

Freedom, Slavery, and God's Way

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4th in a five-part series

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Genesis 12:1–3 (CEB)

The LORD said to Abram, “Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, those who curse you I will curse; all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you.”

Micah 4:1–4 (CEB)

But in the days to come,
the mountain of the LORD’s house
will be the highest of the mountains;
it will be lifted above the hills;
peoples will stream to it.

²Many nations will go and say:

“Come, let’s go up
to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of Jacob’s God,
so that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in God’s paths!”

Instruction will come from Zion
and the LORD’s word
from Jerusalem.

³God will judge between the nations
and settle disputes of mighty
nations,
which are far away.

They will beat their swords
into iron plows
and their spears
into pruning tools.

Nation will not take up sword
against nation;
they will no longer learn
how to make war.

⁴All will sit underneath
their own grapevines,
under their own fig trees.

There will be no one to terrify them;
for the mouth of the LORD of
heavenly forces has spoken.

John 1:29–30 (CEB)

²⁹The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is the one about whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.’”

Galatians 3:26–29 (CEB)

²⁶You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.

God’s way is the way that embraces all peoples. Sadly, too often our way, even the American way, has been to exclude and even to enslave. How can this be?

Last week, we saw that for God, all means all. Sadly, the American Dream was born with a stain that casts shadows still. Here again is the portion of the Declaration of Independence that provides shape and substance to the American dream:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.¹

¹ Quoted from the U.S. archives site: www.archives.gov. This is a great site and you might enjoy prowling around on it.

“All men are created equal”

All means all. Simple as that; or so you’d think. But it has been proved to be anything but simple. The man who penned those words, the Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, owned hundreds of other human beings over the course of his adult life. That statement alone boggles our minds. Own other people? How could such a thing really be? Yet, human slavery characterized nearly all societies for most of human history.

Slavery was common to all agrarian societies. It persisted in every early civilization: in Ur and Sumer, in Egypt and Persia, in the Indus Valley and in Xia Dynasty China. It survived through the classical age, and into the medieval period.

Slavery was endemic in African and Arab societies. Between 11 and 17 million people were taken from Africa by Muslim slavers between the seventh and nineteenth centuries. In the New World, too, slavery existed from the earliest moment of human settlement. The Mayans, Aztecs, and Incas all practiced it.

Although slavery sometimes had an ethnic basis, it was no great respecter of race. Muslim slavers traded in Christians: Georgians, Circassians, Armenians, and others. Christians, for their part, enslaved Moors: as late as the sixteenth century, hundreds of thousands of Muslim slaves toiled on Spanish plantations. On the eve of the American Civil War, there were three thousand black slave owners in the United States.²

It is often noted that the Apostle Paul didn’t call for the end of slavery. Certainly, he asked (commanded?) Philemon to receive home the slave Onesimus as a Christian brother, as he would receive Paul, but still, Paul did not advocate the end of slavery. I’m sure he could hardly conceive of a world without slaves – it was just the way of things, another piece of a broken and sinful world that would one day be swept away in the consummation of God’s kingdom.

Slavery – the stain on America’s founding

Though Britain’s thirteen colonies declared their independence as thirteen sovereign states in July, 1776, the war to effect this independence would go on until 1781, at which time the states had to consider what sort of nation or alliance they had created and how they would govern themselves going forward. What many don’t realize is that they didn’t really form a nation; it was more of an alliance or league of nations with almost no power, neither to enforce collection of taxes nor to raise an army. The governing document was called the Articles of Confederation and was just that, setting forth certain agreements about how these thirteen sovereign states would work in concert. It didn’t even have the structures basic to the various state constitutions. For example, every state had one vote – Rhode Island had as much say as Virginia or New York; just like the General Assembly of the present-day United Nations, and as useless.³

In his recent book, *The Quartet*, historian Joseph Ellis tells the story of how four men, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, James Madison, and George Washington led the states from their ineffectual alliance to a republic of thirteen truly united states, or as Ellis put it, from *pluribus to unum*.

Ellis aptly describes the two “ghosts” that haunted the Convention: monarchy and slavery.

The other ghost at the banquet was slavery, which was simultaneously omnipresent and unmentionable. Lincoln subsequently claimed that the decision to avoid the word slavery in the founding document accurately reflected the widespread recognition that the “peculiar institution” was fundamentally incompatible with the values on which the American Revolution was based, so that the bulk of the delegates

² Hannan, Daniel (2013-11-19). *Inventing Freedom: How the English-Speaking Peoples Made the Modern World* (p. 287). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

³ Ellis, Joseph J. (2015-05-12). *The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783-1789*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

realized that any explicit mention of the offensive term would, over time, prove embarrassing.

This was true enough, but the more palpable and pressing truth in the summer of 1787 was that slavery was deeply embedded in the economies of all states south of the Potomac and that no political plan that questioned that reality had any prospect of winning approval. Much like the big-state-small-state conflict, then, a sectional split was, from the beginning, built into the very structure of the convention, and some kind of political compromise was inevitable if the Constitution were to stand any chance of passage and ratification. Madison himself believed that slavery was the most elemental source of conflict. “The states were divided into different interests not by their difference in size,” he recalled later, “but principally from their having or not having slaves.... It did not lie between the large and small states, it lay between the Northern and Southern.”

The crucial compromise was an agreement to avoid any direct discussion of the divisive issue and to use euphemisms like “that species of property” when the forbidden topic forced itself onto the agenda. The two most explicit decisions implicitly endorsing slavery were the agreement to count slaves as three-fifths of a person for purposes of representation in the House and a prohibition against ending the slave trade for twenty years, concessions to the Deep South, especially South Carolina, that appear horrific to our eyes but without which the Constitution almost certainly could never have come into existence.

