



MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Examining the text & our hearts:

Bible Reading: Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 6:1-9

- “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives & don’t be bitter toward them. 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they won’t become discouraged. 22 Slaves, obey your human masters in everything. Don’t work only while being watched, as people-pleasers, but work wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord & not for people, 24 knowing that you’ll receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he has done, & there is no favoritism Masters, deal with your slaves justly & fairly, since you know that you too have a Master in heaven.” [Col. 3:18-4:1 CSB]
- Slaves, obey your human masters with fear & trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as you would Christ. 6 Don’t work only while being watched, as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, do God’s will from your heart. 7 Serve with a good attitude, as to the Lord & not to people, 8 knowing that whatever good each one does, slave or free, he will receive this back from the Lord. 9 And masters, treat your slaves the same way, without threatening them, because you know that both their Master & yours is in heaven, & there is no favoritism with him.” [Eph. 6:5-9 CSB]

SUMMARY:

The New Testament ‘Household Codes’ (Eph. 5, 6; Col. 3) mandate the roles of wives/husbands, children/parents, & slaves/masters. They enshrine in Scripture modified versions of Roman-Greek ethical codes. In our era they have generated heated debate & bitter controversy; 150-years ago they were used to justify US slavery. Are they timeless divinely-ordained principles or historic protocols

irrelevant today? Do they reflect ‘universal norms’ or an ‘interim ethic’ which tolerated 1st-century patriarchy and slavery? How can we treat them as “God’s Word,” and apply them today in our cultural context? What can we learn from Paul’s interaction with slavery on both personal & institutional levels?

I. ‘Household Codes’ (Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-25; 4:1)

A. NT ‘Household Codes’ Adopt & Adapt Existing Greek Ethical Codes

- “Paul’s adoption of contemporary norms for the Christian household shows...his readiness to work within cultural norms ...In the [Household Codes] of Col. 3:18-4:1 we see Paul’s *acceptance of present cultural structures* and norms...[and] his relativization of them...in Christ.” [Bruce Hansen, ‘*All of You are One*’: *Social Vision of Gal 3:28...& Col 3:11*, pp. 185, 203]
- “There was a [Greek (e.g. Aristotle’s)] moral code...that the [early] churches adopted & adapted...NT ‘household codes’ *didn’t just adopt* existing moral traditions...; *they adapted it*. They *transformed* that tradition...The early churches...envisioned a different world...of God’s unchallenged sovereignty...in which ‘*there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male & female; since...all are one in Christ*’ (Gal. 3:28). They struggled to bring [their community]...into conformity to the world they envisioned & struggle was the crucial thing.” [Allen Verhay, J. Harvard, Joseph S. Harvard, *Ephesians*, pp 226-228]

B. Accommodating secular roles/institutions to avoid appearing subversive (Rom. 13:1)

1. Accepting what can’t be changed: The household code “affirms...the conventional institutions & instructs the church to live within the given social structure...It might even seem to endorse a status quo...at odds with certain Christian ideals. But... the NT household code...is related to the thesis statement of Rom. 13:1: ‘Let everyone *submit to...governing authorities*... there’s no authority except from God, &...authorities...are instituted by God’.” [P. H. Towner, *Romans & P. of God*, p. 162]

2. To avoid appearing subversive: “The household codes...[echo] traditional & respected mores of the time (particularly Col. 3:18-4:1...wives subject...to husbands, slaves obedient to masters) [which] is striking & somewhat disturbing to modern ears. But it was evidently more important that the early Christians *be seen to be not subversive of stable society and society norms* than that they should set themselves up as [unique Jesus communities].” [J. Dunn, *Unity & Diversity in... NT*, p. XXI]

