

Introduction

I wrote an article recently explaining how I select commentaries to use in my study. I look first for scholarship. I also look for minority voices such as women scholars and non-white scholars. Due to differences between men and women, men are far more likely to specialize in the ways writers of commentaries need to specialize so there are far more commentaries written by men than by women. There is a similar dearth of commentaries written by non-white scholars. It is important to hear other voices because we can get stuck in a bubble of our own cognitive environment.

A cognitive environment is the set of assumptions you have, often without realizing you have them. If I were to say to you, “The Lions are going to win the Super Bowl”, you would recognize who the Lions are and what the Super Bowl is, even if you have never watched an NFL game in your life. If I were to say the same thing to a man from the traditional Himba people in Africa, he would wonder why a lion would want a dish of *any* size.

Our cognitive environment includes things such as “9/11” and “running for president”. If I were to mention the non-stop fireworks in the city, many of you would grown inwardly with me, knowing exactly what I’m talking about. We think it strange that other nations still have kings and would immediately bristle at the thought of establishing a monarchy in our nation. That idea offends our cognitive environment because we like to think we choose our presidents.

Our cognitive environment affects how we read things. We intuitively read an article on “The Onion” differently than we would read an article on MLive. Our cognitive environment changes with time. If you were to watch an old “All in the Family” episode today, you’d be shocked at the bigotry of the main character—and the laughs it generated. In the 1970s and early 80s, this was just “television”.

When we approach Scripture, we approach literature that was written long ago in very different cultures that had very different cognitive environments. The world that Moses lived in was very different from the world of David and Solomon, and their world was very different from that of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Their world was very different from that of the apostles. They saw the world differently and from their own cognitive environments.

Our task in approaching Scripture is recognizing our own cognitive environment, seeing how it shapes our understanding of Scripture. We also have to strive to enter into the cognitive environment of the particular author and his recipients. For example, in his letter to the Philippians Paul tells the church there that “our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ”. We hear this as being about our ultimate allegiance and our hope in the return of Christ.

Philippi was a Roman colony, with a considerable number of Roman citizens living there. They thought of themselves as thoroughly *Roman*. You might even say they thought of the city of Philippi as a suburb of Rome, even though it was hundreds of miles away. Further, Caesar was called “the savior of the world”, and Caesar was called “lord”. In this simple

declaration that our citizenship is in heaven and from heaven we wait a Savior, the one who is Lord, Paul is challenging their assumptions about the world. Their Roman citizenship—which they would have valued very highly—pales in comparison to their true citizenship. Their true Lord is sovereign over all and the emperor is but a passing figure. We miss the weight of Paul’s words because our cognitive environment is so very different.

One of the resources I often turn to for a different perspective is the Africa Bible Commentary. Given the vast majority of slaves in our history came from Africa, I opened this volume this past week with a bit of anticipation. Surely a commentary written about a text on slavery by an African scholar would be scathing in its critique of that slavery. The cognitive environment of an African biblical scholar is so different from ours that he simply applies the principles in our text to employees and employers. He doesn’t mention New World slavery! A modern day *African* scholar is simply not asking the same questions we ask as modern Americans.

So we come to our text. Our default assumptions about the world come from a 21st-century American perspective, whether you’re black or white, Asian or Hispanic, whether you’re rich or poor, whether you have college degrees or a high-school diploma, whether you grew up in West Michigan or you moved here later in life. These things affect our perspective, yet our perspective is that of those who live in a world of plenty, where groceries are readily available year-round. Even the idea of eating fresh fruit *year-round* is relatively new in human history. A hundred years ago fresh fruit was both seasonal and highly local. *You can get watermelon in January.* It may not be great watermelon, but you can get it.

Because we live in a world of plenty and a world of great freedom to do as we please, we approach the text of Scripture differently than everyone else in history. Our world is different today than it was 50 years ago, and even more different than it was 100 years ago. It’s hard to imagine a world from 2,000 years ago, but this is our task when we approach Scripture. So we come to our text in Ephesians 6.

Eph 6:5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ,⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart,⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man,⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.⁹ 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.

Ephesians 6:5–9

Ancient Slavery

One question skeptics frequently ask is why the Bible does not condemn slavery outright. It seeks to limit it. The Mosaic law contained rules about slaves. Here Paul gives instructions to both slaves and their masters. The claim is that having rules governing how slaves were treated is tantamount to approving and affirming the existence of slavery. Gavin Ortlund makes a helpful point about this from the law of Moses:

Ex 22:1 “If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.

