

“Slavery & the God of the Bible”
Deuteronomy 23:15-16 & 24:7
October 4, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

This morning, we continue our series in the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses instructs God’s people as to how they are to live in the land.

Today we come to the topic of slavery, in Deuteronomy 23:15-16 and 24:7.

As we hear from these passages, please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

^{23:15} “You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. ¹⁶ He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him.”

And then from chapter 24:

⁷ “If a man is found stealing one of his brothers of the people of Israel, and if he treats him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall die. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we do believe that your word
is firmly fixed forever, with you, in the heavens.
Your faithfulness endures to all generations.
Help us to take your word to heart,
Because by it you give us life.
Lord, we are yours, save us.
We pray this in Jesus’s name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:89, 90, 93, 94]

Introduction

Our text this morning addresses the topic of slavery.

And as we dig into this text, and others related to it, what I think we see is that in the Bible, God's opposition to slavery in this life points to his concern for our hearts, his concern for the hearts of others, and also his concern for the lives of all.

Let me say that again: God's opposition to slavery in this life points to his concern for our hearts, his concern for the hearts of others, and also his concern for the lives of all.

Let's take that one piece at a time.

God Opposes Slavery in This Life

First, the God of the Bible opposes slavery in this life.

Now, to make that case, we need to consider the whole Bible's teaching on this topic, and we will. But let's start with the text before us.

The Code of Hammurabi, a well-known ancient Babylonian law text, says this – it says:

16. If any one receive into his house a runaway [...] slave [...], and does not bring [them] out [...] the master of the house shall be put to death.

19. If he hold the slaves in his house, and they are caught there, he shall be put to death.

17. If any one find runaway [...] slaves in the open country and bring them to their masters, the master of the slaves shall pay him two shekels of silver.

If you come across a slave who has fled from their master, and you don't return them to their master ... then you were to be put to death. And if you do return them, you're rewarded with money.

This was the pattern of ancient Near Eastern law codes – not just in Babylon, but in general. [Wright, 249] And in many international treaties, this law was extended even to when a slave crossed borders from one nation to another. [Brown, 222; Craigie, 300-301]

Now, with that norm in mind, hear again the law for Israel. Moses says:

“You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him.”

One commentator writes: “This is an astonishing law. It is diametrically opposite to the whole thrust of slave legislation in other ancient Near East law codes.” [Wright, 249]

The Law of Moses was strikingly counter-cultural when compared with the laws of the nations around them. And, as we'll see in a little bit, this law also undermined slavery and indentured servitude within Israel as well.

Then, there's our verse from chapter 24, which forbids enslaving a fellow Israelite through abduction. In a sense, this law was not that different from those of other nations. But this law would also point the Israelites back to an earlier law that was much broader.

In Exodus 21, God says to Moses: “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.”

Here, God extends this protection not just to fellow countrymen ... but to anyone. And it’s not just the initial abductor who’s liable to capital punishment, but anyone who possess the slave, down the chain of custody. This, as we’ll see, had profound implications.

Now, certain forms of slavery or indentured servitude still existed in ancient Israel, and we’re going to talk about that. But one thing we also need to observe is that the form of slavery practiced in our own country’s history was forbidden and outlawed in Israel, 3,000 years before the first African slaves arrived in America.

One of the great tragedies of our country’s spiritual history is that for centuries, white Americans in the American South used the Bible to justify the practice of race-based chattel slavery – of treating enslaved Africans as property. And even today, many who may themselves condemn America’s practice of slavery, still believe that the Bible condoned it.

But I would argue instead that if the American South had taken the Bible’s teaching on slavery seriously, then the kind of slavery they practiced would have been impossible. And in a lot of what follows, I’m drawing from the work of Paul Copan [124-149] and Esau McCaulley [137-163].

For one thing, as we’ve seen, enslaving others through abduction, and even holding any slave who had initially been abducted, was a capital offense in the Bible. And while data for the African slave trade can be hard to nail down, one study argues that 40% of slaves acquired from Africa were initially kidnapped [Nunn & Wantchekon, 7] while others at the time made the case that it was even more common than that. [see in Metaxas, 119]

As we said, according to Exodus 21:16, even possessing a slave who had initially been kidnapped was a capital offense. If this law had been followed by the pre-Civil-War American South, then so many enslavers, and slave holders, would have faced potential capital punishment, that that alone would probably have discouraged and dismantled the practice of American slavery.