C. Not timeless absolutes, but modified 1st-century secular codes

- When “the Christian church entered the social world of the 1st century...the Churches did not (& could not) create *ex nihilo* [from nothing] a new social order. The church adopted the commonplace rules, but *they also adapted them...they transformed them...they nudged them in the direction of God’s good future*...[There was] adoption...But neither the early churches nor [the book of] *Ephesians* simply ‘baptized’ the [Greek] moral commonplaces into God’s law, and they surely didn’t absolutize them...*The church should not absolutize the [household codes] as a timeless moral code, but rather attend to the direction in which it nudged the received tradition*.” [Allen Verhay, Joseph S. Harvard, *Ephesians*, pp. 229-230]
- Not God-given laws/statutes for all-time: “We have sometimes read the [‘household codes’] as...timeless moral rules [which] dropped out of heaven to be forever the rules to guide our

lives. As a result [they have] been used to defend patriarchy, slavery, and abuse.” [Allen Verhay, Joseph S. Harvard, *Ephesians*, p. 226]

- View from the 21st Century: “Today most readers find the use of the NT ‘household codes,’ including Col. 3:18-4:1 to justify slavery appalling. Yet as [19th century US] pro-slavery interpreters pointed out, *these codes do not—at least directly—challenge slavery as an institution.*” [Janice C. Anderson, *Colossians*, p. 72]

D. Household codes: an “universal norm,” or an “interim ethic”?

- **Universal norm:** “Paul’s message was that *whenever these relationships exist, the people in them are expected to act as Paul commanded* through the Spirit of God. When *servants are servants [slaves are slaves] (& masters...masters), these guidelines pertain* ...When children are children (& parents are parents), these guidelines remain. Likewise, when a woman is a wife (& a man is a husband) this is the order God expects.” [Richard R. Melick Jr., *Philip., Col., & Philemon* (2001) p. 310]
- **Interim Ethic:** “The New Testament...express[es] the *unfolding of an ethic*...in an incremental (not absolute) fashion.. The issue is not the NT’s status as final revelation, but...its realization of ethics.” [W. Webb, *Redemptive Movement*, p. 393]

E. Short of God’s ultimate ideal, his ‘perfect ethic’ (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:13)

- “*In Christ there’s no Greek & Jew...barbarian, Scythian, slave & free; but Christ is all & in all.*” (Col. 3:11)
- “The Household Code of Col. 3:17-4:1...seems to be in tension with...Col. 3:11. [These] represent *two aspects of Paul’s corporate vision* for the church in Colossae...[1.] First, the unity & solidarity Paul urges...he frames practically...[in] the Household Code...[where] Paul’s social vision is stridently concrete. [2.] Second, by juxtaposing the Household Code to the new creational unity of Col. 3:10-11 Paul [is sketching] his [ultimate, end-time] social vision...oriented to Christ’s cosmic reconciliation....These [are] 2 points [his interim & ultimate ethic].” [B. Hansen, ‘*All of You are One*’ *Social Vision*, p. 162]
- “Col. 3:11 summarizes [Paul’s] cosmic [end-time] vision of Christ reconciling all to himself...the fulfillment of all cultures in Christ. Yet *this completion lies in the indeterminate future* [it’s ‘not yet’]...In the meantime, the *church is to strive to approximate* such fulfillment as a microcosm of this future cosmos.” [B. Hansen, ‘*All of You are One*’ *Social Vision*, p 188]
- “The tradition of the household codes [was] an historical achievement [but it] left the church at some distance from the future it envisioned...The distance between the vision and [its] realization...remains...as *the church continues its pilgrimage* towards [God’s] good future...that’s still on the horizon...The church [shouldn’t] be content with the distance ...[nor] simply repeat this 1st-century code as the timeless word of God.” [Allen Verhay, J. S. Harvard, *Ephesians*, p. 233]

F. Incremental Steps towards God’s Ultimate Ethic:

- “God, in a pastoral sense, accommodates himself to meeting people and society where they are in their existing social ethic & from there he *gently moves them with incremental steps towards something better.*” [William J. Webb, “*Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic*,” *JETS* 48/2, June 2005, pp. 331-49]

II. Slaves & Masters in the Household Codes (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1)

A. Adopting & Adapting existing Codes (Eph. 6:5, 8-9)

B. Equal Status regarding Judgment (Eph. 6:9; cf. Rom. 10:11-13; Col. 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:13)

