

Considering Slavery

1 Peter Series

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Please turn in your Bibles to 1 Peter 2. We're going to read up to verse 20 but we shall not be covering all of that. 1 Peter 2, beginning at verse 18.

18 Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. 19 For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. 20 For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.

"All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away, But the word of the LORD endures forever."

The title of my sermon this morning is "Considering Slavery." Peter now goes on to give us a fairly extensive amount of instructions that have to do with believers, instruction to those believers he is writing to who were slaves. He gives us a large body of instruction. The word "servants" as my Bible uses, dilutes the Greek word that is used. Peter is clearly addressing slaves, not servants; servants carries another connotation to us. We could have servants today that we would not regard as slaves, and that's not what Peter is referring to. The modern church, I'm sure, wishes that Peter had addressed servants rather than slaves in this passage because the idea of slavery is something that the hermeneutic can't handle. Hermeneutics has to do with the rules and the principles you use in order to interpret and understand Scripture. That's my hermeneutic. These are the tools and rules I bring and I consistently use those same rules to understand the whole of Scripture. The modern church's hermeneutic cannot handle slavery. If you have an arbitrary or inconsistent hermeneutic, it will be exposed by difficult passages and this is one such passage.

You see, for the most part, the modern mind assumes a common starting point when thinking about slavery, and what is that presupposed common starting point? Slavery is evil. No further discussion. No further elaboration. No further qualification is needed. We all know that slavery is evil. The modern Christian, without question, adopts the same presupposition. He never evaluates or subjects that presupposition to Scripture and so his

thinking on the topic is defective, actually it's worse than defective because now you can see his hermeneutic, because what he ends up doing is updating the Bible. He is improving on what the Bible has revealed. He has to improve on it. He is improving on God's ethical standard. That's his hermeneutic, "I have the authority and the responsibility to improve where I find something defective in the Bible." That's his hermeneutic.

When people feel comfortable improving upon God's perfect law of liberty, we have a problem that clearly demonstrates that their hermeneutic is woefully defective. It's all over the place. It's a shifting, malleable, bending, changing thing that fits into what they feel, fits into how they think. It is shaped by culture. It is shaped by all different other kinds of external influences. If someone's hermeneutic allows them to refine and civilize God's revelation, then they make themselves, or somebody else, but they make human ideas their highest authority and thus then adding to God's word becomes a necessary and vital component of their hermeneutic. But what is the check upon what people may contribute to the civilizing of the Scriptures? When adding to Scripture is needed in order to interpret Scripture and thus understand God's mind and will, then man has placed himself above God. He has the final say, and he does this in the guise of improving upon God's revealed morality.

How ought we to think about slaves and slavery? Well, the only way that we should think about it is by bringing our own mind, bringing the topic, bringing everything into subjection to what Scripture reveals about it. And early on in Abraham's life, the father of the faith, we have the incident with King Abimelech and Sarah, Abraham's wife. And after the king realized that Sarah and Abraham were married, we are told that then Abimelech took sheep, oxen, male and female slaves, my Bible says servants, slaves and gave them to Abraham, Genesis 20:14. He gave slaves to Abraham and Abraham said, "Thanks. Cool." The father of all who believed is a slave owner. Well, those were primitive years, primitive times, primitive days.

Then when Abraham sent out one of his slaves to go and find a wife for his son, Isaac, this slave ended up in the family of Abraham, actually his brother's son's daughter was Rebekah. His nephew was his brother's son and Rebekah was the daughter of his nephew. He ends up in their house and he is wanting to impress them, that you're going to give your daughter to this incredible family heritage and stuff, and he says to them about the stature and the importance of Abraham, this is how he describes the stature and the importance, "You're not coming to nobody." He said, "The Lord has blessed my master greatly and he has become great. He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female servants and camels and donkeys." He lists the slaves in there along with the livestock and the gold and the silver. This is a symbol of wealth, Genesis 24:35. They were his possession. He owned them. He could give them away. Horror of horrors.

