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Sermon Notes

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The Freedom of a Christian Slave

Colossians 3:22-4:1

As we come to today's topic from Colossians, I am amazed by the depths of the subject...how rich it is biblically and how potent historically... I am speaking of SLAVERY

How can it be that one of the greatest triumphs of the gospel in improving life on this sin-cursed planet is the world-wide abolition of slavery

AND YET the greatest accomplishment of the gospel within our own hearts is to teach us to be cheerful slaves of God and of each other, and to do it for eternity in heaven?

That is the paradox before us!! Slavery is both an enemy of the church and the highest glory of the church

Last week, we went carefully over Colossians 3:22-4:1, Paul's commands to masters and slaves, and focused on WORK

But there is another issue—that of slavery itself, and I want to address that today

I. The Heroic Fight Against Slavery's Wicked Abuse

A. 2007: Two Hundredth Anniversary of Wilberforce's Triumph

1. William Wilberforce, an Evangelical Christian in England and a Member of Parliament, led a successful eighteen-year fight against the British slave trade... struck down again and again, vilified, opposed, shouted-down, hated, mocked, threatened... he tirelessly persevered until at last success was his in 1807
2. This was just the first step: the abolition of the infamous MIDDLE PASSAGE... by which maybe 15 million Africans were eventually snatched from their homes and transported across the Atlantic Ocean to be enslaved in the Western Hemisphere

African kings, warlords and private kidnappers sold captives to Europeans who held several coastal forts. The captives were usually force-marched to these ports along the western coast of Africa, where they were held for purchase to the European or American slave traders. Ships contained up to 300 slaves aboard one slave ship with a crew of 30. The male captives were normally chained together in pairs to save space; right leg to the next man's left leg — while the women and children may have had somewhat more room.

The captives were fed beans, corn, yams, rice, and palm oil. Slaves were fed one meal a day with water, but if food was scarce, slaveholders would get priority over meals.

in 1781, the Captain of the slave ship *Zong*, threw overboard 130 living slaves chained together to claim them as lost cargo and get insurance money

3. Wilberforce spared nothing in making the horrors of the trade widely known: the inhuman conditions on board the overpacked slave ships
4. Last year marked the 200th anniversary of the end of British slave trade...
5. But that was just the first step of the fight: for the next 26 years Wilberforce also participated in the fight to abolish slavery itself... that finally happened in 1833, days before he died
6. The worldwide fight against slavery continued after that... including the American Civil War fought on the issue... the last nation to abolish slavery was the Islamic nation of Mauritania in 1981!!! But **ILLEGAL SLAVE TRAFFICKING** continues in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world to this very day

B. History of Abolition

1. Abolition itself a product of the Gospel of Jesus Christ
2. Islamic nations stubbornly resisted abolition, and only made changes when forced to by Western nations with whom they wanted to do business
3. Worldwide abolition is one of the greatest achievements of the Gospel of Jesus Christ... YET

C. Questions Linger About the Bible

1. Once abolitionism gained power, many slaveholders began to defend the “peculiar institution” from texts of the Bible
2. They actually supported slavery from the Old Testament passages I’m about to discuss... and they used an argument from silence: Paul never abolished slavery but sought to regulate how it would be done... so slavery must be okay
3. My purpose today is to defend the Scripture’s astonishingly deep handling of the issue of slavery
4. What is “slavery”?

Encyclopedia Britannica: The social sanction that permits one person or group to compel the involuntary labor of another person or group—whether slave, serf, indentured servant, or otherwise

That bonded person is obliged to perform personal service for his lord or master under conditions that make him socially inferior and are restrictive of his freedom

Key issues: compulsion of labor (involuntary labor)... conditions that make him inferior, even sub-human... no personal freedom... the Gospel TRANSFORMS EACH ASPECT

II. Slavery in the Old Testament

A. Overview of OT History

1. Cursed be Canaan... Noah's curse on Ham's son for his treatment of Noah

Genesis 9:24-25 "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers."

2. Abraham had male and female slaves, like Hagar
3. When Hagar was abused by Sarah, she ran away and God told her

Genesis 16:9 Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her."

4. Joseph was sold as a slave into Egypt... then threatened his brothers with slavery for stealing his cup
5. The Jews were slaves in Egypt, but then made slaves of other nations later in their history

B. The Puzzling Laws of Moses

1. Moses constantly reminded the Jews that they had been slaves in Egypt
2. He commanded them to be mindful of treating strangers with kindness because

Exodus 23:9 "Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt."

3. But yet, slavery was permitted in the Laws of Moses

Immediately after the Ten Commandments, several laws regulating, not abolishing slavery:

C. A Key Text: A Voluntary Slave who Delights in the Master

Deuteronomy 15:12-17 If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. ¹³ And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. ¹⁴ Supply him

liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. ¹⁵ Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today. ¹⁶ But if your servant says to you, "I do not want to leave you," because he loves you and your family and is well off with you, ¹⁷ then take an awl and push it through his ear lobe into the door, and he will become your servant for life. Do the same for your maidservant.