- “When masters are told to stop threatening their slaves because ‘their Master & yours is in heaven, & there’s no favoritism with him,’ a theological image is invoked that unsettles the conventional patterns of master-slave relations.”—Richard Hays
- “Paul says something very counter-cultural: ‘*Masters, act in the same way towards them*’ (Eph. 6:9a). This recalls the exhortation...in Eph. 5:21 ‘*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*’ Paul does not literally mean that masters are to obey their slaves. But [they] should treat their slaves in a considerate manner...Paul reminds slave owners of the *fundamentally equal status* they share with their slaves, ‘*both their Master & yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him*’ (Eph. 6:9)...Masters will themselves be judged by their master Christ on the basis of their conduct, & this judge treats masters and slaves the same.” [Peter Williamson, *Ephesians*, p. 187]
- “The Household code...stands under the influence...of [Christ’s] return in glory as judge...The instruction to slaves and masters reveals...the regulating element of Christ’s judgment.” [James P. Hering, *Colossians & Ephesians Haustafeln*, p. v]
- Masters/slaves equal: in salvation (Rom. 10:11-13); status ‘in Christ’ (Col. 3:11) & Body (1 Cor. 12:13); at judgment (Eph. 6:9)

C. Restructuring Relationships; ‘Seeds’ for Abolition?

- “While a master can’t perhaps ‘obey’ his slaves, he can—and as a believers now must—treat them with respect & even love...To ‘do the same’ means that the master is called to treat his slaves like Christ [would treat them?], seeking God’s will & Christ’s pleasure in his treatment of slaves. *This may not be a summons to dismantle slavery, but it is a radical restructuring of relationships within that system...*The norm[s] of sexual abuse...& violent punishment of slaves are forbidden...” [Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, pp. 605-606]
- “If slaves shared in the same grace of God as their masters, then the honor due to masters would have to be given in *both directions* (see Eph. 6:5, 9), establishing a reciprocity [between masters and slaves] that would *eventually upend the hierarchies* that were then—and now—taken for granted.’ [John M. G. Barclay, *Paul & the Gift*,]

III. The Redemptive Arc (‘Trajectory’)

A. ‘Redemptive Movement’ (Arc) Explained:

- What it is: “The first job of...[determining] redemptive-movement...is to see the subject from the point of view of the original recipients/[readers of Scripture]. The subject is then traced through a progressive ‘trajectory’ through history (or at least through the biblical witness). Finally, the subject’s trajectory is assumed to continue beyond the NT to affect issues in our world today...Slavery is often used to illustrate...redemptive-movement...In the first parts of Scripture, slavery was accepted as a normal part of culture, even among the [OT] Hebrews. However... [Moses’] Law limited what could be done to slaves & provided for treatment that was ‘humane,’ compared to what the surrounding cultures allowed. Such rules show the “trajectory” that God intended to take regarding slavery. In the NT, masters were admonished to treat their slaves well (Col. 4:1 [Eph. 6:9]), & Paul referred to a slave as his brother in Christ (Philemon v. 16). This continues the “trajectory” of redemption. [In the ‘redemptive-movement’ view], we can follow the path that Scripture naturally...& conclude that God desired the emancipation of

slaves. While no Scripture exists that abolishes slavery outright, we can infer from the “redemptive movement” within Scripture that God’s will was that slavery end...By extending the trajectory begun in Scripture, we can arrive at a logical conclusion...’Redemptive-movement’... is involved mainly with societal ethics. It attempts to provide answers for those modern issues that the Bible does not directly address by finding the “redemptive spirit” behind the actual text of Scripture & “working out”...the ethics contained in seed form in the Bible. Other issues tackled...include homosexuality & the role of women in ministry.’ [“*Trajectory Hermeneutics*,” GotQuestions.org]

1. Progressive revelation & incremental realization in social ethics

– William Webb also calls it “an incrementalist approach to...ethical formation: ‘It is [an analysis of] movement...captured from reading a text [of Scripture] in its ancient historical & social context and its canonical context that yields a sense of the underlying spirit [trajectory] of the biblical text. It is this ‘redemptive-movement’...meaning that ought to radically shape the contours of our contemporary ethical portrait’.” [S. McKnight, “*Traditional Answers...*” Jesus Creed Blog, 13 Feb. 2020]