But there’s more.

A little later in Exodus 21 we read that anyone who killed a slave was also to be “avenged” – a term that also likely refers to capital punishment. [21:16; Copan, 135; McCaulley, 150] This would not only mean that certain sadistic slaveholders would have been tried for murder when they killed their own slaves, but it would also seem to imply that slave captains who had slaves in their care die because of neglect or mistreatment would also be tried for negligent homicide. And given that, on average, about 15% of all slaves died in transit [<https://www.neh.gov/project/transatlantic-slave-trade-database>; see also Metaxas, 125], few captains in the slave trade would be able to avoid arrest. And the industry, again, would crumble as a result.

And there’s still more. A few verses later in Exodus 21, God says that if a slave holder treats a slave in a way that leads to permanent injury – including something like the loss of a tooth – then that slave was to be set free. [Exodus 21:26-27] No such bodily abuse of enslaved people was permitted. When it happened, it meant their freedom. [Copan, 130; McCaulley, 150-151]

Now, consider again this law in Deuteronomy on those who flee their enslavement. What if our country before the Civil War had taken the Bible seriously, and written Deuteronomy 23:15-16 into our own laws? Any slave who runs away from their enslavement must not be returned to his slave holder, but is to be set up by those who find him, in their town, as a free individual, in the place of his or her choosing, not to be wronged or harassed.

Then consider the laws of Moses commanding kindness and justice to the foreigner [e.g.: Exodus 19:33-34], and the words of the Apostle Paul about how the gospel tears down racial and ethnic divisions [Ephesians 2:14, Galatians 3:28], and the racial basis of American slavery is also rejected by the Bible.

Even if white Americans in the American South had taken just the 10 verses I've alluded to so far this morning seriously – if they had reflected them in their own laws – then African slavery in the U.S. could never have happened as it did. [Copan, 132]

American slavery is condemned by the Bible.

But the form of slavery practiced in the ancient world and even within Israel for a time – that too is seriously undermined by God in the laws he gives.

Consider a few things.

First, between Israelites, slavery was not permitted. It's true that there was a form of indentured servitude that an Israelite could choose to enter into, to pay off his debt if he became seriously indebted. But that was capped at six years of service. After six years, indentured servants were free from their obligation to serve, and their debts were wiped clean.

Now, Leviticus 25 did allow for non-Israelites, who had often become slaves through debt or through becoming prisoners of war, to be held as slaves in perpetuity by Israelites. But a number of other laws that God put in place would have both protected these non-Israelite slaves and undermined the practice in a way that should have led to its decline and eventual end.

Because judging from the text itself, most of the laws we've mentioned so far would have applied to both to Israelite indentured servants and non-Israelite slaves in Israel. [Wright, 249].

Neither could be physically abused, because any serious injury was to lead to their immediate freedom [Exodus 21:26-27]. Neither could be killed or threatened with death [Exodus 21:20]. Neither could be returned to their slave holder if they escaped to another region within Israel. [Deuteronomy 23:25-26]

And, as Esau McCaulley argues, if a foreign slave converted to faith in the God of Israel, and chose to become an Israelite, it would seem that the six-year cap on service would need to apply to them as well, exempting them from perpetual slavery. [McCaulley, 147-148]

All of these laws restricted the evils of slavery in ancient Israel. But they also undermined slavery in a way that would make the practice ultimately unsustainable. [McCaulley, 142] They set Israel on a trajectory towards the eventual abolition of slavery in their land. Because if an enslaved person didn't want to be enslaved in Israel ... it just would have been really hard for a master to actually keep them. They couldn't resort to harsh violence, or it would lead to the slave's freedom. And if

the slave was able to flee to another region in Israel, then other Israelites were forbidden from returning them, and instead had to let them dwell as free people in their land.

In other words, for a master to keep their slaves, they had to treat them so well that they wanted to be there. And with that dynamic in place, it doesn't really resemble slavery or indentured service as we tend to think of it. And weakened to that extent, slavery should have faded away to nothing.

And that was clearly God's heart. [McCaulley, 142-144]

After all, when God made humanity, he didn't call on them to treat one another as property.

As Esau McCaulley points out, when Jesus is asked a difficult question about the Old Testament laws on marriage and divorce, he begins by considering what God's intent for marriage was in the beginning, before sin entered the world. That is how Jesus approaches the Law of Moses.

