

# 10 Hard Questions

*“Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”*  
(1 Peter 3:14–16 ESV)

*“be ready in season and out of season...”*  
(2 Timothy 4:2 ESV)

## **Doesn't the Bible Promote Slavery?**

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**Various Texts**

**Rev. Levi denBok**

### **Introduction:**

Good morning!

Our topic this morning would be difficult on the best of days, but our current cultural climate adds an extra layer of complexity to an already complex question. We have lots of ground to cover, so we're going to jump right into it. Today we're going to ask the question:

## **Doesn't the Bible Promote Slavery?**

Imagine this scenario:

Little Suzy is not so little anymore. You loaded her belongings into the car, drove her to her campus, helped her assemble some storage units in her new dorm room and then drove home with tears streaming down your cheeks. Her peers quickly discover that she's a peculiar girl. She doesn't engage with the frosh week partying and she's not chasing boys like the other girls in rez. Two weeks in, her roommate is so annoyed to be bunking with “goodie-two-shoes” that she decides she needs to knock her off the horse she rode in on. She quickly does a google search and

then approaches Suzy with an open Bible in her hand. She says: “Suzy, do you actually believe this outdated, barbaric nonsense? If your God is so good, then how could He say things like this:

When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. <sup>21</sup> But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money. (Exodus 21:20-21 ESV)

“Suzy, doesn’t your Bible promote slavery?”

Have you prepared Suzy to answer that question?

Are you prepared to answer that question?

If you engage in evangelism for any length of time, this will come up. And I want to encourage you this morning that there is an answer, but it requires a bit of thought and a bit of homework. So, let’s do that together. How should you approach this question?

A few weeks back, Pastor Paul used a sparring analogy to shape his outline and, while I know nothing about sparring, I think that imagery really lends itself to our discussion today.

So, how do you respond to that question? First, you need to block.

### **Step 1: Block (Define the Terms)**

The person asking this question is almost certainly envisioning the African slave trade of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Every time they read the word “slavery” in the Bible, they have the image of kidnapped men and women forced to work in a cotton field.

So, for step one, we need to define our terms. New-World chattel slavery is NOT the slavery that we see in the Bible. If THAT is the slavery that your questioner has in mind, then you can answer their question very simply: Does the Bible condone the racially motivated, man-stealing slavery of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries? Absolutely not! Full stop!

Not in the Old Testament, where the Israelites are told:

Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, **shall be put to death.** (Exodus 21:16 ESV)

The stealing and selling of men and women who are made in the image of God was a capital offense in the Old Testament. Likewise, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writes:

understanding this, that 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, <sup>10</sup> the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, **enslavers**, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is **contrary to sound doctrine** (1 Timothy 1:9-10 ESV)

Old Testament and New, man-stealing was clearly identified as a heinous sin that the people of God were to have nothing to do with.

So, the slavery we see in the Bible was NOT that. What was it?

**Ancient and Greco-Roman slavery was primarily rooted in economics, not race.**

That is an incredibly important distinction that you need to understand. Commentator Gordon Wenham gives a helpful description of the ancient slavery that we see depicted in the Bible. He notes:

As a last resort in case of serious debt, the debtor could sell himself into slavery. These laws are designed to make the slavery as humane as possible... It was somewhat akin to imprisonment in the modern world, and served roughly similar purpose of enabling a man who could not pay a fine to work off his debt directly.<sup>1</sup>

In the ancient world, slavery was not racially motivated. It was often a form of debt repayment. In the Old Testament, God gives instructions to His people as to how that slavery should be regulated within their community. Unlike the nations surrounding Israel, the Jews were to put a limit on the slavery term. In Exodus 21 we read:

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus – NICOT* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 322.

When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. (Exodus 21:2 ESV)

So, if my neighbor owed me a debt that he could not repay, he was to repay me by working for me as a slave. He would not be my slave forever because, under Jewish law, slaves could only serve a six-year sentence. On the seventh year, he was to be set free. The debt that he owed to me had been repaid with his service rendered and I was commanded to let him go with no strings attached. With that understanding in mind, let's look back at that difficult text we read off the top. God instructed His people:

When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. <sup>21</sup> But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money. (Exodus 21:20-21 ESV)

It still sounds shocking, doesn't it? I wanted to pick one of the really difficult passages because it's the difficult passages that you're most likely be confronted with in your evangelism. Let's be honest: This text sounds REALLY bad.