– “Webb is adamant to maintain the distinction between the NT as final revelation, but not the final realization of an ethic. He asserts that the further realization of redemptive movement towards an *ultimate ethic* is still needed. His argument is based on the premise that the NT still expresses the unfolding of an ethic in incremental fashion. [Kevin] Vanhoozer affirms Webb’s statement about definitive revelation & realization, stating that ‘the Spirit continues to guide the church as it strives toward a fuller understanding of and lived response to Scripture’s truth’ (Kevin Vanhoozer, “*Responses*,” p. 263).” [Jeff Fisher, “*Evangelical Theologian & William Webb’s Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: Theological Analysis*,” p. 8]

B. What’s Counter-cultural? Is there a Canonical Trend?

1. Counter-cultural Contrast

– “Some ethical positions found in the Bible...differ from the predominant views of the surrounding culture. Such difference may...sign[al] a significant biblical value or principle that should be accorded special weight in the dialogue between the Bible & Christian ethics today. A *countercultural trend* may be seen, for e.g., ...in *Paul’s instruction to husbands* to model Christ’s self-sacrificial love toward their wives in Eph 5:25... Identifying potential countercultural tendencies...is often combined with the aim of *establishing ‘trajectories’* within the biblical canon that...support...an interpretative direction for...countercultural tendencies.” [Volker Rabens, “*Bible & Ethics: Pathways for Dialogue*,” *die Skriflig*, Vol. 51(3) p. 6]

2. What’s the Trajectory, the ‘Redemptive Arc’?

– “The ‘redemptive [movement] or incremental development in ethic...within the slavery texts of the Bible is discovered through reading these texts relative to their ancient historical/social setting...[&] often augmented by the canonical movement between the Testaments [i.e., OT to NT].” [William J. Webb, “*Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic*,” in *Four Views in Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, p. 228]

– “Ignoring the redemptive movement of the text as well as key countercultural voices in its biblical context (e.g. Gal 3:28; Phlm. 16–17, 21; etc.), & thus *applying the text literally to*

today, would be a regressive movement – particularly from the perspective of many cultures today.” [Volker Rabens, “*Bible & Ethics: Pathways for Dialogue*,” die Skriflig, Vol. 51(3) p. 6]

– “The strengths of this [Redemptive Movement] interpretation are both its concern to identify the dynamic potential of a particular text in its cultural context as well as its endeavor to read the text as part of a *broader trajectory* within the canon of Scripture.” [Volker Rabens, “*Bible & Ethics: Pathways for Dialogue*,” die Skriflig, Vol. 51(3) p. 6]

3. William Webb’s **XYZ** Formula

– William J. Webb expounds the “Redemptive-Movement [Method]” He uses an “XYZ” formula.

X: the cultural context (surrounding society’s values) within which a Scripture passage was written.

Y: the concrete words of Scripture & ethic they teach (in contrast to the prevailing culture).

Z: stands for the ultimate ethic the God intends for eternity.

4. A quick example—Revenge

– **X:** The “seven-fold vengeance” said that whatever wrong you do to me I will repay 7 times worse. This excessive vengeance was prevalent in the ancient Middle-East. (Gen. 4:15; Ps. 79:12)

– **Y:** God gave Moses the commandment to limit vengeance to “an eye for an eye & a tooth for a tooth.” (Dt. 19:21)

– **Z:** Jesus told us to love our enemies. (Mt. 5:38-42)

– The “eye for an eye” standard was to limit violence. It’s not the ultimate standard, but it pointed us in the direction of the ultimate standard. To act on an “eye for an eye” mentality now (today) would be a regression from the standard.

– The ‘ultimate ethic’ as clearly articulated in Scripture [by Jesus] for this particular issue. This is not the case on many other issues. For instance, nowhere in Scripture does it explicitly say to end slavery & there were slaves in NT churches. To return to [explicit] NT ethics would be a reversion from an ultimate ethic [which Christians identify as slavery’s abolition].