And if we approach the Old Testament laws in the same way, following Jesus's example, then we should ask: When we read Genesis 1 and 2, does it appear that God's intention was that as Adam and Eve started having children and grandchildren, those children and grandchildren, in the Garden of Eden, in an unfallen world, would have started enslaving one another, and treating one another as property?

The answer seems to be an obvious no. [McCaulley, 140-142]

And if that wasn't clear enough, then we need to remember the context of Deuteronomy itself. Moses is addressing a population that God himself had freed from slavery. The great story of Israel, as a nation, is one where they were enslaved, and God, in an incredible and miraculous fashion, freed them from slavery. That said a lot about who God was – he was an emancipator of the enslaved. That's how he was known to Israel, and the world, at that point.

And the subsequent Scriptures are in line with that trajectory. It's true, Paul acknowledges slavery as a widespread and common reality in the ancient world he lives in [McCaulley, 144-145], present even in the church. And he calls on slaves who cannot secure their freedom to respect and serve their masters while they are confined to that role [1 Timothy 6:1-2]. But he also encourages them to secure their freedom if they can [1 Cor 7:21b] and he focuses a whole book of the Bible on exhorting a Christian slave holder to free one of his slaves [Philemon]. [McCaulley, 154-156] And for those who remained enslaved, he assures them that they can still be faithful to Jesus, even in that condition. [1 Corinthians 7:21a; McCaulley, 157-159]¹

It's true, God did not, in an instant, end all forms of enslavement within Israel. But he made it clear that slavery was not his purpose at creation, he revealed himself as a freer of slaves, and he imposed

¹ We could add to this that Paul was speaking to this issue in a very different context than Moses was. In the verses we considered this morning Moses was in a position to shape a society in such a way that he could set a nation that was dedicated to the God of the Bible on a trajectory that restrained and ultimately undermined the practice of slavery there.

Paul was addressing enslaved Christians in a society where believers were an extreme minority. In their lifetimes slavery as it was practiced in the ancient world would not be undone – God's people were not in a position to change that yet. [McCaulley, 151-152] And so Paul's instruction is focused on how such slaves should live then and there. And again, in Paul's situation as well, the kind of slavery he was speaking into was still very different from that practiced in America centuries later.

laws upon his people that, if followed, would not only protect those under bondage or indentured servitude, but would also lead to slavery in all forms eventually falling apart.

This is how God often worked in redemptive history – not all at once, but gradually, over time.

But the picture, still, is clear: the God of the Bible opposes slavery in this life, and in his world.

That is a concrete physical, social, political, and moral truth here – and it has implications we need to consider.

God's Concern for Our Hearts

But before we consider some of the social implications of these laws, we also need to consider their spiritual implications.

Because the exodus – God's work of freeing his people from slavery – is also a picture the Bible frequently returns to to describe not just the physical needs of some people, but the spiritual needs of all people.

God's opposition to slavery is also a picture of his concern for each of our hearts.

In John 8, we read about an interaction where Jesus says to those listening to him: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Jesus was telling those who heard him that they needed to be "set free." And they caught that. And it confused them. They responded, saying: "We [...] have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

And Jesus responded: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." [8:31-34]

Jesus tells us that sin – the bad, and selfish, and ugly things that we think, and say, and act out – sin is not just something we do. It's something we are enslaved to. And anyone who's ever tried to stop sinning knows this.

I don't like sweet potato casserole. You know, the mashed sweet potatoes with the marshmallows on top. I really don't like it. In fact, I kind of hate it. And so I don't ask for, or make, or eat sweet potato casserole. And I'm pretty successful at avoiding it. I decided not to eat it. And I just don't. Because I am not enslaved to sweet potato casserole.

You know what else I hate? I hate it when I grumble and complain. When I think complaining thoughts, and I say grumbling things, and I act in ways that are rooted in entitlement and discontentedness. I hate that. I know it's bad, and self-centered, and repellant. I don't want to do that.

But despite all that ... I can't in my own power just decide one day to stop thinking, or saying, or doing those things, the way I could decide to stop eating sweet potato casserole. Because while

I'm not enslaved to sweet potato casserole, in my natural state, I am enslaved to grumbling and complaining. And that's just one sin I'm naturally enslaved to. There are so many more.

Jesus says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."

