

Romans 6: Slavery

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The second part of Romans 6 deals with the idea of slavery. In Romans 1 and 2 Paul has confirmed that all men were under law (the law of Noah for the Gentiles, the law of Moses for the Jews), and when they sinned, all men were held under sin. In Romans 3 and 4 he made us to understand that in order to be right with God, we needed justification and sanctification. However, such was beyond us when in sin. In Romans 5 Paul spoke to our condition of being enemies with God, and that such could only be resolved by propitiation, a (blood) sacrifice to appease God's wrath. Jesus Christ was that sacrifice. Finally, in Romans 6, he reminds us that this propitiation was achieved when we were baptized.

In connection to baptism, Paul tells us that our baptism into Christ's death has released us from slavery. The best example of this is the Israelite escape in Exodus 14. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, until the death of the firstborn. With that event, they are free to choose to leave. However, they are still pursued by the authority of their slave master, Pharaoh. It is not until their baptism at the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:1-4) that they are truly set free; when they see the slave master's authority scattered in the water they were immersed through. This is the same as baptism for us today.

Many people in the world cannot understand the Bible language which tells us about slavery. In particular, that the bible does not condemn slavery outright, nor does it command all master to free their slaves is a message that many find immoral. Thus the skeptic accuses the Scriptures of being immoral, and if one part of the Scriptures are at fault, then all of the Scriptures are faulted (2 Timothy 3:16-17). However, this reflects three common errors by men: they do not accurately understand the concept of slavery; they do not accurately understand the Scriptures; they do not understand what slavery was describe as in Scriptures.

WHAT IS SLAVERY?

Slavery should be defined broadly, but for most people they are only thinking of the institution of slavery as it existed in the United States until the 13th amendment. This narrow definition would exclude indentured servants, serfdom, and debt peonage, all relevant and common forms of slavery. Slavery should be described as a working situation that includes two circumstances: working without an opportunity to be released, or working at unfair or nominal wages. Consider situations such as apprenticeships, internships, military service or prison labor. All of this have conditions similar to slavery, but are acceptable in our society.

SLAVERY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Slavery is classified in the law of Moses in two circumstances. First there was Hebrew slavery, and then there was Gentile slavery. A Hebrew slave could become a slave for one of two reasons: a crime (Exodus 22:1-3) and debt (Leviticus 25:39-41). A Hebrew slave was to be freed at the Jubilee (Exodus 21:2), the seventh year of service. However, a slave had the right to petition to remain with their master (Exodus 21:6).

Gentile slaves (which could be obtained in warfare, Lev. 25:44), had rights as well as a Hebrew slave. Neither could be abused by their master; if they were wounded, they were entitled to their freedom AND the Mosaic penalty of "eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:20-21). A maser who killed a slave was guilty of murder and to be put to death. A master was commanded not to be severe in treatment (Lev. 25:43).

Slaves had the rights of worship; whether Hebrew or Gentile, all were given the Sabbath and the feast days (Lev. 25:6). Their families were not to be broken up (Deut. 15:12-18). If a master had intimate relations with his slave, he was obligated to make her his wife (not concubine). A slave cannot be charged with adultery (Lev. 19:20) in such instances, but the master can be charged.

Important to the laws of slavery in the Mosaic law was that it was a capital crime to take men as slaves (called kidnapping in Exodus 21:16). Thus we need to make an important determination: in the law of Moses, men were slaves because of choices they made (i.e. debt, crime or going to war with Israel). No one could be forced into slavery without at least some choice or the choice of their parents. This is an important point that follows through in the New Testament.

SLAVERY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There is little conversation about the New Testament laws of slavery, beyond Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 4:1, which insist that a master treat a slave with justice and fairness, and to give up threatening. But there seems to be a case in 1 Corinthians 7:21-23 that implies that slavery is an imperfect condition for a slave. While Philemon was not commanded to release Onesimus, the slave returning to him, perhaps we can conclude that Paul's warnings are: he is your brother, and you will be judged by your behavior to him, and any debt his service has cost you is paid for with the Gospel. Perhaps this is Paul's way of moving Philemon to freeing Onesimus. As in the Old Testament, it is a sin to take a man or woman against their will and force them into slavery (again called kidnapping in 1 Timothy 1:10).

Thus, anyone who is familiar with the laws of Moses, and the New Testament must conclude that American slavery was immoral and unlawful in both its principles (the laws and rules which established and governed it) and in its practice (the actual conditions of slavery). No one could defend American slavery any more that they can defend the concepts of Abortion in our day today (see comparison chart).

SLAVERY IN ROMANS 6

It is necessary to understand the idea of the choice in slavery (albeit a remote choice for many in the Scriptural views of slavery) to understand the concepts of Romans 6. Fundamentally, all men have a choice as to their Master: Sin or Righteousness. Paul (and Jesus, John 8:34) states that slavery is being owned by that which we serve. One who serves the flesh is owned by sin; to be owned by sin is to be owned by Satan (Hebrews 2:14-15, Mark 3:26-27). To be owned by Satan is the same as being a child of Satan (Galatians 4:7-8, John 8:44). Paul makes it clear that the wage of this sin is death, which is being spiritually and eternally cut off from God (Ephesians 2:1-3).

Yet the other slavery in view is that to Jesus Christ. One who submits to Him is delivered to His authority. The writers of the New Testament gladly identified themselves as slaves of Christ: Titus 1:1 "Paul, a *slave* of God"; 2 Peter 1:1 "Peter, a *slave* and apostle of Jesus"; James 1:1 "James, a *slave* of God and the Lord"; Jude 1 "Jude, a *slave* of Jesus Christ"; Revelation 1:1 "communicated... by (Jesus') *slave* John". This slavery is one without shame, particularly because it contains a reward of adoption and inheritance (something foreseen in the OT – Lev. 25:46). The reward of this becomes the central theme of Romans – the free gift of eternal life.

Parallels between Abortion and Slavery		
	Slavery	Abortion
Supporting view	States right to choose – Freedom of choice	Woman’s right to choose – Freedom of choice
Legal precedent : A supreme court case defined the right and what gives a person human rights	Dred Scot vs. Sanford	Roe vs. Wade
Abolitionist view	Morally wrong because it denies basic human rights by denying human identity	Morally wrong because it denies basic human rights by denying human identity
View of majority of Americans	<i>“I would not own a slave, but who am I to tell someone else”</i>	<i>“I would not have an abortion, but who am I to tell someone else”</i>