

Tough Topics: Does God *Condone* Slavery? What Does the Bible Say?

Basic Presupposition to Start: We live in a fallen world, full of fallen sinners. Due to man's rebellion against God, and our ongoing active disobedience, there are practices that mankind has engaged in since the dawn of time that are **antithetical to God's enduring will for His creation**. Does God condone slavery? Does He even promote it? If you listen to non-Christians and even nominal Christians, one of the aspersions cast against Christianity is that the Bible endorses the practice of slavery. We want to consider that claim in light of what Scripture teaches, but also what God truly desires for His creatures.

Part One: Slavery in the Old Testament

Is slavery depicted in the Bible? Of course.

Exodus 20:2: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The greatest redemptive act in the OT is God delivering His people from bondage. This shows that to be enslaved is something to be rescued from.

But what about these verses (*Exodus 21:1-6*):

Now these are the rules that you shall set before them. When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone. But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.

This might seem a bit shocking! That God would make provisions and rules regarding the owning of slaves. In fact, the OT does not regard the possession of slaves to be always and in all circumstances a moral evil. To the best of our knowledge, no ancient writer (pagan, Jewish, Christian) expressed as a distant hope or desire the thought that some day slavery might be abolished.

Part Two: Discontinuity and Continuity with the OT People of God

Part of our shock at not finding slavery condemned in the Bible is due to our viewing "slavery" through the lens of our recent American past. I will speak to that below. But we see many things that were permitted and even regulated that we find abhorrent. It might be "holy wars" or even levirate marriage. It is important to keep in mind while there are things we have in common with the sons and daughters of Israel, there are many things we don't. Ultimately, this has to do with the salvific and redemptive work of Jesus. Jesus came that we would be liberated from the bondage of sin and death. In Jesus, God restores His people back to His revelatory will that governs all things. We see this expressed in the discussion about divorce in *Mark 10:2-9*:

And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his

wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Though the topic is different, the sentiment is the same. God gave certain commandments due to the hardness of man's hearts, that is, due to the sinful practices men engage in. He gave certain rules that would govern society and keep things from coming apart. But God's goal was always for restoration.

We even see in the OT a provision for slaves and an encouragement to work towards an abolition of the practice of slavery. *Leviticus 25:39-43*:

"If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God.

Other passages show that non-Israelite slaves could be circumcised and brought into the family. *Exodus 12:43-49*:

And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "This is the statute of the Passover: no foreigner shall eat of it, but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him. No foreigner or hired worker may eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you."

Part Three: Slavery in the New Testament

We also see slavery in the NT. It was a part of society. But the institute of Greco-Roman slavery (the social context Paul is writing in for instance) was much, much different from our conception of slavery. The Roman Empire had an estimated 55 million people in its jurisdiction, and 10-20 were slaves. In the city of Rome, slaves were 40 percent of the city's population. So, it was very common. Note that I do not say good but common! The practice of slavery was the way society ran.

However, the things we associate with "slavery" were not part of the Greco-Roman practice. For instance "race" had little or nothing to do with slavery in the 1st century AD. There were slaves from all over the known world, or different colors of skin and ethnic backgrounds. Secondly, slaves in the Greco-Roman world could enjoy a relatively high standing in society and be well-educated. In fact, most ancient slaves would be better educated than most of their masters! Also, slaves could own other slaves and even enjoy some of the same privileges as freeborn citizens. To be sure, there were some very base and gross uses of slavery in Roman times. But it had very little in common with the ante-bellum practice in our history.

So, it is in this context that we see St. Paul write about slaves.

1 Corinthians 7:17-24:

*Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. **Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.***

Ephesians 6:5-9:

*Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, **whether he is a bondservant or is free.** Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.*

What we see from St. Paul, is that your present social status does not automatically change once you become a “slave to Jesus Christ”. However, while not changing social standing, being in Christ grants **all people equal status.**

Galatians 3:23-29:

*Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 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. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.***

In announcing the Gospel, St. Paul does not seek to overthrow social structures and rid the world of things that we would consider “abhorrent”. Neither does Jesus! Instead, there is great care and concern for the relationships between brother and sister in Christ, regardless of social status.

Matthew 8:5-13:

When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly.” And he said to him, “I will come and heal him.” But the centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I

found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed at that very moment.

Note that Jesus restores the man’s “slave” in health. He does not command that they sever their relationship.

So, does God “condone” slavery? It depends what we mean. Does He condemn the abuse and mistreatment of another human creature. Absolutely. Does He at any point say that selling people into bondage is to be practiced? Absolutely not. But God does not end all corrupt and abusive human institutions. What He does do is restore relationships. First, between Himself and the sinner by the blood of His Son Jesus, and then between Christian and Christian. To see this, we look at Paul’s letter to *Philemon*.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 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. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

What Paul desires is that Philemon and Onesimus (his runaway slave) are restored, no longer on just the basis of their former relationship, but on the basis of their relationship in Christ. Paul does not say, “He is no longer to be your slave...” but instead sends Onesimus back to Philemon. For the “slavery” motif has great theological implications. *Romans 6:15-19:*

What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.