This idea of the piercing of an earlobe, I think, is an incredible picture of Christ's stance toward His Father when He entered the world:

Psalm 40:6-8 Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. ⁷ Then I said, "Here I am, I have come-- it is written about me in the scroll. ⁸ I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

Christ came into the world, then, as the perfect slave of a perfect master... He entered the world to do the will of the One who sent Him:

John 6:38-39 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

The will of God was that Jesus should lay down His life... and this was the sacrifice He must make for the will of the Master:

III. Christ a Perfect Slave, Christ a Perfect Master

A. Christ the "Very Nature of a Slave"

Philippians 2:5-8 Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

1. Exegetical observations

- a. the word "servant" is *doulos*... it is usually translated slave
- b. Parallel Greek construction: "very nature God" vs. "very nature ... a servant"... Jesus was AS MUCH SERVANT AS HE WAS GOD
- c. The essence of slavery is full obedience... in Christ's case even to death

2. Thus Jesus was a perfect slave... and He went as low as a slave could possibly go... a humiliating death on the cross

B. Christ's Slave-like Demeanor to Others

1. He willingly served anyone who came with a need
 - The Centurion's paralyzed servant: Jesus rises to heal him
 - Jairus' daughter: Jesus rises to heal her
 - Huge crowds pressing in on Him: Jesus heals each one
2. Especially displayed in the footwashing, John 13
 - a. A task even the most menial servant would not have been asked to do
 - b. Jesus on His hands and knees washing His disciples' feet is a powerful picture of servanthood
 - c. BUT... it is not the most slave-like thing He ever did

C. Christ's Ultimate "Bondage": The Cross

1. Philippians implied that the downward path of slave-like obedience culminated in His death on the cross
2. Jesus in another place used slavery language to speak of His "bondage" in the Father's will

Luke 12:50 I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!

The Greek word translated "distressed" refers to bondage... like being in chains or tied up with ropes, like a prisoner, like a slave

His is clearly referring to His own death... the will of the Father, the will of His Master was binding him like a chain, and He could not get free until it was accomplished

The ultimate expression of His total submission to the will of His Master:

Matthew 26:39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

This is Christ, the perfect servant of a Master... doing the hardest service any slave has ever been commanded to perform

For on the cross, as a substitute, Jesus suffered the wrath and curse of God for a countless multitude of sinners from every tribe, nation, people, and language

As a slave, Jesus drank the cup of hell... no other servitude was greater

Matthew 20:28 the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Suffering Servant:

Isaiah 53:11 After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

D. Christ Also a Perfect Master

Colossians 4:1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

No one has ever gone so low, and no one has ever been raised so high... Christ's dual roles of Master and Slave changes the very essence of slavery forever

IV. Slavery in the New Testament: Some Observations

A. Spiritual Slavery: Every Human Being a Slave

Spiritually, as a human being you will SERVE SOME MASTER... there is no avoiding this

Satan's great lie is to offer "freedom" from all submission, from all authority... you can do whatever you want with your time... you can CHOOSE, and no one has the right to tell you what to do... you can eat whatever you want, spend your money however you want, go wherever you want, do what ever you want

But, at the core of it is slavery to SIN

1. Every Non-Christian a Slave of Sin (and of Satan)

John 8:34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

Romans 6:17 you used to be slaves to sin

2. Every Christian a Slave of Christ

Matthew 11:28-30 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Paul uses slave language boldly:

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Many Christian leaders took as their most exalted title “Bond-slave” of Christ:

Paul, Epaphras, James, Jude, Peter, Tychicus all delight to be called “bond-slave”

Bottom line: Every human being on the face of the earth will either serve God through Christ or serve Satan and sin... Christians delight to serve Christ, not Satan

If you are ever talking to someone who says, “I am free... no one tells me what to do; I can do whatever I want with my life, my money, my time, my relationships, my interests, my hobbies... My life is mine to live it however I choose” be assured that person is serving Satan

B. Freedom and Slavery Both Redefined by Christ

1. “Freedom” Redefined by Christ

a. Freedom is NOT that attitude I just gave you... that is a faithless attitude that forgets there is a King who rules over everything

b. Freedom is defined differently now in Christ:

Psalm 119:32 I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.

Freedom is joyful obedience to the commands of a King you love and trust... freedom means complete obedience to God’s commands as revealed in His word

Jesus’ freedom:

John 8:31-32 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

True freedom is holding to Jesus’ teaching... being Christ’s disciples; taking His yoke and walking under His laws and finding those commands have set you free from the sadness, misery, waste, destruction, and death of SIN

John 8:34-36 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Paul teaches this kind of freedom as well:

Romans 6:18 You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Freedom then is an attitude of the heart toward God, toward the commands of God... and even a slave who has come to Christ is truly a free man:

1 Corinthians 7:22 For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave.

2. Slavery Redefined by Christ

- a. Every Christian now a slave to Christ... and therefore to other people
- b. We are free to serve both Christians and non-Christians alike
 - i) We serve Christians by loving them, forgiving their sins, washing their feet, meeting their needs

Galatians 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.

