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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“LIBERATED SLAVES”
First Peter 2:18-25

Let's name the elephant in the room.

I am White.

Our text was originally written to slaves.

Given our ugly history of Black slavery it is risky for a North American of European descent to preach this Scripture.

Some might bristle at that. After all, the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment almost 149 years ago in December 1865 abolished chattel slavery.

☑ {W Faulkner; Sarah Dessen} What we fail to understand is that **“The past is never dead. It's not even *the past*.”**
“Even if *you* forget *it*, *it* remembers *you*.”

☑ As Shakespeare observed, **“What's past is prologue.”** The past is what has led us to the present, and the present cannot be severed from the past.

{Rev 21:5; 2 Co 5:17} I am not saying we must be *controlled* by the past. The Sovereign Creator is **“making [all things] new!”** If we are **“in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”**

☆ Still, Eternal God does this *not by erasing* history but *by redeeming* it. In his hands, the connection between past and present is like that between an **old lump of coal and a new diamond**: all the carbon atoms are still there, they have just been rearranged into a different pattern.

Slavery is an integral part of our American story. We must take it into consideration when addressing a slavery text.

We will start with three basic observations.

★ 1) God's agenda for us is holistic freedom.

Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt is the defining event of the Old Testament era.

Old Testament Law is a roadmap to comprehensive liberty. It assumes the existence of slavery, yet it commands the periodic release of Hebrew slaves.

{Lk 4:18-19} In his ministry manifesto Jesus prioritizes liberty:

**“The Spirit of the Lord is on me
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the
prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's
favor.”**

{Ps 146:7} God's agenda for humans is freedom of spirit, mind, soul and body. He **“upholds the cause of the oppressed and... sets prisoners free.”**

★ 2) Ancient Mediterranean slavery and American slavery were different institutions. Both were sinful and destructive; yet American slavery was by every measure more brutal and dehumanizing.

★ 3) Scripture does not overtly condemn slavery, but it does effectively subvert it.

The Old Testament inhibits the *abuse* of slaves. Better yet, it sets definite *limits* on the institution itself.

The New Testament goes a step further and actively *sabotages* slavery from the inside. The ethics set forth in the Gospels and Epistles are fundamentally incompatible with slavery.

{Phm 10, 12, 16} For example, in his letter to Philemon Paul describes Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus as "**my son,**" "**my heart,**" "**a fellow man and... a brother in the Lord.**" Paul presses Philemon to "**welcome him as you would welcome me,**" with hospitality, love, and respect, as you would a free man and an apostle of Christ. He even writes: "**Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.**"

In order to use the Bible to validate slavery one must ignore certain passages, misinterpret others, and categorize enslaved people as less than fully human. That is precisely what pro-slavery Americans did.

❑ Please turn with me to First Peter 2:18-25.

■ **Verse 18: "Slaves...submit...to your masters."**

How can this be relevant to us?

It is imperative that we interpret Scripture in its context. Slavery looms large in Peter's world so we cannot discern his original meaning apart from it.

{Heb 4:12; 2 Ti 3:16} Application is another matter. The Word "**is alive and active**" and thus adaptable. It "**is**

useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" in every setting.

☆ Hence, this text speaks to any Christ Follower who is the subordinate in a harsh and considerably unequal power relationship: the Christian who is in prison, who serves in the armed forces, who is bullied by a tyrannical authority figure, or who works for an overbearing boss but can't afford to leave their job. Millions of our brothers and sisters live in intensely hostile cultures and under oppressive governments.

The rest of us might well be called on to help them. This text speaks to us, as well.

? *What is the Spirit saying through Peter?*

✎ First, our minds and hearts are free in Christ even when our bodies are in bondage.

● Just before this, in verse 16, Peter advises all of his readers to "**Live as free people.**"

These slaves are subject to extreme external control. Their masters control their movements, dictate their tasks, dole out their food and clothing, and determine whether they will live or die.

Their masters do not control their thoughts and attitudes. Every Christ Follower is free for obedience to God, love of neighbor, and moral transformation.

➤ That explains why Peter directly addresses Christian slaves as free moral agents.

Ancient pagan philosophers rarely do this. With few exceptions they write *about* slaves, not *to* slaves. They direct their remarks to slave owners.

Why? In their eyes an owner is fully human but as long as a slave is in bondage he or she is on par with a beast of burden or an inanimate tool. Consequently they assume that a master is entitled and able to make decisions about right and wrong, while a slave is not.

Peter writes directly *to* slaves, not *about* slaves. He talks to the slaves themselves.

{Ps 139:14; Ge 1:26-27; 1 P 1:1; 2:9} Why? These slaves have been “**fearfully and wonderfully made**” in the Creator’s “**own image**” and “**likeness.**” Not only so, as “**God’s elect**” they “**are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession.**” They are entitled and able to make moral decisions, for God holds them accountable. They are free moral agents.

In Christ our minds and hearts are free even when our bodies are in bondage.

✈ Second, in Christ we serve God instead of human masters.

■ Verse 18: “**Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters.**”

● This ties back in to verses 13 and 16: “**Submit... for the Lord’s sake to every human authority.**” “**Live as free people...live as God’s slaves.**”

{Eph 6:7} If we resolve to labor “**as [though] we were [working for] the Lord, not people,**” it does not matter who gives the orders. We are serving God.

This resolution strengthens us for jobs that are dreary, dirty, difficult, or dangerous. I love the LORD. That which I would refuse to do for a sinful human being, I will willingly do for him.

{Ro 12:1} This resolution elevates the most menial toil. When we labor “**for the Lord’s sake**” we “**offer [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God**” – and “**this is true worship**”!

This resolution empowers us to discern when, and how, to disobey human masters. Our “**reverent fear of God**” prohibits us from participating in immorality, injustice, and idolatry. That is the limit of submission.

In Christ we serve God instead of human masters.

✈ Third, enduring unjust suffering in Christ is admirable.

■ Verses 18-19: “**Submit...to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if you bear up under the pain of unjust suffering because you are conscious of God.**”

{1 T 6:2; Eph 6:5, 9; Phm 16} If Peter was writing to masters as Paul did he would command devotion their slaves’ welfare, forbid the use of threats, and demand that they act respectfully. He might well urge those masters to treat their slaves as slaves “**no longer...but better than that, as**” family. To endure unjust suffering is sometimes admirable; to inflict unjust suffering is always despicable.

■ Admirable endurance is innocent. Verse 20: “**How is it to your credit if you receive a beating for**

doing wrong and endure it? If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, *this* is commendable.”

■ Admirable endurance is also “**in Christ**”: that is, in the Spirit of Christ, as an intentional act of obedience, according to his example. Verses 21-23:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

**“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”**

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Bearing up fearfully to avoid further punishment, or despairingly because we have abandoned hope, is not admirable. One’s motivation matters!

Enduring unjust suffering in Christ is admirable.

Slavery is an abomination.

Bullying and the abuse of power are sinful.

God the Father sent his Son “**to proclaim freedom for the prisoners**” and “**to set the oppressed free.**” As citizens of his Kingdom this is at the heart of our mission.

But until that mission is complete let us hear, believe, and share the good news:

✈ Our minds and hearts are free in Christ even when our bodies are in bondage.

✈ In Christ we serve God instead of human masters.

✈ Enduring unjust suffering in Christ is admirable.
First Peter 2:18-25 is the Word of the Lord.