Abraham's slaves were listed with all his other possessions. When God gave the covenant of circumcision to Abraham, he said, "He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised," Genesis 17:30. He who is bought with your money? You own him?

The 10 Commandments that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai are a distilled summary of all law. Any law throughout Scripture that you come across that God gave is traceable and connectable to at least one of those commandments. Everything. Thus the 10 Commandments are an absolute distilled summary of anything anybody could ever want to know about any moral issue were distilled into those 10 sayings. So that is God's distilled summary of law, and it's significant that twice in God's distilled summary of law that slaves are mentioned, and both times in the context of being owned by someone. Imagine that. The fourth and the tenth commandment: a person's animals and his male and female slaves were not to be put to work on the Sabbath; and it is forbidden to covet another man's animals, male and female slaves, his possessions. He is not to covet them.

You see, what Scripture makes clear, abundantly clear is that there is a legally established difference between a slave and a free person and that fact doesn't diminish the fact that the slave is a full human who is made in the image of God, has equal access to the grace and the mercy whereby someone becomes an eternal child of God. But people can't make a distinction there. They are incapable of doing that. You cannot impute evilness to the idea and condition of slavery because it promotes social inequalities because God established social inequality.

Scripture regulates slavery. It regulates slavery. Now, God doesn't provide parameters for something that is essentially evil. He hasn't given us parameters for prostitution. He doesn't do that. The modern world condemns the idea of slavery and gives parameters for prostitution. It gives parameters for abortion. These are the conditions, this is what you can and can't do with respect to abortion because in and of itself abortion is not evil. It condemns slavery, gives parameters for abortion. Abortion is essentially and completely evil. We do not give parameters for something that is evil. It's just, no. There is nothing even slightly virtuous in abortion. You cannot and do not give parameters to something that is essentially wicked.

God regulates slavery. He gives parameters. If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years and in the seventh year he shall go out free and pay nothing. If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself. If he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives to him a wife and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and the children shall be the master's and he shall go out by himself. But if the servant plainly says, "I love my master, my wife and my children. I will not go out free," then his master shall bring him to the judges, he shall also bring him to the door or to the doorpost and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl and he shall serve him forever. Exodus 21:2-6. The modern mind says horror of horrors. We've got to civilize that.

Did you ever notice when the children of Israel were leaving Egypt, they were slaves in Egypt, they were about to leave Egypt and Moses gives them the story about the Passover and what is needed and what they have to do for the Passover and who could eat of the Passover meal, and he says this, "Every man slave who is bought by money, when you are circumcised, he may eat the Passover meal." The slaves had slaves. Read Ezra and Nehemiah when the children of Israel left Babylon after 70 years of captivity, what do they leave with? Slaves. They had slaves. It was life. That's how it functioned.

Let's look at some more regulations. We're told if a man beats his male or female servant with a rod so that he dies under his hand, he shall surely be punished. Notwithstanding, if he remains alive a day or two, he shall not be punished for he is his property. Exodus 21:20-21. And again, if a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. If he knocks out a tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth. Exodus 21:26 and 27.

Also, no nation can survive if it allows kidnapping within its borders. Thus we read, he who kidnaps a man and sells him or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death. Exodus 20:16. You can read about that as well in Deuteronomy 24:7. In Deuteronomy 24 he is talking about you cannot kidnap an Israelite. We'll leave that for another day. Kidnapping is destructive of a nation. It destroys communities. It destroys security. It is the undermining of the ability of a nation to function in peace and harmony and, thus, Scripture makes kidnapping within a nation a capital crime. You kill the kidnapper. You execute him or her.

