

SLAVES, OBEY YOUR HUMAN MASTERS

Colossians 3:22-4:1

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The text today is relevant to us in the twenty-first century in two ways.
 - i. How do we live for Christ at work? The slave/master relationship has much in common with the employee/employer relationship.
 - ii. Does the Bible endorse slavery?
 1. Famous atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris say that the slavery in ancient Israel is a warrant for trafficking humans and for treating people like farm equipment.
 2. Why did God allow slavery in ancient Israel?
 3. Why didn't Jesus and the apostles condemn slavery in the New Testament?

II. TEXT

1. **Colossians 3:22-4:1** "22 Slaves, obey your human masters in everything. Don't work only while being watched, as people-pleasers, but work wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people, 24 knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he has done, and there is no favoritism. 4:1 Masters, deal with your slaves justly and fairly, since you know that you too have a Master in heaven."

III. NINE PROOFS THAT THE OLD TESTAMENT DOES NOT ENDORSE SLAVERY

- i. Does the Bible endorse slavery?
- ii. When we study "slavery" in ancient Israel, we find that it was nothing like the slavery in the antebellum south. In fact, if early Americans would have closely followed Scripture, chattel slavery would not have been possible.
- iii. Here are twelve proofs that the Old Testament does not endorse slavery.
 1. **Slavery in ancient Israel was debt-servitude.**
 - a. When the early settlers came to America, many of them came as indentured servants. Since they could not afford to pay for their passage to America, they would agree to work for someone for a certain amount of time. Slavery in ancient Israel was more like indentured-servitude than the chattel slavery of the antebellum south.
 - b. The slavery in ancient Israel was a solution to poverty. If there was no poverty, there would have been no slavery.
 - c. The Hebrew word for "slave" in the Old Testament is *ebed*, and it is better translated as servant, or debt-servant.

- d. When an Israelite was too poor to care for himself or his family, or if he could not pay off his debts, he would sell himself as a debt-servant for a limited period of time to work off his debt.
2. **Slavery in ancient Israel was not based on race.**
 - a. In the antebellum south, slavery was largely based on race. Blacks were viewed as subhuman, or inferior to whites, and this view was used to justify chattel slavery.
 - b. In ancient Israel, slavery had nothing to do with race. It was a response to poverty and debt.
 - c. Israelites were “slaves” to other Israelites.
 3. **Slavery in ancient Israel was voluntary.**
 - a. In the antebellum south, blacks were forced into slavery. They were either born into slavery, or they were captured in Africa and sold in America.
 - b. Slave-trading was illegal in ancient Israel. You could not kidnap someone and force them into slavery.
 - c. **Exodus 21:16** “Whoever kidnaps a person must be put to death, whether he sells him or the person is found in his possession.”
 - d. The only slaves in Israel were those who volunteered to be debt-servants.
 4. **Slavery in Israel was temporary.**
 - a. Chattel slavery in the antebellum south was permanent. You were born a slave, and you would die a slave, unless you escaped, or unless someone bought your freedom.
 - b. In ancient Israel, you could only hold a slave for six years. In the seventh year, you had to set them free.
 - c. **Deuteronomy 15:12** “If your fellow Hebrew, a man or woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, you must set him free in the seventh year.”
 5. **The law in ancient Israel required the humane treatment of slaves.**
 - a. Bodily abuse was forbidden. If a man severely injured his slave such as causing them to lose an eye or a tooth, he had to set them free (Exodus 21:26-27).
 - b. If a master killed his slave, he would be put to death (Ex 21:20-21).
 - c. Masters could not treat their slaves harshly. **Leviticus 25:39-43** “39 If your brother among you becomes destitute and sells himself to you, you must not force him to do slave labor. 40 Let him stay with you as a hired worker or temporary resident; he may work for you until the Year of Jubilee. 41 Then he and his children are to be released from you, and he may return to his clan and his ancestral property. 42 They are not to be sold as slaves, because they are my servants that I brought out of the land of Egypt. 43 You are not to rule over them harshly but fear your God.”
 6. **When debt-servants were released, masters were to give them generous provisions.**