Exodus 22:1

This command gives penalties for those who steal. Does this text approve of stealing by seeking to mitigate the damages caused by theft? No, of course it does not approve of stealing! In the same way, the Bible seeks to mitigate the damage caused by slavery. You may have noticed the ESV translates the word for slave as “bondservant”. This is due to the recognition of our cognitive environment affecting our understanding of the word. Ancient slavery and New World slavery had little in common.

What I am about to share does not in any way express approval for slavery. I am not suggesting the Bible approves it. I am not trying to soften the horrors that came with American slavery or the horrors that came with ancient slavery. I am simply trying to highlight the differences.

In the ancient Roman world most slaves could expect freedom by age 30. Prior to the time of the apostles the majority of slaves came from prisoners of war. As wars of conquest tapered off, the source of new slaves became the children of slaves. Again, they could expect freedom by age 30. However, another significant source of slaves in the Roman empire was self-sale into slavery. That is, a person would sell himself as a slave, complete with a contract and the reception of a substantial sum. The new master would pay the prevailing price for a slave and the slave could invest that money and could even own his own slaves!

From our perspective we cannot imagine why a person would sell himself or herself into slavery. Though a slave could work a side job and could own slaves himself and could expect freedom by age 30, while a slave he was, in all ways, property, and had to do his master’s bidding. So why would a person sell himself into slavery?

First, he could choose his master. If the master were a Roman citizen, upon receiving his freedom, the slave would become a Roman citizen. While a slave that person would experience a measure of financial stability, with his or her needs met. In fact, you could not look at a person in the first century and tell by his or her clothing—or skin color—whether that person were a slave.

Slaves could own property. Their education was often greatly encouraged, as many had significant financial responsibilities for their masters. Slaves were not seen as a distinct social class. We tend to think of slaves as poor, but this wasn’t exactly the case. Because they could own property and because they could work a side job and were, in fact, *usually paid for their service*, many grew in wealth during their enslavement and upon being freed they could enter the broader society as a new member of the elite.

In the city of Corinth during Paul’s day the city treasurer was a man named Erastus. Paul mentions him a couple times. We also have found archaeological evidence of him. Turns out he paid for the paving of a road in ancient Corinth in response to being elected aedile—something like a city manager. New Testament scholar S. Scott Bartchy says Erastus almost certainly had sold himself to the city of Corinth as a public slave. He, though a slave, was most likely the most publicly distinguished member of the church in Corinth, for his high social position *as a slave*.

It’s not hard to see that when the New Testament speaks of slaves, it’s not really referring to the sort of slavery we had here in the United States. It was still evil as an institution and

human practice! The great African church father Augustine explained the origin of slavery.

This is prescribed by the order of nature: it is thus that God has created man. For “let them,” He says, “have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every creeping thing which creeps on the earth.” He did not intend that His rational creature, who was made in His image, should have dominion over anything but the irrational creation, —not man over man, but man over the beasts.

...[Slavery] is a name, therefore, introduced by sin and not by nature. The origin of the Latin word for slave is supposed to be found in the circumstance that those who by the law of war were liable to be killed were sometimes preserved by their victors, and were hence called servants. And these circumstances could never have arisen save through sin.

Augustine, *The City of God*, XIX Chapter 15

Slavery, he argues, is not part of God’s created order. Slavery is contrary to God’s created order. God gave us the animals to help us labor; he did not give us other men to use as cattle. On its face, slavery is an upending of God’s good world. It is an attack on the image of God in man.

What is strange to me is that in the ancient world slaves were not pining for their freedom. The only danger of a slave revolt was against a particularly cruel master. If there were a revolt, it wouldn’t be to end slavery, but to turn the tables on the master and make him a slave to teach him a lesson.

When we come to a text like this one in Ephesians, we ask why Paul didn’t condemn slavery outright. In the ancient world, neither master *nor slave* would ask this question. It would not have occurred to them. For many, slavery was a means of getting out of poverty or quickly eliminating even enormous debts or strangely, a way to climb the social ladder and join the Roman elite.

This does not mean slavery was a net good. The system that arose that made slavery a means of social and financial advancement was evil. God’s good world is not lacking resources. Any system that arises that tends to keep poor people poor and rich people rich is a broken system that is contrary to God’s created order. There are still such systems in place today. Any economic system that relies on the subjugation of people is a broken economic system that is contrary to God’s created order.

