

# Paul and Slavery

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So we've been on a series talking about Paul. Paul is an author in the Bible, in the New Testament. He wrote a bunch of letters, a big chunk of the New Testament. And I don't know if you all know, but some folks have problems with Paul because Paul has been known to say some things that are difficult to understand. That's actually a verse in the Bible, in the book of 1 Peter. Peter is talking about his colleague Paul. And Peter says, we know that Paul writes things and Paul writes things that are difficult to understand. And 2,000 years later, you're like, yep, Peter, you got that right. Paul does not make sense sometimes. Paul, the apostle, the writer of the, part of the writer of the New Testament says things that just rub us the wrong way or have been used to hurt and harm people, including those in this room and those watching online. So what do we do with a book, with a writer, and with letters and sections of our Bible, and the Bible itself, when it's been used to abuse and maim and kill, honestly, millions? What do we do with a religion that has been used to subjugate women and inflict white supremacy upon the world and empower empires of violence? In America, the Bible became one of the primary tools to uphold the institution of slavery. And enslaved black Americans were often not allowed to listen to preaching from black preachers. Rather, they were forced to listen to preaching from white preachers, many of which had slaves of their own. And can you guess what the most popular text for preaching to the enslaved was? Ephesians 6.5, slaves obey your masters. Thanks a lot, Paul.

Now, the Bible was used to prove the inferiority of dark-skinned people, to support physical abuse, to uphold an institution that traded millions of people as property, sold and traded and used, and if need be, killed. Listen, and this will be up on the screen, to this autobiographical report from a formerly enslaved person in the 1800s, Henry Brown. This is what he writes. He says, I received a message that if I wish to see my wife and children and bid them the last farewell, I could do so by taking my stand on the street where they were all to pass on their way for North Carolina. So I, Henry Brown writes, placed myself by the side of a street and soon had the melancholy satisfaction of witnessing the approach of a gang of slaves, amounting to 350 in member, marching under, listened to the direction of a Methodist minister by whom they were purchased, and amongst which slaves were my wife and my children. So this train of beings, he writes, was accompanied by a number of wagons and loaded with little children of many different families, which, as they appeared, rent the air with their shrieks and cries and vain endeavors to resist the separation which was thus forced upon them, and the cords with which they were thus bound.

But what should I now see in the very foremost wagon but a little child looking towards me and pitifully calling father, father? This was my eldest child, and I was obliged to look upon it for the last time I should perhaps ever see it again in my life. Thus passed my child for my presence. It was my own child.

I loved it with all the fondness of a father, but things were so ordered that I could only say farewell and leave it to pass in chains while I looked for the approach of another gang, which my wife was also loaded with chains. My eyes soon caught her precious face, but gracious heavens, that glance of agony may God spare me from ever again enduring. My wife, under the influence of her feelings, jumped aside. I seized hold of her hand while mine felt unutterable things, and my tongue was only able to say, we shall meet in heaven. I went with her for about four miles hand in hand, but both our hearts were so overpowered with feeling that we could say nothing, and when at last we were obliged to part, the look of mutual love which we exchanged was all the token which we could give each other that we should yet meet in heaven. Did you catch it? 350 slaves marching under the direction of a Methodist Christian minister by whom they were purchased. If the words of Paul specifically, and the Bible in general, can be used to support such horrific harm, are we not just better off to throw the whole thing away? We're going to talk about four things today. Number one, misuse of something says more about the misuser than the misused. Number two, use of the Bible should not be surrounded to jackasses. There were many stronger words put in earlier drafts of this.

This was the most strong that I felt was appropriate, but also, you know, still conveyed the, you know, magnitude of what we're talking about. Number three, there's a difference between writing about your ideals and writing to your present reality. Number four, Ephesians 6 and the writings of Paul in general still matter. Now, number one, misuse of the thing does not invalidate the thing. Have you ever seen a child use a fork? Particularly those under the age of five or four or three. It goes everywhere.

[ 6 : 11 ] I actually tweeted about it. My son routinely uses his fork to drop food on the floor, get food in his hair and clothes, and worse of all, scrape it as hard and as fast as he can along our wooden table.

