slave owners because their misinterpretation of the Bible convinced them slavery was okay or they deliberately twisted what the Bible says for their own benefit.

They actually used verses of the Bible to justify their evil. For example – in the movie 12 Years a Slave a slave owner reads Luke 12:47 before a slave is whipped.

*And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.*

That verse has absolutely nothing to do with slavery. It is part of a parable about those who live sinfully because the Lord’s return is delayed. Those who are ready to meet God will be rewarded with eternal life and those who are not will receive eternal punishment. But slave owners took verses like this out of context and used them to justify their own sinful behavior by saying that the lord this verse talks about was them – the slave owners. That is totally wrong in every way. Biblically, humanly, morally. It was pure evil.

So – we tend to look at what the Bible says about slavery through the lens of American history – but I need you to set that aside for a moment as we look at slavery through the lens of the Bible.

I studied this out and found that slavery was very common in the ancient world – but the slavery in Israel and the Old Testament was different from the slavery in the nations around them.

Egypt was the first nation in the Bible to practice harsh slavery, which was imposed on the Children of Israel until God set them free. In those days, when nations went to war – the winner enslaved the people they conquered. Those who were conquered were considered property. These slaves were treated harshly and could be sold, traded, punished, raped or killed at the owner’s whim. Much the same as slavery was practiced in America.

That kind of slavery happened in Bible times, but that kind of slavery was unacceptable by biblical standards. In fact, both Old and New Testaments condemn enslaving people. Exodus 21:16 says:

*Kidnappers must be put to death, whether they are caught in possession of their victims or have already sold them as slaves.*

That’s Old Testament – here’s the New. 1 Timothy 1:9-10 says:

*We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers — and for whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.*

So – if God forbids slave trade – what does Colossians 3 mean when it says, *Bondservants, obey your masters?*

To understand that you must understand the meaning of bondservant. This was not talking about the harsh slave trade practiced in many ancient cultures and in America where Africans were bought and sold and treated as property with no rights.

In Bible times, a bondservant was someone who owed a debt they could not pay. So, they became a servant for the person they owed. And they worked to pay off the debt.

It’s what we call today an indentured servant. Indentured servants are people who came to America in the 17<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> centuries on a contract to work – usually for seven years. Someone paid the way for them to get to America and gave them food, clothing and shelter while they were here – and they were bound by contract to pay it back through labor.

Once they fulfilled their contract – they were free to leave. The fact that they were bound by contract made them bondservants.

This happened in Bible times when someone owed a debt they could not pay. They would have to work it off. I'll give you and Old and New Testament examples.

2 Kings 4 is the story of Elisha multiplying oil to help a widow. Verse 1 says-

*The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves."*

The KJV says bondmen. This means they would have to work to pay off their father's debt. They were not slaves for life – they worked until the debt was paid.

Jesus told a parable about forgiveness in Matthew 18. Verse 25 says -

*Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

This practice comes from the laws about servants in Exodus 21:2

*If you buy a Hebrew servant (as the result of debt or theft), he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, paying nothing.*

Here's another example in Leviticus 25:39-41

*If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. Then he and his children are to be released.*

This idea of bondservant is what Paul is talking about in Colossians 3. These are not slaves who were captured and made to work against their will. They were people in debt who contracted to work for the person they owed in order to pay off their debt.

And God gave strict rules about how these servants were to be treated. The fact that God had rules to protect those considered to be slaves was very different than the surrounding cultures.