It is in the midst of the brokenness of this world, with political and legal and social and racial and economic injustices everywhere, that we are called to live faithfully. It should be no surprise, then, that Paul gives instructions to both slaves and masters, particularly to a church in a city that housed the wholesale slave market that served as the distribution point for the western half of the empire. Let’s take a closer look at his words.

Slaves and Masters

As we’ve seen, Paul is quite counter-cultural in his instructions to husbands and wives, to parents and children, and now to slaves and masters. He told husbands to submit to their wives by loving them and giving their lives for them. He told wives, as responsible agents, to

submit to their husbands by respecting them. He addressed children as responsible agents and told them to submit to their parents by obeying them. He told fathers to submit to their children by not angering them by being brutish and overly harsh, and instead to raise them and seek their flourishing. In our text he addresses slaves directly, as responsible agents. In the fifth century Theodoret explains this.

It was necessary for Paul to offer instructions for slaves. They were present everywhere in the church, which contains all classes and strata of human society, both men and women, parents and children, slaves and masters, rich and poor, governors and the governed.

Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Epistle to the Ephesians 6.5

Slaves made up approximately a third of the empire. You could not look at a person and know immediately whether that person were a slave, as their dress often indicated the social status of the master. If the master were incredibly wealthy, the slave would be a well-dressed member of society, wearing clothing appropriate to both the task and the class of the master. Many were included in the family, and if they died while in the service to a family, were often buried in the family burial plot.

Still, slaves were slaves and while the conditions of their enslavement were generally not as evil as that of New World slaves, the very idea of “owning” a person is incompatible with Christian faith. By addressing slaves as responsible agents Paul undermines the very foundation of slavery itself. In his letter to the Corinthians he addressed the slaves in that church.

^{1 Cor 7:21} Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² 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. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men.

1 Corinthians 7:21–23

Here he instructs the Corinthians to not become bondservants. Bondservants were slaves. Since prisoners of war as a source of slaves had largely dried up in his day, and since the majority of slaves were either children born to slaves or those who sold themselves into slavery (though human piracy was also an issue), Paul is essentially condemning slavery as an institution. He’s telling them directly to not contribute to the problem of slavery, even *voluntarily*.

Given the impact of the wholesale slave market in Ephesus, and given how many in the church would have been slaves, Paul’s instructions to slaves undermines the institution. Those who are slaves are not property. They are not chattel. They are human beings created in the image of God and therefore have inherent dignity and worth. They cannot be traded like commodities! And yet, Paul instructs those who are slaves—many of whom had already sold themselves as such—to obey their earthly masters with fear and trembling. He doesn’t mean the sort of abject fear of corporal punishment, though this was not uncommon. He means their demeanor toward their masters must reflect their actual legal status.

But even more, their demeanor as slaves must reflect something greater. They must serve their earthly masters as they would serve the Lord Christ. Just as a wife must submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ, so a servant must submit to his master as he does to Christ.

Paul adds this service must be with a sincere heart, not merely as people-pleasers. They are to serve as if they are serving the Lord himself. Look at the motivation in verse 8: “knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free”. He’s saying that even a person who is slave is not defined by his earthly status. Those who belong to the Lord have an identity in Christ, even if their earthly status is lowly.

Let’s not miss the significance here. Paul is addressing them directly, indicating their real status and their real identity in Christ. They are not, and cannot be, mere property, even if the corrupt legal and economic system of Rome treats them as such. Understand that masters were also present in the church in Ephesus. There were those who owned slaves and were in the gathered assembly as this letter from Paul was being read. You would have already been flabbergasted that Paul addressed wives directly and followed this up by addressing children directly. *Now he’s writing to your slaves directly!?* At every step Paul is undercutting the basis for slavery.

Before Paul even addresses slave owners directly, there is a rebuke to them. Paul, the holy apostle of the Lord, speaks directly to slaves as responsible human beings. It’s entirely possible and maybe even likely that they’re familiar with the letter he wrote to Philemon, who lived in Colossae, which was in the same Roman province as Ephesus. Being in the same province, it’s likely copies of the letter were shared with other churches. In that letter Paul instructs Philemon to treat his runaway slave Onesimus as if he were the apostle himself! Paul calls Onesimus “my very heart”. He tells Philemon directly,

Phlm 1:17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

Philemon 17–18

Do you see how Paul undercuts the very idea of slavery? Treat this runaway slave in the same manner you would treat me, an apostle of the Lord Jesus. Slaves, for their part, must obey their masters as those who are truly working for the Lord Jesus, but they do so as those who are equal in dignity with the apostles!