5. Defining the “Ultimate Ethic”—point “Z”—“God’s good future” (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11, 1 Cor. 12:13)

– Critics allege “Even if [the redemptive] movement [method] were granted as a legitimate lens of interpretation, the *lack of a clear end to any trajectory* [i.e., the ‘ultimate ethic’] is *extremely problematic*.” [Jeff Fisher, “... *Analysis*,” p. 12]

– However, “Webb affirms the ‘ultimate ethic’...is the true ethic of the NT...rightly understood.” [Fisher, “... *Analysis*,” p. 8] He could argue the ‘ultimate ethic’ is defined by Paul’s vision of ‘God’s good future’: Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11, 1 Cor. 12:13, etc.

IV. Redemptive Movement Model applied to Slavery:

A. Codes condone Slavery—“*Slaves, obey your...masters*” (Eph. 6:6; Col. 3:22); “*Slaves submit...*” (Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18)

- “As one reads the biblical texts on slaves, an overwhelming impression emerges: *a less-than-ultimate ethic in the treatment of slaves/people is a major part of our Bible*. If we clear away the technical language, we might simply say that *there is a problem with the treatment of slaves in the Bible*. There exist numerous “not so pretty” components within the slavery texts that illustrate a less-than-ultimate ethic in the treatment of slaves/people: [details omitted]
- “Relative to the [surrounding] ancient culture many of these texts were...progressive. Nevertheless, the above practices are problematic & in need of movement towards an ultimate ethic. A much more humane treatment of persons can be legislated & lived out in our modern civil-law settings. The idea of a ‘Redemptive Movement hermeneutic’ is...that *God in a pastoral sense accommodates himself to meeting people & society where they are in their existing social ethic & (from there) he gently moves them with incremental steps towards something better...* Incremental movement within Scripture reveals a God who is willing to live with the tension between an absolute ethic in theory & the reality of guiding real people in practice towards such a goal.” [William J. Webb, “*Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic*,” *JETS* 48/2, (2005) pp. 332-3]

B. Slavery at odds with God as the Emancipator of Israel (Ex. 13:14; Lev. 26:13)

- “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.*” (Ex. 13:14; 12x in OT)
- “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you [Israel] out of...Egypt, so...you would no longer be their slaves. I broke the bars of your yoke & enabled you to live in freedom.*” (Lev. 26:13)
- “Passover is the freedom-festival par excellence. It recalls the time God *went down to Egypt & rescued his people from slavery*. Many times since then the Israelite people have been outwardly enslaved, but the annual Passover declares their belief...they are God’s free people, & one day will be truly free again.” [N. T. Wright, *Paul & the Puzzle of Freedom*, p.]

C. Exodus’ clear message trumps the NT Household Codes

- The Household codes don’t prescribe slavery; they’re presented in the context of slavery.
- Regarding Slavery “A guideline [is found] not in the...NT, but in the OT book of Exodus... Impressions from the NT that the Bible authorizes slavery have mistaken slavery’s presence as divine sanction [approval]. The *Exodus text provides the clearer word...*The problem of the Bible’s apparent authorization of slavery [is] overcome when...a sharp distinction [is made] between Biblical *description* & Biblical sanction [*prescription*].” [J R Davison, *Still Letting My People Go*, pp. 88, 91]
- “Today...theologians recognize that slavery is not...acceptable.; it is rejected on the basis...that all human beings are created in the image of God & that all...are potentially objects of redemption since Christ died for all...[This] excludes the absolute power of one [person] over another that occurs in slavery.” [I Howard Marshall, in R. Pierce (ed.) *Biblical Equality*, p. 189]

D. Yet, in the OT Israel still practiced slavery—why?

- In the OT “God begins with an ancient people who have imbibed dehumanizing customs & social structures from their Ancient Near East context...Even if...slavery is eradicated, this does not mean that the culture’s mindset will be changed along with it...As Aiden Thompson argues, *God is incrementally ‘humanizing’ Ancient Near East structures within Israel* to diminish cruelty

and elevate the status of, say, slaves & women—even if such customs are not fully eliminated.” [Paul Copan, “*Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?*” *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 10, #1, p. 16]