John 13:12-16 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

- ii) We serve non-Christians by doing whatever is necessary to bring them to faith in Christ

1 Corinthians 9:19-22 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

Thus Christians find themselves doing the most menial tasks, meeting physical needs of lost people, so that they could somehow win them to Christ

C. Physical Slavery: Not Overthrown but Subverted

1. Slavery Itself Not Clearly Overthrown

- a. Neither Jesus nor Paul ever commanded all masters to free their slaves
- b. There are no clear bible texts that expose slavery itself as wicked or evil

c. Now you can see why: because there are aspects of the master-slave relationship that perfectly describe our relationship to God and to Christ, as well as to other people

d. It is the wickedness attached to slavery that is clearly overthrown

BUT: slavery never clearly overthrown in the Bible!

2. YET: Physical Slavery is Subverted

a. The Golden Rule

Matthew 7:12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Abraham Booth, an English Calvinist Baptist, preached a sermon in 1792 entitled,

Commerce in the Human Species, and the Enslaving of Innocent Persons, inimical to the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Christ

He said: How would you like it if some foreign slave traders came to Liverpool and took your wives and children right from you and enslaved them?

If you wouldn't like to be a slave, then why enslave others?

b. Jesus' statement to His disciples:

John 15:13-15 "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ "You are My friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing

This has power to subvert slavery... Jesus has elevated all of us from slaves to friends, and from friends to brothers

c. The common brotherhood of master-slave in the gospel

Galatians 3:26-28 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

d. The Command to Try to Seek Freedom

1 Corinthians 7:21 Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you-- although if you can gain your freedom, do so.

BUT...clearly, Paul felt you could productively live out the rest of your life as a slave

1 Corinthians 7:22 For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave.

BUT the whole flow of argumentation in 1 Corinthians 7 is that the freer you are from earthly commitments, the freer you are to serve Christ. This even extended to of marriage:

1 Corinthians 7:32-34 I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs-- how he can please the Lord. ³³ But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world-- how he can please his wife-- ³⁴ and his interests are divided.

How much more are your interests divided when your time is given to an earthly master who owns all your time

So Paul clearly forbids any Christian from voluntarily becoming a slave:

1 Corinthians 7:23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.

But still: if you can get your freedom do it!!! Freedom is better than bondage

And this whole approach subverts slavery

e. The Condemnation of Slave Traders

i) In the Law of Moses

Exodus 21:16 "Anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death.

ii) In the New Testament

1 Timothy 1:9-11 We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers--

The image of wicked men, lying in wait near some African village for some hapless villagers who wander too far... jumping up suddenly with a net, beating them unconscious, dragging them to a slave fortress on the West Coast of Africa, then subjecting them to the wretched horrors of the Middle Passage...chaining them packed closely together in a stinking below-decks hold, giving just enough food to survive the voyage, withholding food from those too sick to continue... this is the SLAVE TRADE... done by kidnappers

This is CONDEMNED in the Law and will be condemned on Judgment Day

It was from this evil trade that John Newton was saved and later wrote the famous words:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...

“A wretch”... what an understatement

f. The Book of Philemon

- i) Onesimus an escaped slave
- ii) Paul finds him and leads him to faith in Christ
- iii) Paul sends him back to his master, who turns out to be Philemon, another of Paul's converts!!
- iv) With him, Paul sends this letter and this command: SET HIM FREE

Philemon 1:15-16 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

V. "Service" in Heaven: Redeemed from the Curse

A. Eternal Rewards Based on Becoming Slaves

1. An entirely new way of thinking is needed
2. We tend to want to be Kings and have others serve us
3. Christ wants us to think like servants... even like slaves
4. The one who will be most highly rewarded in heaven is the one who most humbly served on earth

Matthew 20:25-28 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

B. Service Itself Will Be Redeemed in Heaven

1. God surrounded constantly by willing servants
 - a. The angels

Daniel 7:9-10 "As I looked, "thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. ¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

Revelation 22:8-9 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who

had been showing them to me. ⁹ But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!"

This is what Christ meant in the Lord's Prayer:

Matthew 6:10 your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Angels never bicker, they are never jealous of another angel's position... they serve God as He chooses and are delighted to do it

b. John Newton's observation

"If two angels were sent to the earth on a mission from God; one of them to run an empire, and the other one to sweep the streets of a city, neither one would seek a different job but would do it gladly to the glory of the One who sent them."

2. The Redeemed from every nation will serve Him

Revelation 22:3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.

3. AND ALSO reign with Him!!

Revelation 22:5 And they will reign for ever and ever.

4. And the one who reigns over all, Christ, will actually serve us

Luke 12:37 It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.

ASTONISHING!!!! Imagine the King of the Universe, Jesus, the Son of God, getting down from His throne at the banquet in the Kingdom, and coming to you with a servant's tray and asking "Can I get you something to drink?"

Jesus redeems slavery forever: redeeming us from slavery to sin

Redeeming service itself to be the most blessed state anyone can ever experience... the delight of living for someone else's happiness... of putting yourself totally at the disposal of another

Jesus is the King who was a slave, and the slave who is a King... who delights more in serving than in being served

That is our future as well... that is our salvation!!!