There were, to be sure, flashes of emotional honesty that exposed the depth of the sectional divide. Luther Martin of Maryland denounced slavery as “an odious bargain with sin, inconsistent with the principles of the revolution and dishonorable to the American character.” Gouverneur Morris pronounced slavery “a curse,” an anachronistic “vestige of feudalism” that would actually retard the economic development of the South, and “the most prominent feature in the aristocratic countenance of the proposed Constitution.” On the pro-slavery side, the most succinct statement came from Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of South Carolina: “South Carolina and Georgia cannot do without slaves.”

Such statements accurately expressed the broadly shared recognition that slavery was, on the one hand, a cancerous tumor in the American body politic and, on the other, a malignancy so deeply embedded that it could not be removed without killing the patient, which in this case was a newly created American nation. As a result, the most salient piece of evidence is silence. No one proposed any provision condemning slavery and insisting that it be put on the road to extinction. And no one proposed that the Constitution contain language explicitly justifying or protecting slavery or defending its permanent place in American society.

The euphemisms and circumlocutions in the language of the Constitution accurately reflected the ambiguous and ambivalent mentality of the delegates. If there was one explosive device that could blow up the entire national enterprise, this was it, and the delegates knew it. Leadership, as they saw it, meant evading rather than facing the moral implications of the slavery question. Whether this was a failure of moral leadership or a realistic recognition of the politically possible can be debated until the end of time.

And so slavery would be a stain on the Constitution – perhaps necessary, but still a stain. Though the British paid off slave owners to accomplish emancipation, Americans would fight the deadliest war in our history to put an end to the sinful institution, a war that would not have been fought without the issue of slavery. Perhaps it had to be this way, perhaps not. But we are still living with the aftermath.

The way we learned to live

Again we come back to the question of how these men could, on the one hand, speak of “all men” being created equal, and, on the other, abide the continuation of slavery. How could they? Would we? I am 64 and grew up in the deep South, in north Louisiana. I remember two water fountains at every grocery store, one marked “white” and the other “colored.” Three restrooms: “men,” “women,” and “colored.” Two waiting rooms at the doctor’s office. I was a kid then, but even when I became a teenager and at

least somewhat more aware, I still pushed it away. I guess I wasn't much different in this than the some of our most revered founders – I had simply learned to live that way, as Ellis puts it:

At an even deeper psychological level, the circumlocutions deployed for evasive purposes in the Constitution accurately captured the denial mechanisms that many of the southern delegates had developed in their daily lives as slave owners: ways of talking and even thinking designed to obscure the moral implications of their livelihoods and lifestyles. Twenty-five of the delegates owned slaves, including George Mason, who oversaw three hundred slaves at Gunston Hall and never freed them but incongruously delivered several passionate critiques of slavery at the convention.

George Washington arrived in Philadelphia accompanied by three slaves, including his personal valet, Billy Lee, who stood behind his master's chair throughout the convention, tending to his personal needs. One can only wonder what Billy Lee thought about the tortured debate over slavery. Or whether Washington wondered what Billy Lee was thinking. On the latter score, the likely answer is that Washington gave the matter no thought at all. And if he did, it would be the last thing he would ever talk about or record in his diary. The unofficial policy of silence at the convention on the all-important question of slavery was, to be sure, a political decision driven by a collective awareness of its explosive implications, but silence and willful obliviousness came naturally to most southern slave owners. It was the way they had learned to live their lives.⁴

In the end, blindness to injustice is evidence of the sin that afflicts us all, this deep, ineradicable darkness that lurks in every all human heart. Though Jefferson advocated for the gradual manumission of the slaves, he didn't free his own. Why? Money. He had inherited large agricultural estates and needed the slaves to make them economic. How many of us could really be sure we would have chosen differently in 1787? We should never underestimate the hold that sin has on us. That is why it so seldom that "all means all."

Sin is real and its presence explains a great deal about ourselves and our world. The problem when we begin to talk about sin is that it is commonly misunderstood. We tend to think of sin only as the breaking of a rule, as if we might look back over our day and count the sins we committed. But this is not the best way to go about understanding sin.

Sin is whatever separates us from God. Sin is whatever diminishes the image of God in us all. Sin is whatever keeps us from functioning as God intended. Sin is our brokenness . . . and we are all broken . . . and we are often too blind to even know it.

Adam, Eve, you, and I were all created by God so that we might love God and one another. When we refuse to see injustice in all its manifestations, we are separated further and further from God. Adam and Eve, giving in to their pride and desiring to be like gods themselves, chose to follow their own way rather than God's way. In the biblical worldview, Adam and Eve's choice is still with us. They ran from God, causing a tragic rip in the relationship between God and humanity. It is as if their bad choice passed on to us a flaw in our moral DNA, a flaw that we cannot fully heal ourselves, but must be healed by God. It is this flaw, shared by us all, that we can call Sin. That's why it can only be in Christ and by the power of his Spirit that any of us can hope to genuinely see that "all means all."

I close this week, with some excerpts from the famous letter Rev. Martin Luther King wrote while in a Birmingham, Alabama jail in 1963. He was harshly treated in the jail and received a letter from eight white Alabama clergymen condemning King and his methods of non-violent civil disobedience as "untimely and unwise." Here is a small

⁴ Ellis, Joseph J. (2015-05-12). *The Quartet: Orchestrating the Second American Revolution, 1783-1789*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

portion of King's lengthy letter, first written on newsprint and scraps of paper sneaked to him in his cell:

One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I it" relationship for an "I thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong. . . .

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws. . . .

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. . . . Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

And now this approach [of civil disobedience] is being termed extremist. But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?