I have therefore began a campaign to remove all forks from society. Will you join me? I am not a popular tweeter, but this was probably one of my least popular tweets. But seriously, little child with a fork, it goes in the hair, it places food every which direction, and my favorite, along the table, which we bought with our own darn money, should we therefore get rid of the fork?

Is that the right thing to do? Because we can imagine the ways in which, well, if the fork is misused, then we need to blog about it, and we need to have a Twitter storm about it, and we need to get rid of the fork. But when something is misused, that doesn't mean that it's now ruined. It meant that whoever did the misusing needs to change. Sorry, children. If I blast you in the face with water, the correct response is not to criminalize the water, it's to confront my own violent actions.

And just because a person or system used scripture to inflict harm, that doesn't mean that scripture is now forever and only inherently harmful. It means that instead, the person or the system was bent towards harm and used whatever tools they could to accomplish their harmful intent.

Misogyny, patriarchy, violence and war, white supremacy and slavery, these all existed in time and space without the Bible, without Christianity. The powers of evil became weapons to propagate oppressive systems. But their weaponization is more about the people and the systems bent on oppressing others than it is a defining characteristic of scripture and the Christian faith. Just because something is misused doesn't mean that it is can only ever be misused. Now, to some of you, this may sound like similar to the guns don't kill people, people kill people argument. In other words, if abuse of the thing doesn't invalidate the thing, then why don't we have more of the thing? More guns or, for instance, more prisons? Or, okay, here's an example. Someone might say the problem isn't misogyny. It's just misogyny incorrectly applied. Yeah? However, there are some things that just lack an ability to bring health and wholeness and healing and life into the world. There is no definition of misogyny that doesn't attempt to subjugate women. It's definitionally true. Guns definitionally are harmful to others. But not everything is defined solely by its ability to bring harm. Water can bring harm through natural disaster or weaponization. A disordered relationship with food can bring harm through malnutrition. But that doesn't mean that water or food are inherently harmful. Similarly, scripture and Christianity have been weaponized to harm and marginalize people. And the church is the first place where we have to be honest about that. And that weaponization and that misuse does not define scripture and Christianity. In fact, when the Bible and Christianity are abandoned to be defined by the abusers and weaponizers, we're giving them undeserved power. We are surrendering what is meant to bring life and healing and wholeness and restoration. We're surrendering that to those who would use it to only bring harm. By abandoning scripture, it's as if we're telling those who would use it for their sexist and racist and violent and otherwise bigoted ends, they were right. Handed over to the jackasses.

[ 10 : 39 ] And worse yet, we're telling anyone who has been oppressed, who heard scripture as a source of hope and resistance, that they're actually in fact mistaken, wrong, or naive. And that we therefore become an unwitting tool in keeping the oppressor in power and the oppressed underfoot. Which brings us to point number two, don't surrender scripture to slaveholder religion. Don't abandon it to the jackasses.

As I said at the beginning of the series, it's popular to say that Paul's writings and many, many other parts of the Bible, pick your choice, aren't worth keeping around, reading, or studying because of the history, their history of being used to bring harm. But we've got a historical problem then. What about the oppressed who heard Paul and heard a gospel of freedom and liberation and resistance and revolution? Slaves as well as women and LGBTQ people and other oppressed people throughout the nations have used Paul and the whole of scripture to stand up for their freedom and liberation. So we have to ask, were they wrong to do so?

In 1774, enslaved Americans wrote a petition to the government of Massachusetts to argue for their freedom. And they quote Paul liberally throughout. Here's the quote.

By our deplorable, whatever it's in italics on your screen, that's a quote from the Apostle Paul. By our deplorable situation, we are rendered incapable of showing our obedience to Almighty God.

How can a slave, they write, perform the duties of a husband to a wife or parent to his child? How could a husband leave master and work and cleave to his wife? How can the wife submit themselves to their husbands in all things? How can the child obey their parents in all things?

[ 12 : 36 ] There's a great number of us, these enslaved people write, a great number of us sincere members of the Church of Christ. How can the master and the slave be said to fulfill that command, quoting Paul, live in love and let brotherly love continue and abound.