A slave owner would already be troubled at this point in the letter. Hearing how slaves are to serve in the same way they serve the Lord Jesus would have been shocking. Paul is elevating the dignity and worth of mere slaves by saying they are servants of the almighty God.

Then the reader gets to verse 9: “Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening”. Do *the same* to them. Do what, exactly? Remember the context! This was written to the church in Ephesus. Paul is explaining to them specific ways they are to submit to one another in the church, and therefore in the household. Just as slaves are to submit to their masters by serving them with sincerity as *they* would serve the Lord Jesus himself, so masters are to submit to their slaves by serving *them* with sincerity, as they would serve the Lord Jesus himself!

Whatever you would do to your slave, ask if you would do the same to the Lord Jesus. Then go and do accordingly. Rather than issue a command—“Free your slaves”—Paul essentially throws down an even greater command that will result in them freeing their slaves: be like Jesus.

Like Jesus

At this point the easy route would be to recognize we no longer have slavery as an institution in our nation, and then to take the principles in this text and apply them to employees and employers. It would be easy to tell those who work for another to be respectful and serve him or her as if you were serving the Lord Jesus. It would be easy to tell employers to be kind and respectful of their employees, to not threaten them. Those are good applications of Scripture, but that would be too easy.

Paul is getting at something far deeper in this text, and it's been the very thing he's been pointing us to all along. The text isn't as simple as “we don't have slaves anymore so...be good employees”. We are finishing the section of the letter in which Paul has been instructing the Ephesian church to walk in the truth of God in Christ.

For three chapters he urged them first to sit. They must sit in the truth of the gospel of who God is and what he has done. This means to rest in him. It means to believe what God says of them is true. They have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. They have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. They have obtained an inheritance. They have been sealed with the Holy Spirit who guarantees that inheritance.

Though they had been dead in their trespasses and sins, and though they had at one time carried out the desires of the body and were by nature children of wrath, in Christ they have been made alive together with Christ. They have received grace. Though they were once outsiders for not being part of the people of Israel, in Christ they have been adopted into God's new people, his church, for God has taken from Jew and Gentile and has created a new category, a new humanity that replaces these old categories.

To get there Jesus fulfilled the law and then abolished it with its commandments that created separations between people. All this was because of God's eternal purpose he has fulfilled in Christ. His church is a people united in Christ in spite of their vast differences. This was God's plan from the very beginning, that people from every tribe and language and people and nation would be joined together in one body, the church.

The Ephesians must *sit* in this truth. They must *rest* in it. Their identity must be rooted in who Christ is and what he has done, not in anything they find in themselves. Though the world may insist their identity is rooted in their sexual inclinations, this is not their identity. It is not what defines them. Though the world may claim their identity is based entirely on their social class or their ethnicity, these are not the things that define them. Though the world may tell them their identity is based on whether they are too tall or too short, whether skinny or fat, whether clumsy or athletic, whether beautiful or normal, whether rich or poor, whether Democrat or Republican, these are not the things that define them. Their identity is in this: Jesus loves them and has rescued them and has claimed them as his people. This is who they are!

This extends into the household as well. Whether a wife or a husband—or single!, whether a child or a parent, whether a slave or a master, these are not the things that define them. For those who are in Christ, their identity, the thing that gives them meaning and purpose and dignity and worth, is being *in Christ*.

It is only by sitting in this truth that one can then walk in a manner worthy of that calling. After laying out the truth of God in Christ Paul has been instructing the church with the true standard of living: the Lord Jesus himself. To walk in a manner worthy of their calling is to become more like Jesus. Jesus is the one who prayed for the unity of his church in John 17. Jesus is the one who gives gifted people to his church that his church might be equipped to engage in the work of ministry. Jesus is the one who they are to imitate in putting off their old self and its practices and desires and values and in putting on the new self—the new identity in Christ that is created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

This is why they are to engage in behaviors that build up the community of faith and shun behaviors that destroy the community. As God in Christ has forgiven them, they are to be like him in loving and caring for one another. This is why they are to walk in love and live as children of light rather than children of darkness. They are light in the Lord, after all! They are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In the home this means wives submit to their husbands by respecting them, and husbands submit to their wives by loving and cherishing them, sacrificing for them. This means children submit to their parents by obeying them, and parents submit to their children by caring for them and disciplining them. Then we come to a different, though related, set of instructions. Clinton Arnold is very helpful here.

