



δούλος • *doulos* • slave

Ephesians 6:1-9

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In these early months of 2020, we are looking at some of the ancient Hebrew and Greek words of the original Biblical manuscripts and seeking to glean a more faithful understanding of how these words were meant to be understood. Too often, our translation to the English language loses the intent of the Biblical text because of, either, the inability of the English language to accurately cover the nuances of the ancient texts, or because our theology gets in the way of our interpretation.

To aid in this work of claiming a more faithful understanding of ancient words, we've looked at why etymology is often insufficient for translation. Etymology can be very helpful at aiding translation, but is usually unhelpful by itself. To aid in a more faithful understanding of the Biblical text, we've looked at just how important the *context* is when translating.

This morning's word gives us a good example of why, even when etymology gets us to the right word, context is still vitally important. Even if etymology gets us to the correct English translation, we still have to ask, how does the context and use of the word teach us faithfulness today?

This morning's word is also a challenging word for interpretation, not because of how the Biblical authors sought to use the word in teaching faithfulness, but because of how the word has been used in the history of Christianity. The use of today's word shows that, regardless how well we understand the intent of the ancient Hebrew and Greek, those who read, interpret, and teach the text are still fallible, and are therefore still very capable of using the Biblical text in unfaithful ways to maintain their own authority, power, and theological beliefs.

I felt it appropriate to look at this word *doulos* on this weekend, which is marked by the remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., because it calls our attention to how the Bible has been changed to maintain teachings that are antithetical to the Biblical text. The perversions of the Bible in reference to this word *doulos* have led us to a world in which some still do not believe that in Christ, there is no Gentile or Jew, slave or free, male or female. Some still do not agree with the Biblical claim that all are created in the image of God. Yet, we know these are Biblical claims – the Bible makes this clear. As Dr. King proclaimed in his speech, *The American Dream*, "The whole concept of the *imago dei*, as it is expressed in Latin, the 'image of God,' is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. Not that they have substantial unity with God, but that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God."

So what is this word, and why is it so complicated? This word *doulos* is rightly translated from the ancient Greek as the English word "slave." We find it in over 100 verses in the New

Testament text, like in our text this morning in Ephesians, which says, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ.” ... If its presence and translation cannot be argued against, if the word is rightly defined as “slave,” why is this word such a challenge for us in understanding the Biblical text?

I find this word challenging for us as faithful Christians in the year 2020 for two primary reasons. First, because of how the Biblical text was used to uphold slavery here in America, and second, because the Biblical text is written within a context that is vastly different than our own, and *context matters*.

Let me start with the context, and then come back to use of the word the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

This text in Ephesians, and the whole of the New and Old Testament, is written in a season of human history where-in slavery was part of the normal structure of the society. Slavery in the First Century, when Paul was writing to the church in Ephesus, looked *very* different than the chattel slavery of the American colonies, but it was slavery, none-the-less. “The church was born into a social world in which human slavery was an accepted institution sanctioned by law and unquestioned by high-minded moralists.”<sup>i</sup> It existed, and was upheld by the entirety of society. Given this world into which the text was written, how are *we* to understand the Biblical teaching regarding slavery?

Context matters, and so we should first expand the context of this passage in Ephesians 6 to understand the greater intent of Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus.

If we back up to chapter 5, we find that Paul is offering what is called the *household codes*. In this text from 5:21 – 6:9, Paul is trying to help the faithful of Ephesus understand how to order the household within the Hellenistic society they found themselves living within. In 5:21, Paul says most broadly to the community at large, “Be subject to one another out of a reverence for Christ.” This general statement will be the common theme of the instructions to come. Paul will deal with three specific relationships: that of a husband and a wife; that of a child and a parent; and that of slave and a master.

Beginning in chapter 5, verse 22, Paul writes, “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church ...” You can tell from this first admonition, that Paul is writing to a very different community in a very different time. Not that we do not still have the lingering effects of such a strict patriarchal society plaguing our nation here in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but this kind of “subjective” relationship is one that is no longer supported writ large, even among Christian households. Context matters when seeking to understand the text.