- a. **Deuteronomy 15:12-15** “12 If your fellow Hebrew, a man or woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, you must set him free in the seventh year. 13 When you set him free, do not send him away empty-handed. 14 Give generously to him from your flock, your threshing floor, and your winepress. You are to give him whatever the Lord your God has blessed you with. 15 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you; that is why I am giving you this command today.
- 7. Runaway slaves were to be given safe harbor.**
- a. In the antebellum south, the Fugitive Slave Law legally required runaway slaves to be returned to their masters.
 - b. In ancient Israel, if a slave ran away from a harsh master, you had to help him and could not return him to his master.
 - c. **Deuteronomy 23:15-16** “15 Do not return a slave to his master when he has escaped from his master to you. 16 Let him live among you wherever he wants within your city gates. Do not mistreat him.”
- 8. In ancient Israel, slaves were viewed as human beings, not property.**
- a. **Genesis 1:27** “So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female.”
 - b. The Israelites viewed all people image bearers, regardless of race, or sex, or social status. We see this in the attitude of Job toward his slaves.
 - c. **Job 31:13-15** “If I have dismissed the case of my male or female servants when they made a complaint against me, what could I do when God stands up to judge? How should I answer him when he calls me to account? Did not the same one who made me in the womb also make them? Did not the same God form us both in the womb?”
 - d. The southern slave owners were able to justify mistreating their slaves by dehumanizing them. This is the same way that the Nazis were able to mistreat the Jews, and the way that Democrats are able to kill the unborn. Because the ancient Israelites were forced to view all human beings as image bearers, it no doubt prevented much injustice.
- 9. Much was done in ancient Israel to prevent debt-servitude.**
- a. All slavery in ancient Israel was voluntary, temporary debt-servitude. It was a society solution to extreme poverty. But many laws were put into place to prevent dire poverty so that debt-servitude would only be the very last resort for the most desperate of cases.
 - b. They were commanded to leave the edges of their fields, and the fallen fruit from their vineyards for the poor (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:20-21).
 - c. They were commanded to give generously to the poor (Deut 15:7-11; Pr 22:9; 28:27).
 - d. They were commanded to lend to the poor without interest (Ex 22:25; Lev 25:35-38).

- e. If the poor could not afford the expensive sacrificial animals, they were allowed to sacrifice smaller, inexpensive ones (Lev 5:7, 11).
- f. Debt was to be canceled every seven years (Deut 15:1).
- g. When debt-servant was released after seven years, they were to be generously provided for to prevent future poverty (Deut 15:12-15).
- h. As you can see, slavery in ancient Israel was nothing like slavery in the antebellum south. And if the southern slave owners had followed these Biblical guidelines, then slavery as we know it would not have been an issue.

IV. FIVE PROOFS THAT THE NEW TESTAMENT DOES NOT ENDORSE SLAVERY

- i. Slavery in the New Testament era was very different than slavery in ancient Israel.
- ii. Slavery was very common in the empire. Paul Copan said that during the first century AD, 85-90% of Rome's population consisted of slaves. Another source says that one out of every two people in the Roman empire were slaves. William Barclay says that this amounted to 60 million slaves. To put that in perspective, before the Civil War there were less than 4 million slaves in the United States. Many, if not most of the Christians in the first century were slaves.
- iii. The Roman citizens had become very lazy, and virtually all work was seen as beneath them. Any and all work was done by slaves, even doctors, teachers, and the secretaries of Roman emperors.
- iv. According to Roman law, a slave was not a person. Slaves could not possess any property. Slaves could be abused and killed by their masters for any reason. If a runaway slave was caught, he was either executed or branded on the forehead with the letter "F," for *Fugitivus*, which means runaway. They were not allowed to marry.
- v. **William Barclay** "The slave was a thing in the eyes of the law. There was no such thing as a code of working conditions. When the slave was past his work, he could be thrown out to die. He had not even the right to marry, and if he cohabitated and there was a child, the child belonged to the master, just as the lambs of the flock belonged to the shepherd. Once again all the rights belonged to the master and all the duties to the slave."
- vi. So why didn't the authors of the New Testament condemn slavery?
- vii. The goal of Christianity has never been to change laws or social structures, but to save souls and to change hearts. If Jesus and Peter and Paul had commanded slaves to run away, and master to release their slaves, the Romans would have very quickly seen Christianity as an imminent threat and would have attacked it with swift severity. Instead, Christianity taught certain principles that led to the eventual overthrow of slavery in Rome, and in Europe and America.

viii. The New Testament taught five principles that led to the abolition of slavery all over the world.

1. Slaves must be treated as spiritual equals.

- a. Not only did the New Testament uphold the Old Testament belief that all people were created in the image of God, but it taught that in Christ, there is no difference between slave and free.
- b. **Galatians 3:28** “There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
- c. **Colossians 3:11** “In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.”
- d. The NT teaches that slaves, even though they may not have the same socio-economic status as free people and masters, they are just as important and valuable in God’s eyes.

2. Slaves are encouraged to seek their freedom.

- a. **1 Corinthians 7:21** “Were you called while a slave? Don’t let it concern you. But if you can become free, by all means take the opportunity.”

3. Slave-trading is a terrible sin.

- a. **1 Timothy 1:10** “for the sexually immoral and males who have sex with males, for slave traders, liars, perjurers, and for whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching”
- b. It is sinful to kidnap another human being and force them into slavery.

4. Slaves must be treated humanely.

- a. **Ephesians 6:9** “And masters, treat your slaves the same way, without threatening them, because you know that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.”
- b. **Colossians 4:1** “Masters, deal with your slaves justly and fairly, since you know that you too have a Master in heaven.”

5. Christians must not sell themselves into slavery.

- a. **1 Corinthians 7:23** “You were bought at a price; do no become slaves of people.”
- b. Paul made it clear that slavery was not a good situation for a Christian, because it is hard to serve Christ if you are the property of another person. This leads to the idea that slavery if slavery is not ideal for a Christian, then it is not idea for anyone.
- c. If Christians in America would have followed just these five principles, then slavery would not have been possible in the United States.