So, let's unpack this verse as something of a case study. First of all, we need to recognize that God is not telling the Israelites that they SHOULD strike their slaves! No, this verse represents one of many regulations ensuring that the Israelites would treat their fellow Israelites – even their slaves – with the respect that image bearers deserve. God says, “IF and WHEN an Israelite sins by striking his slave, here is how you should respond in a way that honors me.”

These laws are meant to speak into practical situations, so perhaps it would help if we created a scenario where we could see this played out. Let's imagine we're living in Israel and we're called upon to judge a case. Israelite Bob owed Israelite Steve a small fortune and through negligence and carelessness, Bob lost all of Steve's life savings. Steve is mad. So, what does he do? He brings this matter to the judge. Bob has no money to repay Steve so it is determined that Bob should serve Steve as a slave for six years. On the seventh year, Bob will be released, and the debt will be considered as paid in full.

But there's a new development that complicates things. Steve wakes up the next day and he's not satisfied. He's still mad and he wants to take justice into his own hands. He's so mad, in fact, that

he beats Bob to within an inch of his life. What does the judge do now? THAT potential situation is what this passage was given to address. It breaks the case down into two possible scenarios:

Scenario 1: If Bob dies, then Steve is to be put to death. Bob might have been your slave, but he was also a man made in the image of God. By choosing to take a life, Steve forfeited his in the process.

Scenario 2: If Bob is able to stand back up within a day or two – that is to say – if Bob is still able-bodied and capable of working to provide for his family, then the matter is to be considered resolved.

At this point, you're probably thinking: "What do you mean resolved?! Steve got off the hook, just like that?" But this is why we need to study passages within their context. If you keep reading, you come to verses 26 and 27 which explain that a slave who has been beaten is to be set free. In his anger, Bob forfeited six years of service from Steve and instead indulged in five minutes of unrestrained anger. That was an expensive five minutes, and now the matter is deemed to be resolved in the eyes of the court. Bill has a black eye and some bruises, but he is a free man and his debt is resolved.

THAT is the slavery that we see in the Bible. It was NOT a slavery that was rooted in racism. It was NOT a slavery that was perpetuated by man-stealing. It was primarily economic. It was a form of employment for many and often times it even served as a means of advancement. In fact, we have a number of ancient documents that reveal cases of slaves choosing to remain in their slavery because they had a great relationship with their master.

Now, having defined the terms, we move to our next step which is going to feel counter intuitive.

## **Step 2: Don't Parry**

If you don't know what the word parry means, then you're not alone. I had to look it up to make sure I was using it correctly. A quick google search gives this definition:

Parry: ward off (a weapon or attack) with a counter move

In most instances and on most of the topics we've addressed, that would be our second step. But on this particular issue, I think the best thing to do is to resist the urge to parry.

The skeptic is likely going to ask this follow-up question, or something like it: "Why were so many Christians complicit in the slave trade?"

Our natural inclination is to evade that question. But I would suggest that perhaps it might be best in this instance to humbly and contritely take the blow.

We're going to talk in a moment about the many Christians who led the charge in the abolition movement, but first we need to acknowledge that many Christians were fighting on the wrong side. Many others were complicit in their silence and in their cooperation with the system. People who we deem to be great leaders of the faith – even men like Jonathan Edwards – possessed slaves. Why is that?

The Prophet Jeremiah offers a suggestion:

The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately sick;  
who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)

We are simultaneously saints and sinners. As Christians, while we celebrate that we are no longer what we were, we also acknowledge that we are not yet what we will be. We still sin and fall short of the glory of God. We are still capable of being horribly deceived. It would seem that these men and women were blind to the sin that they were participating in, and that ought to leave us sobered and humbled.

As conservative Baptists, our slice of the evangelical pie has a particularly embarrassing history. Conservative Baptists were, by and large, woefully silent when they should have spoken up. I listened to an excellent discussion led by Thabiti Anyabwile in which he made a really insightful observation. He noted that we use the term "conservative" to describe the fact that we believe that backwards is the way forwards. What we should mean by that, of course, is that we believe that we need to go ALL THE WAY back to the Word of God. We want to shape our lives and our

decisions today with that eternal truth. Amen? Unfortunately, we can easily slip into a mindset where we don't go back far enough. "Back is the way forward" can begin to mean, "We need to keep doing things the way granddad did them." We become less concerned with striving for the multicultural church that we see in the pages of Acts and more concerned with preserving the monochromatic church from our childhood that only sings our style of music. THAT conservative mindset played a large part in the failure of our ancestors of the faith to stand up and speak out against the injustice of the slave trade.