On its own, it's a discouraging statement. But Jesus didn't say it on its own. He went on, and speaking of himself as God's Son, he says that if we follow him, he will set us free. Because, he explains, "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

In our natural state, we are slaves to sin.

But Jesus tells us that if we flee to him, then he will set us free. As the true Israel, he welcomes us in, like foreign slaves, and he promises to set us free, and give us a place in his Kingdom, where we can dwell with him, in his midst. He assures us that he will never wrong us. And he will never send us back to our old enslaving master.

The God of the Bible opposes slavery. And so, when he saw us, with our hearts and souls enslaved to sin, he came to rescue us – just as he did in the Exodus. In the person of Jesus, he came, and he died on the cross, and he rose from the grave, all so that he might free us. [Mark 10:45; Galatians 4:1-7]

God's opposition to slavery is also a picture of his concern for each of our hearts, and the freedom he offers us in the gospel, if we would follow him.

Slavery & the Hearts of Others

In the gospel God reveals his concern for our enslaved hearts. But he also reveals his concern for the hearts of others. And he calls us to join him in that concern.

And how could we not?

Imagine that you were a slave in the ancient world. And one day you met a wealthy man who hated slavery. And he purchased your freedom, and he welcomed you into his house, to live as a member of his family. And he told you "I've done this for you, and now I want to do it for others too. So tell others who are enslaved about me. Tell them that if they want to be free, I will set them free, and I'll welcome them into my family."

And then imagine you went out ... and you told no one. Not the slaves you work beside. Not the slaves you meet in town. Not even slaves who are your close friends and family. You don't tell them ... because you're worried they may be insulted by your suggestion, or they might doubt the offer of the wealthy man. So you say nothing. You don't even tell them about the possibility of their being freed from their enslavement. You don't give them the option.

It seems absurd. But that's what we do when we refuse to tell others about Jesus. That's what we do when we avoid talking about the gospel with non-Christians in our lives. That's what we do when we decide that evangelism isn't really "for us."

Verses 15 and 16 of our text are, among other things, a spiritual commission for us. We are to welcome those in spiritual slavery to come into Jesus's kingdom, to join us here, to enter into the Church, and to find there, through the gospel, freedom and a home.

Maybe you don't know where to start with that task. Recently about a dozen of us read and discussed Sam Chan's book *How to Talk About Jesus*. That book can be a pretty good place to start.

But either way, we need to take seriously our call to invite, and to call, and to welcome those in spiritual bondage to come into Jesus's kingdom, and to find freedom and a true home there. That's another important application of this text.

God's opposition to slavery in this text points to his concern for our hearts, and his concern for the hearts of others – and he calls us to join him in offering the freedom of the gospel to other people.

Slavery & the Lives of All

Fourth and finally, as much as all of this gives us a spiritual calling to come to Jesus and invite others to do the same ... these laws also exhort us to a social, moral, and even political calling as well.²

Because in the Bible, we're not supposed to choose between the spiritual life and social engagement. Faithful Christians throughout history have always recognized that the God who made both heaven and earth – both the spiritual and the social – calls us to be faithful to him in every arena he has made.

One example of Christians who knew that well was William Wilberforce and the community at Clapham. They were sincere Christians, with a dedicated evangelical faith, and a spiritual mindset, who also worked tirelessly in the late 18th and early 19th century to address social issues and needs in the world around them. And chief among those needs in their day was the need to abolish the slave trade throughout the British Empire.

Wilberforce didn't choose between God's mission to save souls from bondage to sin, and God's mission to end earthly slavery and oppression. Wilberforce embraced them both, together. And, frankly, he could not see how anyone could separate them.

And so, Wilberforce, and his evangelical companions took up the task of fighting to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire.

As one author puts it: "The acutely Christian character of the British abolitionist movement is undeniable, for it's leaders were all consciously acting out of the principles of their deeply held faith." [Metaxas, 96]

² It is, of course, true that sometimes in the law of Moses – when we are dealing with certain aspects of the ceremonial law meant to instruct us in spiritual matters – we are called to see the spiritual lesson, and to set aside the ceremonial commands themselves. We considered examples of that just last week.

But our texts this morning are not ceremonial laws. When it comes to slavery, what we so often have are moral laws, and civil laws, which may need to be adjusted to our own time and place, but which still call for concrete application in our personal and social lives today.