So you couldn't kidnap someone and put them into slavery, that's the idea, in your nation, but Israelites could buy slaves from other nations. It wasn't just war where you conquered and you took a slave. You could buy a slave from another nation. And there doesn't appear to be any kind of, "How do I investigate how this person became a slave?" There is nothing that says you have to qualify anything there. Moses said, "As for your male and female slaves whom you have from the nations that are around you, from them you may buy male and female slaves. Moreover, you may buy the children of strangers who dwell among you and their families who are with you which they begat in your land, and they shall become your property and you may take them as an inheritance for your children after you to inherit them as a possession. They shall be your permanent slaves. But regarding your brethren, the children of Israel, you shall not rule over one another with rigor." Leviticus 25:44-46.

In Leviticus 27, we've got a whole shopping list pricing slaves. Verses 3 through 7 of Leviticus 27, "if your valuation is of a male from twenty years old up to sixty years old, then your valuation shall be fifty shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary. If it is a female, then your valuation shall be thirty shekels; and if from five years old up to twenty years old, then your valuation for a male shall be twenty shekels, and for a female ten shekels; and if from a month old up to five years old, then your valuation for a male shall be five shekels of silver, and for a female your valuation shall be three shekels of silver; and if from sixty years old and above, if it is a male, then your valuation shall be fifteen shekels, and for a female ten shekels."

Why regulate something that is perverse? How are we to think about slavery? The priests with their special calling to serve in the sanctuary, to imitate the priesthood of Christ, they had their needs by and large met by the offerings that were to be brought to the tabernacle or to the temple, the people's grain and animals and all that would be brought, offered up as a sacrifice, and the priests would take a portion of that to feed themselves. So Moses said who could eat those offerings and he says, "No outsider shall eat the holy

offering. One who dwells with the priest or a hired servant shall not eat the holy thing, but if the priest buys a person with his money, that person may eat it, and one who is born in his house may eat that food." Leviticus 22:10 and 11. But the priest could own slaves. They bought it with their own money.

There are many more regulations that we could look at. I'm not trying to give you an exhaustive teaching on the details of slavery, I'm only trying to show through the regulations that God gave, how impossible it is to declare that slavery is evil. You can argue it's outdated. You can argue we've moved on. You still have to give me a biblical case for that argument. You can't just say, "We all know. We all know or we don't like what that says." Was it immoral? Was it unfair? Was it cruel? Was it unkind? Was it unjust? Just use right terminology when you describe it. What don't you like about it? Anything that I've read there, what is your spirit reacting to? Name it. Unjust. It's cruel. It's unfair. It's horrible. You have to name it. And you say, "Well, I'm glad we've moved on." Are you? Are we better off because we have moved on?

Slavery is a legitimate institution ordained by God and like any of these God-ordained institutions, it can be used by evil people for evil purposes, however, its abuse cannot negate its legitimate role in God's will anymore than the abuse of civil government can negate the need or the existence of civil government. Have civil governments abused their position? Yes. Therefore the idea of civil government is evil and I can point to all the evil to prove my case. Is that a sound argument? Obviously not.

Okay, my back is to the wall. You've pinned me with Old Testament. We all know that that is not as binding. We know we've moved on. We know the Old Testament is primitive, archaic. Let's go to where the true light exists, the New Testament. That's where true liberty is found. That's where true truth comes to its fullness. Let's find the negative statements in the New Testament about slavery because we know slavery is evil and obviously it will be in there, right? Those were weird times back then in Moses' day and on, ethics were evolving, but we've arrived now with the full light.

Well, what does the New Testament say about slavery? Does the New Testament condemn slavery? Does it warn us against its evils? What are its negative statements about slavery as an institution? Come on, those verses should be popping into your minds. I don't see any hands.