Why were so many Christians complicit? They were blinded by their culture. They were lulled to sleep by their comfort. They were fighting to preserve granddad's church and lost sight of the church that Jesus laid down his life for.

So, let's drop our defensive posture and let's take that blow square in the chin. When this question is asked of us, it presents us with a wonderful opportunity to model humility and repentance. We can repent of our past. We can learn from it. And we can resolve not to repeat it. Amen?

Amen.

But after the first block – after we've defined our terms – and after taking a hit with humility and repentance, we need to lovingly and courageously push back.

### **Step 3: Thrust (Why was Christianity so Instrumental in Dismantling Slavery?)**

I would turn to the skeptic and I would say: "I humbly acknowledge that there were many Christians who failed miserably with respect to the issue of slavery. That is a stain we can't erase and I'm terribly embarrassed by it. That said, I wonder if you can tell me why you think it is that Christianity was so instrumental in dismantling slavery?"

It would take an extraordinary amount of willful blindness to ignore the role that Christianity has played in the abolition of slavery around the world. As Tim Keller notes in his wonderful book *The Reason for God*:

The Bible unconditionally condemns kidnapping and trafficking in slaves (1 Timothy 1:9-11; cf. Deuteronomy 24:7). Therefore, while the early Christians did not go on a campaign to abolish first-century slavery completely, later Christians did so when faced with New-World-style slavery, which could not be squared in any way with Biblical teaching.<sup>2</sup>

For example, William Wilberforce – a devout Christian man – was THE champion for the abolition of slavery in England. In 1833, the Act of Emancipation abolished the slave trade throughout most of the British Empire. In this astonishing decision, the government agreed to compensate the planters for all freed slaves in the British Empire which was tantamount to economic suicide! That episode in British history does not happen without the influence of Christianity. If you want to learn more about William Wilberforce, I would recommend the movie *Amazing Grace*.

Or we could point to Harriet Tubman who fearlessly led slaves out of the south as she herself was led by the Lord. If you haven't seen it already, you need to watch the 2019 release *Harriet* which recounts her amazing story, and which is not silent about the role that her faith played.

Or we could point to Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He may not be the first name that would come to your mind when thinking of abolitionists, but he spoke boldly and fearlessly on the issue. On one particular trip to the United States, Spurgeon was repulsed by the numerous Christians who turned a blind eye to slavery. They referred to slavery simply as a “peculiar institution” to which he marvelously replied:

“It is, indeed, a peculiar institution, just as the devil is a peculiar angel, and hell is a peculiarly hot place.”<sup>3</sup>

And of course, we point to the late Martin Luther King Jr. He understood that the battle for the abolition of slavery was a spiritual battle. He didn't see the Bible as the cause of slavery – he saw it as the antidote. His plan of attack was to preach the living and active Word of God. In his most famous sermon, he thundered the text of Amos 5:24:

But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24 ESV)

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2008), 115.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon as cited by Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 188.



As Tim Keller notes:

The greatest champion of justice in our era knew the antidote to racism was not less Christianity, but a deeper and truer Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

You need to challenge your questioner to wrestle through this: How is it that the Bible, which is accused of condoning slavery, could be the sword with which the institution was finally brought down? I love the way one author puts it:

True, no prooftext dismantled Roman slavery with a single blow. Yet taken as a whole, the Bible decimated slavery with a thousand hits.<sup>5</sup>

That's exactly right. Now, we don't have time to consider a thousand hits, but let's consider three blows that were absolutely devastating to the institution of slavery. First, Christianity proclaimed:

### **1. The God-given dignity of man**

One of the driving forces in the slave trade was the idea that slaves were somehow less than human. Ideas of racial superiority litter the pages of history. From Charles Darwin's famous book: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, to Nietzsche's idea of the uber-man, one of the most prevalent and devastating sins of human history is the stripping of the title of humanity from a fellow human being. And if you think that we have moved beyond this sin, just listen to the argument that is made to justify abortion. We do not have the right to strip another person of their humanity. God is the one who gives us our identity, and right on the first page of Scripture we read:

So God created man in his own image,  
**in the image of God he created him;**  
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27 ESV)

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2008), 66-67.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Menikof, *How and Why Did Some Christians Defend Slavery?*

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-and-why-did-some-christians-defend-slavery/> Accessed June 22, 2020.