Because Paul gives instructions to believers on how to live within an unjust social structure does not imply an advocacy of that institution. The way that Paul addresses slavery in 6:5–9 is vastly different from the way that he addresses husband-wife role relations in 5:21–33. Paul never provides a theological rationale for the institution of slavery; yet he does establish a theological basis for male headship and female submission in 5:21–33. His only concern is to provide perspective on how to live as Christians within this empire-wide socioeconomic structure.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

In short, what Paul is doing in our text is showing us how to be like Jesus, even in an unjust and wicked culture. The truth is Jesus is *our* Lord and Master. Paul frequently refers to himself as a slave of Jesus Christ. And what sort of Master is he? He is the kind of Master who submits to his servants by giving himself up for them. Jesus is the sort of Master who takes on the form of a servant—a slave—and humbles himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. Only those who had no rights could be crucified. Though he is the Lord of lords, he took on the form of a slave, as one who had no rights.

Paul’s instructions to masters in Ephesus would have been shocking. They are to “do the same” for their servants, for they both—master and servant on earth—have a Master in heaven, and he does not make distinctions based on earthly status. Want to be a master here on earth? Fine, then be one like Jesus, and lay down your life for your servants, remembering

that Jesus died so that his servants would be freed from their slavery. At every step Paul is undermining the institution of slavery, while instructing the church in Ephesus how to be faithful followers of Christ regardless of earthly status.

Application

Throughout this letter Paul has been calling the church in Ephesus to maintain the unity of the Spirit. This is simply incompatible with slavery. Paul gives us the reason he does not directly command Christians to free their slaves. In his letter to Philemon he acknowledges his apostolic authority to do so, yet he does not do so—at least not directly.

Phlm⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

Philemon 8–10

What Paul wants more than anything else is to see the gospel of Jesus transform Philemon. He wants to see the gospel change his heart and change his desires and change his cognitive environment—how he sees the world. If the gospel will so transform Philemon, he will, as a matter of course, free his slave and receive him as a brother in Christ.

Living out the truth of the gospel isn't really about a list of rules. We so desperately want it to be. This is why so much preaching today jumps straight to application—and often misses the point of the text. “Do these three things to be a better follower”. “Five steps to a better marriage”. Paul does issue instructions for Christian living, but the instructions are less about certain behaviors and more about a way of being.

We are to *love one another*. We are to *outdo one another in showing honor* (Rom 12:10). We are to *live in harmony with one another* (Rom 12:16). We must *welcome one another* (Rom 15:7). We must *comfort one another* (2 Cor 13:11). We must through love *serve one another* (Gal 5:13). We must *be kind to one another* and we must *forgive one another* (Eph 4:32). We must *bear with one another* (Col 3:13). We must *teach and admonish one another* (Col 3:16). We must *increase and abound in love for one another* (1 Thess 3:12). We must *encourage one another* (1 Thess 4:18).

What we see here is a mutual responsibility for one another. In our text there is a mutual responsibility. Between parents and children there is a mutual responsibility. Between husbands and wives there is a mutual responsibility. Between followers of Jesus there is a mutual responsibility.

When we come to a text like this one we ask the questions that are pressing in from our cognitive environment. We ask specific questions, but rarely do we ask what Paul's point is. Our cognitive environment—our default assumptions about the world—prevents us from seeing it fully. This is because our cognitive environment, at its core, assumes we are free and independent people, answerable only to ourselves. We think we are autonomous, self-contained. We don't need other people. We don't want to rely on other people. We certainly don't want to *answer* to other people.

We forget that we are all, each one of us, slaves to something: either slaves to sin or we have been rescued by the Lord Jesus and are therefore his bondservants. There is no other category. Paul described it this way to the Colossians:

Col 1:13 He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us
to the kingdom of his beloved Son...
Colossians 1:13

You and I are not freed from the slavery of sin so that we can go and do whatever we want. We are freed from service to sin that we might live as citizens of *his kingdom*. The difference is we are freed from a cruel master who seeks only to steal, kill, and destroy, and we now serve a Master who loves us and pursues us and lays down his life for us.

The truth is we are inter-dependent citizens of a better kingdom that will last forever. It is a kingdom where none of us is independent and on our own. In this kingdom ruled by a King who emptied himself and took on the form of a mere slave that he might elevate us to adoption as sons, none of us has to go it alone. Wherever we work, wherever we live, whatever energy we have, whatever resources have been entrusted to us are used in this kingdom for the glory of our King and for *our* good.

Whatever your immediate circumstances, the promise is God is ever at work transforming us. Changing us. Rescuing us. He does this that we might walk in a manner worthy of our calling, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, as his people who look and act and think like Jesus.