Were Paul writing simply from a cultural viewpoint, he likely would have moved on from his teachings regarding the husband and wife. What more could he have said in the midst of a society where women were still seen as the property of their father or their husband? But Paul is not done, because Paul is not only writing from a cultural perspective. Paul continues in verse 25, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. ... He who loves his wife loves himself. ... Each of you should love his wife as himself, and a wife

should respect her husband.” This kind of reciprocal teaching was not common in cultural writings. Women were hardly every affirmed; they were the subject of the husband, not an equal. But the church is not called to conform to culture; we are called to lead change in the culture according to God’s will and God’s way. So Paul offers a reciprocal call to men, just as he begins with the cultural call among women. Even in offering instructions to wives that follows the societal norms, Paul is calling the marriage relationship to a different understanding of mutual subjectivity in reverence of Christ.

He does the same thing in our reading in chapter 6 regarding children and parents. Paul begins chapter 6 by giving a teaching that is in line with the societal norms, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” What would you expect Paul to say regarding the household order in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century? It was widely believed that, like wives to husbands, children were the property of their parents. Parents had full authority and say over their children. ... And yet, Paul isn’t done. Quite counterculturally, Paul continues in giving instructions to the fathers, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” This admonition to fathers would have been quite countercultural. Even in offering instructions to children that follow the societal norms, Paul is calling the family to a different understanding of mutual subjectivity in reverence of Christ.

Finally, beginning in verse 6, we see a focus on the relationship between slave and master. Paul begins, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” Paul is instructing the slaves to be faithful to their masters – a teaching that would have fit the cultural context of the time.

In this text, his instructions to the slaves follows the same pattern as with wives and children. He begins by speaking a word of instruction to the party expected to be obedient according to the societal norms ... and then he challenges those norms. After speaking to the slaves, in verse 9, Paul shifts his focus to the masters, “And, masters, do the same to [the slaves]. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.” This instruction to the master was not common in other cultural writings regarding the relationship between a slave and their master. Even in offering instructions to slaves that follows the societal norms, Paul is calling the master to a different understanding of mutual subjectivity in reverence of Christ.

When taken in this slightly larger context, we find these verses, even while offering support of the standards of the cultural surroundings, *challenge* the structures of the culture in a way that seeks to call everyone in the household to a greater respect of the other. In these household codes, Paul is not simply affirming the societal norms, he’s challenging them in a way that gives reverence to Christ.

What happens when we widen the context even further? What if we look at the full letter to the Ephesian church? What happens if we look at all of Paul’s writings? What if we look the whole of the Gospel?

In the full letter, “Ephesians announces the victory of God over the principalities and the powers, invites us to be formed not by our own cultures of enmity but by the hope to which

God has called us. It calls us to lives and a common life 'to the praise of [God's] glory.' It calls us to break down the walls of hostility. It calls us to peaceable difference, to 'one new humanity.'<sup>ii</sup> The text, though spoken into and referring to a 1<sup>st</sup> Century context, is part of a greater body of God's story that calls us to move beyond the chains of our cultural powers, to proclaim the truth of God's freedom in Christ to everyone in the community. When read in the greater context of the Biblical story, we find that these verses, even in their limiting ability to challenge the cultural structures of the time, fit into this theme in which Paul proclaims that in Christ, there is no east or west, there is no Jew or Gentile, there is no slave or free, there is no male or female. We find that in challenging the status quo, Paul is advancing the gospel to fit in with Jesus' teachings, that there will come a time when we will worship neither on the Samaritan mountain, or at the temple of Jerusalem, but that all will worship together in spirit and in truth. In the greater witness of the Biblical text, Christ is breaking down the barriers of culture that seek to divide us – that seek to lift some up while marginalizing others. We find that "although the *world* may grant the slave owner a higher status than the slave, Christ does not recognize status in these terms."<sup>iii</sup>

And this brings me back to the first problem with this word. "Too often [the church] was content to read this passage as an authorization for slavery."<sup>iv</sup> But context matters when we're seeking a faithful understanding of the Biblical word. We cannot hunt and peck for the scriptures that affirm our theological preferences, and then teach those verses as if they speak authoritatively to the whole of the Biblical text in defining God's will.