Gordon Selwyn in his commentary on 1 Peter has a lengthy essay at the end of that commentary that deals with, among other things, the idea of slavery. What Selwyn does is he's trying to be very very biblical. What he does, in a sense he looks at all the places in the New Testament where this is talked about and he lays them down side-by-side and he goes to a word by word comparison of the differences of all the different New Testament books that talk about slavery and he evaluates them and looks at them. Now, after looking at all that, this is his conclusion. He says and I quote, "The institution of slavery is not in any way in question. The whole interest is in the right conduct of an existing family relationship." Slavery had to do with the family unit. Slaves were owned by households. "Furthermore," Selwyn says, "the main theme is the subjection of slaves to

their masters." He continues and he goes to the books where this teaching appears. He says, "Peter has in mind masters who are harsh and ill-tempered, and Peter deviates at once to the duties of slaves in such situations, and particularly to the need for meekness under injury. Colossians and Ephesians lay stress on service, remembering that through it he serves Christ, the Lord. 1 Timothy expressly contemplates the situation where the master as well as the slave is a Christian, and it warns slaves against the danger of undue familiarity. Titus calls particularly for honesty and trustworthiness in the slaves calling. Both 1 Timothy and Titus mention the favorable effect on man's attitude to Christianity which a slave's good conduct may exert, as does 1 Peter." This is Selwyn's conclusions after laying every New Testament verse side-by-side. But you turn to probably most commentaries, commentators, and you see the uncomfortableness when they deal with this topic. Incredibly uncomfortable. They struggle with the Scriptures, with what the Scriptures actually say about slavery, because what they actually read in the Bible is different to what they are expecting the Scriptures to say about slavery.

Everett Ferguson in his book "Backgrounds of Early Christianity," deals with the New Testament's failure to condemn slavery by saying, "Christianity gave instructions for the existing social structure, but directed attention to higher concerns." Okay? It sounds a little bit like dualism. Jump out of a dusty realm and let's focus on why is he actually serving Christ? That's true, but what do we do with slavery?

James Dunn in his commentary on Philemon, this is in the New International Greek Testament Commentary series, he, as well, is obviously struggling with the New Testament's failure to say what he expects it to say about slavery and he tries to explain away the silence. He's got to give a reason for it from his own intellect, "I've got to give a reason why this New Testament appears to be silent." He says, "In the ancient world, slavery was accepted as an integral part of society and its economic working, and while treatment of slaves was recognized as a moral Christian, the fact of slavery itself was not." Was not regarded a moral question. It was not in the realm of immorality. Slavery was not.

Then he continues to help us understand the silence in the New Testament by saying, "It was only the revulsion against the slave trade in the modern period in Europe and North America which made slavery itself morally repulsive." Don't let that slide past you. Realize what he has just said. Nowhere in the Scriptures is slavery presented as being morally repulsive, only in the modern world when you came to a position where you determined a new ethic with respect to slavery and put it in the category of being morally repulsive. Where did he get his ethic from? He created it. Man's mind out of subjection to God's word arrives at slavery is morally repulsive. Oh, that's fine. Yes, we all agree. Let's move on. No, people, we do not move on. We say, "Excuse me, Mr. Dunn, show me your consistent hermeneutic with Scripture. If you can import something from out of left field and plop it into my lap and say that's morally binding, I need to know why." He doesn't do that. Most of his readers will say, "Yes. Wow, that's wonderful. We've evolved. We've evolved nicely into this new position." So Dunn is comfortable to side with the modern perception of slavery and call it "slavery" because it's the modern position while morally repulsive, even as Scripture actually says the opposite.

Dunn then explains why the world had to wait so long for this perspective to become reality. He says, "In the absence of modern democracy, it would not have been possible to conceive of an effective political protest against slavery." Without democracy? So until democracy came, God was silent on this moral evil? Dunn then says that, "Christianity by design will diminish any radical inequality, and obviously slavery and free men is a radical inequality and Christianity, by nature, dissolves and diminishes any radical inequalities. Voila! There's my second proof for my position. Christianity dissolves, diminishes, radical inequalities." Can't argue with that, can you? Oh, yes I can. And you can see many people just nodding their heads. I'm not talking about my congregation now, they are nodding their heads in agreement with that. "Oh, yeah. Christianity does. We are all equal. We are no longer slave or free, remember?" Now there is no longer male or female either, remember?