God often reminded that nation of Israel that they had been slaves in Egypt. So, He commanded them to treat their servants well. For example – Deuteronomy 15:13-18 says:

*When you release a male servant, do not send him away empty-handed. Give him a generous farewell gift from your flock, your threshing floor, and your winepress.*

*Share with him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were once slaves in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you! That is why I am giving you this command.*

*But suppose your servant says, 'I will not leave you,' because he loves you and your family, and he has done well with you. In that case, take an awl and push it through his earlobe into the door. After that, he will be your servant for life. And do the same for your female servants. You must not consider it a hardship when you release your servants. Remember that for six years they have given you services worth double the wages of hired workers, and the Lord your God will bless you in all you do.*

Here's some of the regulations God gave about the treatment of slaves. Exodus 21:20 says:

*When a man strikes his male or female slave with a rod, and the slave dies under his abuse, the owner must be punished.*

That's obviously different from slavery in America where owners were never punished for the way they treated a slave. Exodus 21:26-27 says:

*When a man strikes the eye of his male or female slave and destroys it, he must let the slave go free in compensation for his eye. If he knocks out the tooth of his male or female slave, he must let the slave go free in compensation for his tooth.*

What I want you to see is that these bondservants had rights and they could not be killed or hurt without their owner being punished. Not only that – there could be no slave catchers. Deuteronomy 23:15-16 says:

*If slaves should escape from their masters and take refuge with you, you must not hand them over to their masters. Let them live among you in any town they choose, and do not oppress them.*

The biblical laws regarding slavery show that it was not the type of harsh enslavement of people that happened in America.

God took the treatment of slaves so seriously, that when Israel disobeyed God and kept bondservants longer than the prescribed time to work off the debt, God brought destruction upon them. He told the prophet Jeremiah to address this in Jeremiah 34:8-22. God told Jeremiah to tell Israelites to let all slaves go free. Israel obeyed but then changed their minds and took back the slaves.

*Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I made a covenant with your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I said, 'Every seventh year each of you must free any fellow Hebrew who has sold himself to you. After he has served you six years, you must let him go free.' Your fathers, however, did not listen to me or pay attention to me.*

*"Therefore, this is what the Lord says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom for your fellow countrymen. So I now proclaim 'freedom' for you, declares the Lord — 'freedom' to fall by the sword, plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth.*

God went on to say that Israel would be defeated in battle and made a wasteland due to their treatment of slaves. I want you to see that God takes this seriously.

Within the New Testament church, there was a momentous shift in terms of how slaves were viewed. For example, Paul makes it clear that in terms of status before God, there is no difference between slaves and free people in Gal. 3:28-

*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

1 Cor. 7:21-23 says:

*Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.*

The Bible is obviously not in favor of slavery! It is important to understand that slavery in New Testament times nor slavery under the Mosaic Covenant has anything to do with the sort of slavery that was practiced in America! Nothing can justify the historic slave trade, which is still a major stain on the history of the United States.

And I want to remind you that it was Christians who led the fight to end the slave trade in Europe and America. And they did it based on the Bible!

A Christian by the name of William Wilberforce led this fight in England. The movie *Amazing Grace* is about him and I urge you to watch it. Wilberforce was elected to the British Parliament in the late 1700's. He was deeply convinced that Britain needed to stop the practice of slavery. But, he knew that many people opposed abolishing slavery because of the money that was made by trafficking in people.

At that time, England was the largest slave trader in the world. Slavery was a huge part of the British economy. William Wilberforce felt called by God to do something about that, so he turned to a pastor named John Newton for counsel. Newton became his mentor. He challenged Wilberforce by telling him God has raised him up for such a time as this.

So, William Wilberforce took on the mission of abolishing the slave trade in England. But it did not happen overnight. Wilberforce introduced bills in the House of Commons to abolish slavery every year for 20 years.

He gave speeches, he prayed, he argued. He was criticized and ostracized and mocked, but he did not give up. He persevered in spite of receiving death threats and being assaulted.

And finally, on Feb. 23, 1807 – 20 years after William Wilberforce started – the British government finally voted to end the slave trade. All of Parliament rose to give Wilberforce a standing ovation, but he was so exhausted from the years of struggle that all he would do was sit and cry.

Due to William Wilberforce's persistence, millions of slaves were released from the bonds of slavery. And after that God unleashed a revival in Great Britain the sparked one of the greatest missionary movements in history.