V. CHRISTIANS LED THE WAY IN ABOLITION

1. Those who criticize the Bible for the issue of slavery would do well to remember one more thing. It was Christians who led the charge to abolish slavery all throughout history, and this was based on the teachings of Scripture.

2. **John MacArthur** “Although slavery is not uniformly condemned in either the Old or New Testaments, the sincere application of New Testament truths has repeatedly led to the elimination of its abusive tendencies. Where Christ’s love is lived in the power of His Spirit, unjust barriers and relationships are inevitably broken down. As the Roman empire disintegrated and eventually collapsed, the brutal, abused system of slavery collapsed with it, due in great measure to the influence of Christianity. In more recent times the back of the black slave trade was broken in Europe and America due largely to the powerful, Spirit-led preaching of such men as John Wesley and George Whitefield and the godly statesmanship of such men as William Wilberforce and William Pitt. New Testament teaching does not focus on reforming and restructuring human systems, which are never the root cause of human problems. The issue is always the heart of man – which when wicked will corrupt the best of systems and when righteous will improve the worst.”

VI. **FOUR COMMANDS FOR THE WORKPLACE**

- i. This passage teaches us how Christians should live at work, because the slave/master relationship has much in common with the employee/employer relationship.
- ii. God doesn’t just want you to live for Christ at church and at home, but also at work. But how?
- iii. In this passage there are four commands, and five truths.

iv. 4 Commands for Christians in the Workplace

1. Obey your boss.

- a. **Colossians 3:22** “Slaves, obey your human masters in everything.”
- b. Do not be a rebel at work. If you don’t like company policy, then find another company, or become the boss and change the policy.

2. Do your best.

- a. **Colossians 3:22** “Don’t work only while being watched, as people-pleasers, but work wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.”
- b. Don’t do a half-hearted job. Don’t do a half-way done job. Don’t be lazy. Don’t be slow. Do your best. Work hard. Master your craft. Pursue excellence. Be the best you can be at your job, no matter what it is. If you are a teacher, be the best teacher. If you are a janitor, be the best janitor.

3. Work for the Lord, not for men.

- a. **Colossians 3:23** “Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people.”
- b. Do your work for God; as if God is your employer. Do work that would please Him; that would satisfy Him – the King of kings and Lord of lords.
- c. You may be able to work at half-speed and still please your boss. But he is not the one you are working to please. Aim to please God by doing your absolute best.

4. Treat your employees with justice and fairness.

- a. **Colossians 4:1** “Masters, deal with your slaves justly and fairly, since you know that you too have a Master in heaven.”
- b. Justice – Do what is right in the eyes of God. Treat your employees in the way that God would want you to treat them. Treat them the way they deserve to be treated in the eyes of God.
- c. Fairness – Treat them equally in relation to each other. Do not show favoritism, or nepotism, or unfair discrimination, or racial preferences.

VII. THREE TRUTHS TO REMEMBER AT WORK

1. God will reward you for your hard work.

- i. **Colossians 3:23-24** “Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people, knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord.”
- ii. Even if your boss doesn’t give you the rewards and recognition you deserve, do your best, because God will reward you – in this life and in the next.

2. You serve the Lord Christ.

- i. **Colossians 3:24** “You serve the Lord Christ.”
- ii. Even if your boss mistreats you, or underpays you, or is unfair to you, do you do your best, because your real boss is Christ.

3. The wrongdoer will be paid back.

- i. **Colossians 3:25** “For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he has done, and there is no favoritism.”
- ii. You do what you are supposed to do, and let God take care of your wicked coworkers and your wicked boss.
- iii. But if you do wrong, then God will pay you back.

VIII. CONCLUSION

1. **Ray Kroc**, the founder of McDonalds said, “My priorities are God first, family second, and McDonald’s hamburgers third. But when I go to work on Monday morning, that order reverses.”
2. That’s not the attitude that we are to have at work. God is to be our priority even at work.
3. A **preacher** said, “The purpose of your life at work is to show that Christ is at work in your life.”
4. Your ultimate purpose at work is not to make money; it is not to make a name for yourself; it is to serve God. It is to glorify God by serving with excellence, and leading with excellence.
5. **Bill Hybels** “It should never be said of Christian workers that they are halfhearted, careless, tardy, irresponsible, whiny, or negligent. Behavior like that embarrasses God. It brings reproach on Him. Christian workers should epitomize character qualities like self-discipline, perseverance, and initiative. They should be self-motivated, prompt, organized, and industrious. Their efforts should result in work of the very highest quality. Why? Because they’re not just laying bricks; they’re

building a wall for God's glory. They're not just teaching a class; they're educating young students for God's glory. They're not just balancing the books; they're keeping the ledgers in excellent order for God's glory. They're not just driving a tractor; they're plowing a straight furrow for God's glory."

6. If you truly follow these instructions, your Christianity will make you the best employee in your company. Every manager is looking for honest and diligent workers.