Bear ye one another's burdens. How can the master be said to bear my burden when he bears me down with the chains of slavery and oppression against my will? And how can we fulfill our part of duty to him while in this condition, as we cannot serve our God as we ought while in this situation?

So these enslaved people from 1774 use the words of Paul to speak for their freedom against those who would use the Bible to speak for their enslavement.

The act of interpretation, what we do with the Bible once it's been read, how we understand it, how we use it and apply it, interpretation can and should be an act of resistance and protest.

In America specifically, black Americans began their biblical arguments where they wanted to begin, not where the oppressors wanted to begin. One scholar, Brad Braxton, calls this seizing hermeneutical control.

[ 13 : 56 ] Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpreting Scripture to use in daily life. Another scholar calls this exegetical reversal, exegesis, how we get out of meaning, out of Scripture.

In other words, when we interpret Scripture, we must allow the voices of those who have been harmed by it to have a leading voice in how we understand it. Frederick Douglass coined the term slaveholder religion in the 1800s.

He had experienced slavery and the religion of enslavers. And Douglass writes, For between the Christianity of this land, the United States, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference.

So wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy is of necessity to reject the other as bad and corrupt and wicked.

To be the friend of the one is of necessity to be enemy of the other. I love the pure and peaceable and impartial Christianity of Christ.

[ 15 : 06 ] Therefore, I hate the corrupt and slaveholding and women whipping and cradle-plundering, partial, and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason but the most deceitful one, Douglass writes, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.

I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. If those who have been oppressed and marginalized and victimized and harmed and abused by the book that we call the Bible can still find something in it that is true and beautiful and lovely and good, then I need to place myself in the position of a learner.

I should be very slow to assume that they're wrong and that the slaveholder religion and Paul are, in fact, together, the slaveholder religion, the oppressive religion.

I should be very slow to assume that those who find meaning and beauty and goodness in this book that we call Scripture, that they're wrong and that it's actually as oppressive as we have been told.

Aside, you really should read African American Readings of Paul by Lisa M. Bowens, who takes different speeches, biographies, that 1774 document of enslaved Americans arguing for their freedom, and it shows all the ways that they understood and used the Apostle Paul's writings to fight for freedom and to resist the slaveholder religion.

[ 16 : 55 ] It's a beautiful and wonderful book. So, misuse of the thing does not mean the thing is wrong. It means the misuser is. Number two, we don't surrender our religion or our understanding of Scripture to the jackasses.

And number three, there's a difference between writing for your ideals and writing for your present reality. So, why didn't Paul and the writers of Scripture just make it all more obvious for us?

Why do we have to do these exegetical dances to get Scripture to mean what we want it to mean? What it should have meant in the first place? So, let's pretend that you all have an assignment.

Your assignment is to write a helpful and encouraging letter to an incarcerated person, a recently incarcerated person. And they're staring down life without parole. So, what do you write?

So, here's my example. Dear Jailbound Jimmy, prisons should not exist. First, they are a product of the American incarceration and police industrial complex designed to subjugate black and brown minorities.

[ 18 : 03 ] Here are the steps of how we should get rid of the prison industrial complex. Now, I suppose that Jailbound Jimmy might appreciate the sentiment, but a letter like that does nothing to help them navigate the intricacies of life in prison.

How to not get a shiv to the ribs, how to make sure you get the right place in line for the grub. Your ideals may be true, but at that moment, they're not particularly helpful.

So, when we read Paul and Peter's and others' letters and instructions to the enslaved, we have to begin with this fact. In Greece and Rome and the culture where the Roman Empire was at play in the first century, 90% of the citizens were either enslaved or originated some way from the enslavement system.

90% of the population was either currently enslaved or had recently gotten out of slavery or had been born into it.

90%. This was not some theoretical concept for Paul's audience. Most of the people hearing Paul's words read aloud to them at a church gathering in a home were living in this reality on a day-to-day, moment-by-moment basis.

[ 19 : 26 ] And so they needed practical advice on how to live out their lives. Now, I suppose there may have been situations where on occasion, Paul could have waxed poetic about a society and an empire and a world without slaves.

But the more immediate need was to speak on how to live in the society they had currently. So let's say you write an email to your friend on how to pick a car.

You write, hey, get one with good gas mileage. And then, 2,000 years later, some archaeologist reads your letter and says, what fools!