Who is going to determine when we cross the line of radical inequality? Up to what point is it not radical inequality and who is going to determine when that line is crossed, "Oh, now we're into radical inequality and we ought to diminish that"? And who is going to determine how we diminish that? How do we remove it? What do we do to the person that's radically not equal with the other person across the other side of the line? How do we deal with him? Is he wicked? The subject of tyranny. Man's law.

Scott Bartchy is an author highly respected for his writings on the topic of slavery. Any in-depth book or article addressing slavery will undoubtedly list Bartchy in its bibliography. One of his main books on the topic is "First Century Slavery and 1 Corinthians 7:21." But he also wrote the article in the NKL Bible dictionary, this is a massive tome of six volumes and each volume is 1,200 pages long. It's a massive work and he wrote the article on slavery in the New Testament in this dictionary. Bartchy is a heavyweight. When he writes, scholars stop and read, and particularly on this topic he is regarded as one of the real heavyweights and he is highly respected. He gets down into the dusty issues. And in this article in the NKL Bible dictionary, Bartchy seeks to address the fact that the New Testament appears to have nothing negative to say about slavery. He has got to address that.

Now Bartchy knows he is up against not only the New Testament writers that we have already looked at, but he is up against Jesus. He knows that. Because of the widespread claim that Jesus never condemned the slavery that existed all around him, but rather what he did, he used it as teaching points, as illustrations in his attempt to communicate something, he used to slaves to illustrate the truth he was teaching without condemning it, without criticizing it, without saying anything negative about the condition of slavery. So it wasn't like Jesus was ignorant of slavery, he knew it was there, it was in his face, So he uses the notion Matthew 24:45 and following. You've got the two slaves who are given certain stuff and responsibilities and the master goes away and then when the master returns, only one of them was still doing the faithful carrying out of his faithful responsibilities. In Luke 15:22, which is the parable of the prodigal son, upon the return of the prodigal son, the father says to a slave, "Go and get my best robe, kill a calf, bring

the ring and put it on my son." He tells a slave to go and do that. Jesus tells the story without commenting on this wicked practice. "Bring the best robe and put it on him."

Then again, as if that wasn't bad enough, in Luke 17:7-8 he says, "And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'?"

Now, bearing in mind that debt slavery was one of the major ways people became slaves, they got into debt and they couldn't get out so they become a slave to the person they owe and they work off until they have paid the debt. Our modern day has much more gracious ways of dealing with it. It punishes the people who lend. You declare bankruptcy and open a company in a different name and start up again. But bearing in mind that debt slavery was one of the major ways that people became slaves, Bartchy in his article moves onto Matthew 18. You see what Bartchy is doing, he's looking for something to cling onto. He's looking for some way to show that actually the New Testament is not silent about slavery, it's actually very negative about slavery. So he is scouring the barrel.

Matthew 18 is the parable of the king who forgave a servant a huge amount of debt, and then that servant went out and another servant owed him a pittance, and he had that guy thrown into jail because the guy couldn't pay him immediately, and the king heard about that and you know the story. Bartchy says in the context of debt slavery, "First the king's financial mercy and then his expression that his slave would extend the same mercy to another potential debt slave must have struck Jesus' hearers as profound critiques of an exceedingly oppressive practice that produced slaves." Jesus was actually critiquing debt slavery as opposed to...

Why did Jesus give this parable? You see, Bartchy is clutching at straws here. Why did he? He gave it in a response to the questions of his disciples saying, "Lord, how many times should I forgive somebody who sins against me? Seven times?" Jesus went on to explain in economic terms because our minds can connect with economic terms when you are trying to show vast differences, deemed credible vastness of the debt that the king forgave as God forgives us, the incredible vastness of our debt against him, and yet we cannot cross society and somebody has this little debt offense of a little sin against us and we cannot forgive them. That's the point of the parable. That's the answer to the question, "How much should I forgive? When can I stop?" Jesus says, "Hey, you don't even know how much you have been forgiven." What is in the mind of that stupid slave after getting off this billion-dollar debt and he goes and calls in a \$10 debt. Profound critique of an exceedingly oppressive practice? That's what Jesus was doing?