This is a true story of faith, commitment and most of all, perseverance. But it is also a story about grace. You see – John Newton – the pastor who mentored Wilberforce in his quest to end slavery was a former slave trader. He was the captain of a slave ship and during one voyage his ship endured an eleven-hour storm on the Atlantic. Newton considered his survival a miracle, so he became a Christian. He gave up the slave trade and eventually became a minister.

John Newton also wrote hymns. In fact, John Newton wrote the most popular Christian hymn of all time. Amazing Grace – How sweet the sound – that saved a wretch like me - I once was lost, but now am found – was blind, but now I see.

John Newton was well acquainted with God's amazing grace. At 82, just before he died - Newton said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior."

A revelation of God's grace changed John Newton and challenged William Wilberforce to fight to end slavery. Many other Christians could be named in the fight to abolish slavery, which culminated with Abraham Lincoln in the mid-1800s.

Eventually, Christianity would overthrow slavery by denouncing it and by promoting the equality of man under God, and by teaching the principles of liberty and the brotherhood of mankind under Christ.

Some people deny it, but some effects of slavery are present to this day. James 5:1-7 talks about people who take advantage of others.

*Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.*

*...Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain.*

Down through history, evil people have enslaved people, held back wages, defrauded workers, abused them and even killed them.

The cries of those laborers have reached the ears of God - The Lord of Sabaoth. This is not Lord of the Sabbath, but Sabaoth, the Lord of hosts - meaning the master avenger who leads the armies of heaven.

What does this mean for us? Many of you came from ethnic backgrounds that were enslaved, stolen from, defrauded and even killed for money. And God says He hears the cry of every single victim from the past. And He promised to send the early rain and the latter rain together. Rain represents the blessing of God. The early rain represents the blessing that was stolen from your family. The latter rain represents the blessing that God wants to give you.

If you are African American, many of your ancestors worked their entire lives without pay. Even many of your recent family member worked for less pay than they should have received. God wants you to know that He hears every one of their voices and will set the books straight. Everything stolen from your ancestors has been stored up for the last days when God is going to send the former and latter rain.

If you are Mexican American, many of your family were exploited. God wants you to know He hears those voices and He will send the former and latter rain. This goes for every ethnic group or minority that has been stolen from. Native Americans who've had land stolen - women who've been paid less than men doing the same job - this goes for anyone who's been discriminated against for any reason.

God sees! God hears your voice! And He has promised to pour out the early and latter rain. Everything that the enemy has stolen from you and your family will be restored. You will be doubly blessed by the Lord!

Slavery stole the lives and livelihood of many African Americans, but God is sending prosperity your way. Racism devastated African American families for generations, but God is sending strong marriages and families your way. Racism stole the wages of many Hispanics and other minorities, but God is sending blessing your way! Everything that the Devil stole, with God's help you can get it back.

Satan is trying to block your blessings - but God wants to open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings on you!

The devil wants to block your career - but God wants to bless it!

The devil wants to destroy your family - but God wants to strengthen it!

The devil wants to steal your money - but God wants to increase it!

The devil wants to steal your health - but God wants you healthy!

The devil wants to steal your life - but God wants to give abundant life!

The devil wants to steal your joy - but the joy of the Lord is your strength!

The devil wants to keep you enslaved – but God wants to set you free!  
And he whom the Son sets free is free indeed!  
Where the spirit of the Lord is there is liberty.  
No weapon formed against you shall prosper and every tongue which rises against  
you in judgment you shall condemn.

So, we take authority over the enemy today in Jesus' name.  
We bind up racism and loose a spirit of reconciliation in Jesus' name!  
We love those who hate us!  
We bless those who curse us!  
We pray for those who mistreat us!  
Because of that, Jesus said that our reward will be great and we shall be called  
sons and daughters of the Most High! Hallelujah!