How could they encourage their friend to buy a car that uses gasoline? How could they call themselves a Christian and perpetuate the evil fossil fuel-based economy? Now, of course, in the back of your mind, you would love for a society to move past fossil fuels.

To invest in public transportation and neighborhoods where driving was less necessary. But the question at hand was how to choose a car, not what idealistic car-free society should I hope for.

[ 20 : 33 ] So imagine you write to jailbound Jimmy. Listen to your prison guards. Keep your head down. Don't make trouble. And again, 2,000 years later, somebody reads your letter and says, listen to the prison guards.

Prison guards are a symbol of oppression and systemic racism. Don't listen to prison guards. Take them down. Paul's words, slaves, obey your masters, are the words that you give to your friends and your co-workers, the majority of which are enslaved when you don't want them to see them die in early death.

Paul has made clear his vision of the church. The church is meant to be a place of utter freedom without division or class or divide based on identity.

But the rest of the world doesn't know that yet. It doesn't live by those values. So how do you live in the meantime? You obey your enslavers in order to survive and you show them the subversive love of the gospel and to believe that even enslavers have the divine spark within them so you work for them as if you were working for Jesus.

But, but, but, Paul's not done. Now keep in mind, the Roman Empire did not look kindly on upsetting the social order. Roman and Greek philosophers saw reversing the social order as going against nature itself.

[ 21 : 59 ] Women, by nature, are inferior to men. Children, by nature, are inferior to parents. Slaves were enslavable by nature. This is what the philosophers claimed.

So to advocate for a change in that social order would get you jailed, beheaded, or crucified. And, keep in mind, that letters that you wrote to someone else could be confiscated by the authorities at any time.

There was no such thing as personal property for anyone but the elite. So if you're Phoebe carrying the letter to the Romans or Luke writing the book of Luke and Acts or Epaphroditus carrying one of Paul's letters from Paul to a church and carrying a letter to Paul in your cloak, you best be prepared for have a Roman centurion take it through and, at best, you hope, laugh at it and hand it back or, at worst, destroy it and you.

This, by the way, quick aside, explains the book of Revelation, which is the most explosive political revolutionary book in the Bible. But you best believe that John the Revelator wasn't going to write and then the Roman Empire and the Emperor will be deposed and lose all political pyre at power.

No, John writes about a dragon and a beast thrown into a sea of fire. A Roman guard reads it and says, nice sci-fi you got going on there. Hands it back. Anyway, how is Paul going to speak about the end of slavery, his belief that slavery is an abomination against God's kingdom without putting his letter carriers at unnecessary risk?

[ 23 : 40 ] He writes this, as for slaves, obey your human masters with fear and trembling with sincere devotion to Christ. Serve your owners enthusiastically as though you were serving the Lord and not human beings.

Listen, listen, listen. As for masters, treat your slaves in the same way. A Roman centurion reading this letter sees slaves obey your masters, whatever.

Masters, treat your slaves in the same way. That's weird, okay. But, to the church who's hearing the whole of this letter read aloud, who hears the theology about the Christ, who, Philippians 2, took on the nature of the slave God becoming man and reversing the entire social order and then, okay, how do we live this out?

Well, we still live in a society that's broken that does not live by the way of Christ. Well, slaves, and you still have to obey your masters and masters, listen, you're going to do the same thing.

Colossians 3 and 4, slaves obey your human masters in everything. Masters, grant your slaves justice and equality. What else could Paul possibly mean?

[ 24 : 46 ] Paul has already said all of this in Colossians 3. What is justice and equality? He says in Colossians 3, take off the old human nature with its practices and put on the new nature which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it.

In this image, Paul writes, there is neither Greek nor Jew circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people.

If this is true, what else could justice and equality mean? Paul is as explicit as he can be when he gives instructions to a man named Philemon on how to welcome back his runaway slave.

In the book of Philemon, verse 15, maybe this is the reason that your enslaved one, Onesimus, was separated for you for a while so that you might have him back forever no longer as a slave but more than a slave.

That is, as a dearly loved brother. Now what we're reading here is what's called encoded resistance. It's the way that oppressed people have to speak to one another when they're under the constant threat of persecution and death.