If this parable is teaching that it is a moral obligation to forgive debt, that's what Bartchy is implying, can't escape from that, it's a moral obligation to forgive debt, if this is what the parable is teaching, then there was nothing merciful, there was nothing gracious, there was nothing generous in what the king did. He did what he was duty-bound before God to do. There is no picture of mercy. There is no picture of generosity. It's a moral

obligation to forgive debt? Then there is nothing merciful. Bartchy destroys the heart of this parable, of this teaching, of this glorious picture of the mercy of God and his forgiveness, of how great it is, which motivates us, in turn, to deal with the pittance that we are confronted with, that we are offended by.

Bartchy destroys the heart of the parable in order to get the New Testament to say something it refuses to say. He wants the New Testament to say slavery is evil and he finds it in that parable, but the New Testament and the whole of Scripture refuses to say what these commentators time and time again expect it and demand it to say. It's a dangerous hermeneutic. Does Jesus illustrate the magnitude of God's forgiveness and give us an incredible motivator for our own forgiveness by using an exceedingly oppressive practice? Maybe.

Bartchy then turns to the Lord's prayer as further proof of his position, saying that the phrase "forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors," Matthew 6:12, assumes, these are his words, "assumes that the petitioner has rejected the use of debt slavery."

Bartchy's final proof that the New Testament is opposed to the institution of slavery is that we find no formal declaration of support for slavery in the New Testament. He says and I quote, "The fact that no theological sanctions for slavery can be found in the New Testament itself, became important for those Christians who later fought to abolish this institution." No theological sanctions. I'm not even sure what that means. It sounds good. Does it mean a carefully laid out theological defense for the idea? Theological sanctions? Does it mean a very clear theological positive explanation of why it is still binding? Is that what he means? He's putting on a theological sanction, I'm really not sure what he's meaning. I mean, it sounds kind of convincing, yeah, theological sanctions. There is nothing negative in the whole of Scripture, both Testaments, about the institution of slavery. Clear regulations are given for slavery and yet Mr. Bartchy says that since we find no theological sanctions for slavery in the New Testament, this is proof that the New Testament was opposed to the institution of slavery and, therefore, we should be working against it.

This theological offense or sanctions or whatever he has in mind, do we find theological sanctions for the Trinity anywhere in the New Testament? Have we got any theological sanctions, Mr. Bartchy, for the Trinity? Because show me that and then I'm really open to look for the slavery ones. Whatever you mean by theological sanction, clear theologically defends the position in support of why we should believe in the Trinity in the New Testament? Hm. If we don't bring all of our likes and dislikes, all of our own ethical assumptions into subjection to Scripture, we will find ourselves at odds with God's kingdom and there will be a thesis written one day to show how destructive the church's position on slavery was to civilization. The institution of slavery is a good litmus test for us to see what we truly look to to get our ethics. Where do we get our ethics from? What is our final authority?

There is much more that can be said on this topic of slavery and hopefully that will come out as we work through this passage before us, but it was necessary before we could even

begin unpacking this passage to say, "Well, what do we even think about slavery and how are we meant to think about slavery?" And hence the title, "Considering Slavery." I've got to think, how do I get my mind under subjection and begin to even think about slavery when I come with a negative attitude toward slavery, a negative untested attitude?

Let's bow our heads.

Father, we thank you that your word, despite the many difficult things that we come across in it, we know that it is the only source of truth. It is the only place we can go to to know who you are and to understand your mind and your will and your purposes; to understand our lives and how we are to live as communities and what that looks like in the dusty details. So we thank you for this truth, this truth about slavery. You know, Lord, we struggle at many points with it and I pray that you would help us to submit ourselves to the word, and in doing so, we truly will come to a fuller understanding of it and, in doing that, that we would be effective servants, making known your glorious truth and ways. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.