E. Israel treated Slaves better than most nations “There’s redemptive movement...within the biblical text.” [Details omitted]

- “Regarding slavery, Christopher Wright declares: ‘The slave [in Israel] was given human and legal rights unheard of in contemporary societies’.” [P. Copan, “*Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?*” *Philosophia Christi*, V. 10, #1, p. 19]
- “Comparing [OT] texts in the Bible to other Ancient Near East texts & the rest of the Bible shows that *Scripture’s ethic [regarding slavery] is “not redemptive in an absolute sense...[i.e., there’s no unambiguous call for emancipation] yet, that movement’ was sufficient enough to signal a clear direction in terms of the possibility of further improvements for later generations,”* which ultimately lead to Christian-backed campaigns for emancipation (e.g. Wilberforce) [W. Webb, p. 227]

F. Scripture’s ‘Redemptive Arc’ points towards Emancipation of Slaves

- “When the Bible’s slavery texts are read against the Ancient Near East/Greco-Roman context, redemptive movement becomes increasingly clear. These biblical modifications to the existing social norms brought greater protection & dignity for the slave. *This improvement in the conditions of slaves relative to the original culture was clearly a redemptive action [in]... Scripture.* Admittedly, it was not redemptive in any absolute sense. Scripture only moved the cultural ‘scrimmage markers’ so far. Yet, that movement was sufficient enough to signal a clear direction in terms of the possibility of further improvements for later generations. Redemptive-movement meaning was (and is) absolutely crucial to contemporary application...[This] becomes *the basis for our contemporary convictions about the abolition of slavery.* [William J. Webb, “*Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic,*” *JETS 48/2*, June 2005, pp. 333-334]

G. Divergent Trajectories—Slavery vs. Homosexuality

- “When [biblical] texts prohibiting homosexual behavior are read against that backdrop of the ancient world...[there’s] movement in a *more restrictive direction*...We encounter a freeing... movement with respect to slavery...but a more restrictive movement with respect to homosexuality.” [William J. Webb, “*Gender Equality & Homosexuality,*” p. 408]

H. Household codes: How to live the Christian life as a slave?

- “The apostle [Paul] seems unconcerned with the institution [of slavery]. He is pastorally burdened for the outworking of the gospel [in] the concrete situation. The apostles...are not making social comment on prevailing custom, they...ask... ‘What does it mean to be slaves of Christ in this situation?’...The implication is profound. Slaves are responsible; the possibility of living a Christian life depends solely on Christ’s grace?not circumstance. Masters are responsible to defend the rights of others. Christians are to be extraordinary people in the world in which they are placed. The apostles sought to introduce [dignity] into the new creation relationship between masters & slaves.” [Michael Parsons, “*Slavery & ...NT Equality & Submissiveness,*” *Vox Evangelica*, Vol. 18 (1988) p. 92]

I. The “Ultimate Ethic” implies Slavery’s Abolition (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; etc.)

- “*There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male & female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” (Gal. 3:28)

- “The most forthright statement on social ethics in the NT is... *Gal. 3:28...[It is] the Magna Carta [‘Great Charter’] of the New Humanity.*” [Richard N. Longenecker, *NT Social Ethics for Today*, p. 30] Note: Metaphor: “The *Magna Carta* is like an architect’s blueprint that has to be converted into detailed drawings & ultimately a functional [building/structure].”
- “Some scholars [argue] *Gal. 3:28* is Paul’s [end-time ideal/‘ultimate ethic’] & that the house codes lie in tension with that, much as the ‘already’ exists in conflict with the ‘not yet’ of Christian experience. In other words...freedom belongs to the New Age; submission to hierarchical structure is the result of living in the Old [Age]. John A. Ziesler, for example, says, ‘the state & society remain, but the...realities of the New Age are already undermining... inequitable, discriminating & hierarchical foundations.’ [Michael Parsons, “*Slavery & ...NT Equality...*,” *Vox Evangelica*, Vol. 18 (1988) pp. 93-94]
- **‘Ultimate- or ‘Perfect Ethic’ vs. ‘Contextual Ethic’:** “In *Gal. 3:28* we observe Paul’s ‘*perfect-ethic*’—a vision of the way he ultimately wishes for churches and Christian households to operate. *Col 3:18-4:1* is not a contradiction of this, but... a ‘*contextual-ethic*’...on relationships in a particular time & place.” [Nijay Gupta, *New Life in Christ*, p. 163]