[ 26 : 02 ] Encoded resistance explains why there are old black spiritual songs and encoded messages about an underground railroad. Imagine, from our place of privilege today, getting angry at slaves that they weren't more clear about their resistance.

Of course they weren't. Their lives were on the line. So imagine the anger that Paul would feel if he saw American enslavers using his words of justice and equality and using them to keep people in slavery.

Imagine the frustration Paul would feel today if he saw modern folks like us throw his words away because we would rather let the oppressors define his words than do the work and seize hermeneutical control to bend the Bible towards love injustice which in my opinion is how it's bent already.

So, we remember that just because someone misuses scripture doesn't mean the scripture itself is wrong. It means the abuser is. We remember that we should not surrender biblical interpretation to those who would use it to bring harm and oppression and we remember that Paul had to write both about his ideals and to his present reality.

So finally, what do we do with these passages now? The table church's vision statement is the table exists to call people to become authentic and thoughtful followers of Jesus to join God in the renewal of all things.

[ 27 : 44 ] friends, we live in the now and the not yet. In biblical language, we live in a time where the age of darkness is passing away and the kingdom of God is taking up residence in the cosmos.

But, as with all things with God, it's a process, not an event. If it were an event diagram, it was the age that is passing the way, the age that is to come, and we are that shaded part in the middle called the church.

So that means that scripture is also constantly wrestling with how to live in both realities. A reality where the old binaries are gone, there's no more Jew or Gentile or male or female or enslaved or enslaver, and a reality that is pushing back against the new and breaking thing.

A reality that says, no, keep things the way they are. So as we, as table, church, Jesus following kinds of people join God in the renewal of all things, we also still have to deal with the things that have not yet been renewed.

I was a foster child for a chunk of my early childhood. Now, the foster system is a massive improvement over orphanages and group homes.

[ 29 : 07 ] But it's also a far cry from a society in which family units aren't broken up due to poverty or lack of access to mental health care or the criminalization of drugs.

If 500 years, I'm sure that we're going to look back on the foster care system as a abomination. Why didn't society prioritize the health of families through a well-functioning economy?

And in time, fostering may become obsolete. But in the meanwhile, how do we treat foster kids? As a seven-year-old, I did not need someone to come to me and say, well, I'd love to help you, kid, but by helping you, we're only legitimizing the system, so you're on your own until we get this dismantled.

What I did need someone to say are, here's your foster parents, here are the expectations, and even if this is all messed up, which it is, let me help you live in the messed upness of it all.

Paul knew slavery was messed up. He had a notion or two about God's kingdom of equality and justice and what it could look like. And he also knew that that wasn't the state of things on the ground.

[ 30 : 15 ] And so in the meanwhile, how do we help people live in the messed upness of it all, while also working to undo the messed upness? Juneteenth is another example of this.

It's a celebration of the end of slavery for black people in America, America, and it's also a lament for white people that slavery was a thing in the first place. It's a recognition of those of African descent who came here because they were kidnapped and trafficked and of how far they've come.

And it's also a recognition of the inequalities and prejudices and the systems of oppression that still exist today. The now and the not yet.

Father's Day. It's a celebration of dads and father figures who helped us grow into the people we are, and it's also a lament of dads who have passed away too early, of broken relationships with the men in our lives who let us down.

We recognize that there are things to celebrate and things to lament in a space in between where we have lots of work to do.

[ 31 : 24 ] We recognize that misuse of the thing doesn't ruin the thing. The existence of bad dads doesn't mean we abandon fathership, and yet we hope that we can grow up to be more emotionally mature and responsible and available than our dads and our dads' dads and our dads before that were.

The now and the not yet. This is the work, friends. A constant wrestling with what we hope there is to be and what there currently is today. A celebration of how far we come and a lament of how far there is to go.

We've come a long way from slaves obey your masters and I think Paul would celebrate that. But I also think we've got plenty of new things to wrestle with.

It's my belief and my contention that scripture is the way that's going to help us wrestle with these new things, to learn from those who wrestle with these things from old so we can learn how to do it today.

And when we toss scripture aside, we're missing out on all the wisdom it has to offer. Thank you.