

TEACHING GOAL

To study the issue of slavery as a special consideration of the eighth commandment.

DOCTRINAL STANDARDS

- Q. Which is the eighth commandment?
A. The eighth commandment is, Thou shalt not steal.
- Q. What is forbidden in the eighth commandment?
A. The eighth commandment forbids whatsoever does or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbor's wealth or outward estate.
- S.C. 75, L.C. 142, W.C. of F. XIX, Savoy 19, Young 97-98

SCRIPTURAL BASIS

Study Passage: Titus 2

Support Passages: Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1; I Timothy 6:1-2; I Peter 2:18-19; Luke 7:2-10; Genesis 14:14, 17:9-14, 26:12-14; Leviticus 25:45; Exodus 21:20-21; Genesis 9:20-27; Exodus 21:1-11; Leviticus 25:35-55; Numbers 31:25-31; Joshua 9:16-27

BIBLE STORY

Philemon: The runaway slave.

MEMORY ASSIGNMENT

"Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior." (Titus 2:9-10, ESV)

APPLICATION

God does not abolish the practice of slavery but rather regulates it as He does also with regard to our own slavery to Himself because we are His property. Therefore we are to love the slave no less than the master and treat him or her as we would a neighbor.

SUMMARY

Slavery, especially in this country, is a very delicate issue but we need to consider it because there are many references to it in the Scriptures. In order to understand the relevance of slavery to the eighth commandment we must define what it is in terms of the Bible. The moral concept of slavery consists in the, "obligations of the slave to labor for life, without his own consent, for the master. The thing, therefore, in which the master has property or ownership, is the involuntary labor of his slave, and not his personality, or his soul. A certain right of control over the person of the slave is incidentally given to the master by his property in the bondsman's labor; that is, so much control as is necessary to enable him to secure the labor which belongs to him. But we repeat, it is not the person, but the labor of the slave, which is the master's property."¹

In the New Testament, the *douloi* or bondslaves are urged by the apostle Paul to be, "subject to their own masters in everything, to be well pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect." Paul does not urge the abolition of slavery but its continuation in a well pleasing manner. Such an exhortation seems all the more amazing when we realize that in Roman culture slaves were mistreated far more than they ever were in the United States. Similar regulations are to be found in Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:1. Nowhere in the Word of God is found any indication that slavery, as defined above, is immoral and is to be abolished.

"Let all who are under the yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine may not be spoken against. and let those who have believers as their masters not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren, but let them serve them all the more, because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved. Teach and preach these principles."² Conversion and repentance does not abrogate the moral obligations the slave has to his master. To runaway, as did Onesimus, amounted to theft perpetrated against Philemon. Both were Christians yet Paul insisted that Onesimus return to serve his master and brother in the Lord because he recognized that Philemon had property in Onesimus. That Paul sent Onesimus back, even though he besought Philemon to forgive Onesimus of any wrong he had committed and signed an affidavit to repay any debt himself, indicates that slaveholding as such is not unlawful or immoral. This is true even when the master is unreasonable or perverse.³ In that case it is the perversity of the master that is immoral and not the slaveholding.

Thus far we have taken note of New Testament passages which applied to a culture that was greatly different from that of Israel in the Old Testament.

However God spoke to the matter of slavery in Israel as well. The subject is treated at some length in Exodus 21, Leviticus 25, Numbers 31 and Joshua 9. Each of these passages deals frankly with the purchase of slaves or the forcing of human beings into servitude. A Hebrew citizen could be purchased as a slave for the space of six years but in the Jubilee year he was to set free if he wished it. He could inure himself permanently to his master if he wished by having his ear pierced with an awl. One might be forced into slavery due to poverty or for penal reasons or simply because one desired to be a slave. Again we notice that slaveholding as such is not immoral. It is however highly regulated by God.

Abraham was a slaveholder of considerable note as was Isaac. Hagar, the mistress of Abraham, was remanded by God to slavery. And earlier in history Canaan, Lamech and Cain were similarly cursed with it. On the other hand, all of us who were "bought with a price" are slaves of God and bondslaves of Jesus Christ who bought us with His own blood. Whether bond or free we are all one in Christ. Therefore we conclude that no matter what our station in life may be, we ought not to act as men-pleasers but as God-pleasers. We ought to regard Christians in servitude just as we would those who are free. We ought to love our neighbor as ourselves though he is bond or free.

¹ Robert L. Dabney, A Defense of Virginia, Harrisonburg, Virginia, Sprinkle Publications, 1977, p. 94

² I Timothy 6:1-2

³ I Peter 2:18