Men like John Newton, who wrote the hymn Amazing Grace (which we sang earlier in the service), and William Cowper, who wrote several hymns we sing from our hymnal – these men were actively involved in this social and political effort as well. [Metaxas, 131, 134-135]

Wilberforce, speaking from the vantage point of his Christian faith, described the slave trade as “such a course of wickedness and cruelty as has never before disgraced a Christian country.” [Quoted in Metaxas, 162]

Eric Metaxas writes: “Wilberforce knew that if Britain took its faith seriously, if it actually believed the doctrines it claimed to believe, it could never have countenanced the slave trade or the institution of slavery itself. He knew that if Britain began to see what real Christianity was, it would begin to take an interest in the sufferings of the poor and feel an obligation toward them, as well as towards prisoners and others who suffered. That sort of concern was always the mark of real Christianity, but it was utterly absent from Britain in the last years of the eighteenth century.” [Metaxas, 171]

He continues: “Wilberforce realized that Britain was a nation that had effectively lost its conscience or grown deaf to it, that claimed in every outward way to be a Christian nation, but that acted upon principles fundamentally at odds with the Christian view of human beings as immortal creatures, created in the image of God.” [Metaxas, 163]

But Wilberforce and his fellow believers did not throw up their hands in despair. And they didn’t wait for the nation to be converted before taking up such social evils as slavery. Even as they preached the gospel, they also worked and labored to change hearts, and minds, and eventually laws, when it came to the social evils of slavery.

It wasn’t a quick process. And it came at a cost. Wilberforce at times lost friends, and social standing, and even had his life threatened. But after twenty years of effort for Wilberforce – and even longer for those who began the efforts before him – in 1807 British Parliament passed a law to end the slave trade in the British Empire. [Metaxas, 211-215]

As one contemporary of Wilberforce put it: “We are apt, perpetually to express our wonder that so much exertion should be necessary to suppress such a flagrant injustice.” But he also noted that we should reflect on how the effort of a few, wisely directed, can change the lives of so many for the better – particularly, as Wilberforce would add, when God is at work to aid it. [Quoted in Metaxas, 212]

In a similar way, we too are called to action.

What might that look like for us?

For one thing, it means that socially, and even politically, we are called to oppose practices that strip others of dignity, that leave them vulnerable or oppressed, or that create a powerless underclass within society.

This can take many forms. It means caring for the homeless. It means advocating for and defending the rights of the disabled. It means working for the protection of the unborn. It means coming alongside, and assisting the immigrant. It means welcoming the refugee.

And those things can be unpopular. And fighting for them can make us unpopular – just as they did Wilberforce for many years.

Because we live in a day when many fight tooth and nail against creating a real home for the homeless, if we feel like it might affect us. We live in a day when some in power want to push the disabled out of our communities, because supporting them there is too inconvenient. [<https://www.npr.org/2026/06/20/nx-s1-5865100/doj-memo-trump-disability-civil-rights-institutionalization>] We live in a day when many want to strip the unborn of protections, and render their lives not worth mourning. We live in a day where some want to exploit immigrants as a powerless underclass [Redemer], while others want to demonize them as a convenient scapegoat. We live in a day where, for the first time in at least 25 years, our country has not allowed a single Christian fleeing religious persecution to resettle in our country. [World Relief, 12] And we could go on.

Christians must not sit on the sidelines on such issues, as men and women, boys and girls, young and old, are treated as less than human. Like Wilberforce and his allies, like the people of ancient Israel, we are called to be a light to the world, an advocate for the weak, the vulnerable, and the oppressed, serving the God who comes alongside those in need, who frees the enslaved, who lifts up the oppressed.

Where might God be calling you to step out in that way? What community of people might he be calling you to serve and defend? Where might he be calling you to make his heart known, by serving the least of these among us?

God's opposition to slavery in this text, points us to God's concern for our hearts, and for the hearts of others. But it also points us to his concern for the lives of all people, and his call for us to fight against oppression and to provide refuge for those in need in this life.

Conclusion

And so, brothers and sisters, let us seek freedom for our own hearts – freedom that can only be found in Christ.

Let us direct others to that eternal freedom as well, sharing the good news about Jesus with them.

And let us labor in this fallen world, to protect the vulnerable, to defend the oppressed, to lift up the needy – to bring God's heart to bear in this fallen world.

Because we serve the God of the exodus. We serve the God who frees the enslaved.

That is the God who is our Father and King.

Let us seek to do his will in this world.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.