The Bible teaches us that every man and every woman from every nation at every age and stage of development is a glorious image of Almighty God! There is no second class. There is no favored race, contrary to Charles Darwin. There is no uberman, contrary to Nietzsche. There is no barbarian, contrary to many of our ancestors. There are only image bearers.

The second blow that Christianity dealt to the institution of slavery was:

## **2. The equalizing message of the Gospel**

For many slave traders, they were content to acknowledge the humanity of their slaves, but they would not dare consider them equals. This is why even grown black men were referred to as “boy” and even young white men were referred to as “sir.” But, in the New Testament, we have a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a man named Philemon. Philemon’s slave, Onesimus, had escaped and had made his way to visit the Apostle Paul in prison. Paul wrote to Philemon to prepare him for how he ought to receive his servant upon his return. Listen to what Paul says:

For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup>no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. (Philemon 1:15-16 ESV)

One of the most striking aspects of this passage is that Paul refers to Onesimus not as a slave, but as a brother. If you’re familiar at all with Paul’s letters, you’ll know that he often uses the language of slavery to refer to his relationship to Christ. Paul writes in Romans 6:22:

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. (Romans 6:22 ESV)

Paul wanted his churches to understand that to be a Christian is fundamentally to become a slave to God. It is to willingly surrender ourselves to a new Master, because we believe that He is the Master that we need. He frequently uses this language in reference to himself. Listen to the way that he often opened his letters to his churches:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God (Romans 1:1 ESV)

The word translated there as “servant” is the Greek word “doulos” and it is the word for a slave. We see it again in his letter to the Philippians and to Titus:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:1a ESV)

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ (Titus 1:1a ESV)

Paul believed and taught that all Christians were, in effect, slaves, and he used the term liberally. But again, listen again to how Paul describes Onesimus in his letter to Philemon:

For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup> no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, **as a beloved brother**—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. (Philemon 1:15-16 ESV)

I think Rebecca McLaughlin is right when she observes:

But, in a tenderly tactful move, Paul does not use that language of Onesimus. Rather, he calls the one person in the list we know to have been an actual slave “our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you” (Col. 4:9).<sup>6</sup>

The gospel is the great equalizer. At the cross of Christ, all of the things that the world values are stripped away. When you humble yourself at the foot of the cross and you look around, you quickly realize that there is only one classification that really matters and it applies to every one of us: We are all sinners who need a Saviour. As the Apostle Paul writes:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28 ESV)

This leads us naturally to the final blow to slavery which we will consider this morning:

### **3. The beauty of unity amidst diversity**

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<sup>6</sup> Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 180.

Contrary to Darwin and Nietzsche who believed that the way forward was to identify the most privileged race and to attempt to homogenize the world, the Bible clearly teaches that the diversity we see in humanity is part of the beauty that we will celebrate forever. The Apostle John was given a glimpse of the great throne room of God and listen to what he saw:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, **from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages**, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,<sup>10</sup> and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"  
(Revelation 7:9 ESV)

How could Christians enslave the brothers and sisters who they would one day worship beside at the throne of grace? How could Christians participate in a culture of segregation when our final destination will be a place of beautiful, unashamed integration?

Thoughtful, Bible-believing Christians allowed their understanding of Scripture to shape their view of the culture. When that happened, the world changed.

Church, as we close, I want to acknowledge the fact that there is an important discussion that is being had in our culture today. Now more than ever, let us be the people that believe that backwards is the way forwards. But let's learn from the mistakes of our spiritual forefathers. Let's look all the way back. Back to the Garden of Eden where we were taught that all men are made in the image of God. Back to the temple where people from all the nations would gather to worship. Back to the cross, where Jesus died for the sins of all peoples without distinction. That is the way forward. That is the trajectory that culminates with that scene in Revelation 7 in the throne room of God.

Let's open our Bibles and speak into the conversation that is being had today. Let's invite the Word of God to correct and refine our view of the world. And let's work hard so that our church might resemble the glory of God's plan for unity in diversity. Amen? Amen.

Let's pray together now.