This past week, I had the chance to visit the Museum of the Bible, which opened just a few years ago in DC. I had heard about this one version of the Bible they have on display, and I wanted to see it for myself. I'm only sad I didn't get to the museum last year, when they have a special exhibit on this one copy of the Bible. The copy is titled, "Parts of the Holy Bible Selected for the Use of the Negro Slaves in the British West-India Islands." It is known as "The Slave Bible." It was published in 1808 by a British missionary organization known as "The Society for the Conversion of the Negro Slaves."

This specific version of the Bible was used to educate slaves in both reading, and in the Christian faith. And yet, in its publication, the missionary organization left out any scriptural texts that spoke of God's will as liberating. "Its pages are meant to push an inhumane agenda by selectively removing almost 90 percent of the Old Testament and 50 percent of the New Testament."<sup>v</sup> Of the King James Version's original 1200 chapters, the bible cut out over 900 chapters before being provided to the slaves.

Any text that offers something along the lines of "slaves, obey your masters," was included in the Slave Bible, but any text suggesting "there is no slave or free" was left out. The story of the Israelites' slavery in Egypt was included, but the Exodus, and Moses' challenging of Pharaoh, are absent. The Bible includes stories like Joseph's being sold into slavery, but takes out any vision from the prophets or Revelation of there being a new Kingdom to come – any idea of a new world to exist – wherein we are all joined as one community of equals worshipping Christ.

The blame for the Slave Bible, and this teaching of slave-hood as a necessary position to endure, does not fall solely at the feet of this one British missionary society. Here in America,

here in our own community, early leaders of the church offered their support of slavery, using the Biblical text as their foundational document of support.

Even where we sit in this church today, we can't help but to look around and acknowledge that this building was first purchased and constructed using the funds of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South – a branch of the Methodist Church that was formed in 1844 largely due to their belief that the institution of slavery was not against the Biblical text. Our church founders, here at Washington Street – some 90 persons – split from Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church that used to be located across the street, because these 90 individuals believed in the “institutions” of the south, and Trinity Church did not.

This is not history we can easily hide. Our history books, and the journal of our founding pastor, they do not hide the origins of this church. This church was established quite boastfully as the northern most outpost of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

This is the toxicity of reading any Biblical passage in isolation – of reading any word without its sentence – of reading any sentence without its paragraph – of reading any paragraph without its book – of reading any book without the full of the Biblical witness.

And we, here in the comfort of this beautiful space – in a building we have done well to maintain – in a church we have fought to keep alive and vital for the community – we are not exempt from the failures of our forbearers. In this City of Alexandria, in this Nation of America, we cannot escape the reality that we are privileged in this space due, at least in part, to the misquoting and failed application of the Biblical text by those who have come before us.

Diving deep in to the Biblical text is not something we *should* do – it's something we *must* do. We must not only see the truth of how some and many have abused God's will for their own power, but we must also seek to ensure we do not continue that legacy. We must live in the witness of God's redeeming love, that invites us to see all persons as created in the image of God – a witness that continually pushes against the power structures of society and the marginalization of any within the family, or the community, or the world at large. For we are called to be subject to one another in reverence of Christ, that all may know God's great love. For the glory of God, so may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Ralph P. Marin. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Allen Verhey and Joseph S. Harvard. *Belief A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Ephesians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> Stephen E. Fowl. *Ephesians (A Commentary): The New Testament Library*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> Verhey and Harvard.

<sup>v</sup> Jeannine Law. *'Slave Bible' on display at the Museum of the Bible; edition removes chapters to uphold slavery*. Published April 26, 2019. Christianpost.com. Retrieved January 16, 2020.