V. Paul’s Personal Interaction with Slavery—His Letter to Philemon re: his slave Onesimus

A. Paul’s Pastoral Advice (1 Cor. 7:20-21)

- “Let each of you remain in the situation in which he was called. 21 Were you called while a slave? Don’t let it concern you. But *if you can become free, by all means take the opportunity.*” (1 Cor. 7:20-21 CSB) Note: “Paul urges Christian slaves who can gain freedom to do so. The released slave was officially...a ‘freedman’.” [ESV]

B. Paul’s Advocacy for Philemon’s slave, Onesimus (meaning ‘Useful’) (Phlm. 1:10-22)

- Philemon was a resident of Colossae & it’s likely that Paul’s letter to Philemon accompanied the letter to the Colossians. Philemon’s slave, Onesimus has offended his master, perhaps absconded with valuables. Traditionally he’s viewed as a runaway (fugitive) slave, who (somehow) met Paul the prisoner & got saved. Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon:
- Paul writes Philemon: “*I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. I became his father while I was in chains. 11 Once he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you & to me. 12 I’m sending him back to you...[he’s] my very own heart. 13 I wanted to keep him...that in my imprisonment...he might serve me in your place. 14 But I didn’t want to do anything without your consent, so...your good deed might not be out of obligation, but of your own free will. 15 For perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a brief time, so...you might get him back permanently, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave—as a dearly loved brother. He’s especially so to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh & in the Lord. 17 So... welcome him as you would me. 18 And if he’s wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: ‘I will repay it’—not to mention...that you owe me even your very self. 20 Yes, brother, may I benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Since I’m confident of your obedience, I’m writing to you, knowing that you’ll do even more than I say.*” [Philemon 10-21 CSB]
- **Paul’s 3-fold request to Philemon...**[1.] First, accept Onesimus back...as a humble but reconciled brother in Christ (though still a slave): do not punish him. [2.] Second, please send him back to me as an assistant. [3.] Third, perhaps, in doing so, you’ll give him his freedom [implied in:] “*knowing...you’ll do even more than I say.*” (v. 21)...If a young man called

Onesimus were indeed to return to Ephesus to work alongside Paul in the mid-50s, it is not entirely impossible that he is the same person referred to 60 years later by Ignatius as the 'bishop of Ephesus'." [N. T. Wright, *Paul Faithfulness...God*, p. 15]

C. Why Didn't Paul Campaign for Emancipation & Slavery's Abolition? [Hint: Paul is a prisoner (Eph. 3:1; 4:1; Phlm. 9)]

- The fascinating part of the letter is that Paul never explicitly commands Philemon to release Onesimus, which he certainly had the spiritual authority to do. N.T. Wright raises questions which we – modern readers – ask:
- "Why did Paul not simply ask [Philemon] for Onesimus to be released from slavery? Why (for that matter) *did [Paul] not order all Christian slave-owners to release all their slaves*, rather than profit from an unjust social structure? Slavery was one of the really great evils of the ancient world, under which a large [%] of the population belonged totally to another person, for better or (usually) for worse, with no rights, no prospects, the possibility of sexual abuse, the chance of torture or death for trivial offences. Some slaves were fortunate in having kind or generous masters, & by the end of the first century some secular writers were expressing disgust at the institution. But for the great majority, life was at best drudgery & at worst 'merciless exploitation'. Why...did Paul not protest against the whole dehumanizing system?" – N. T. Wright
- Our natural impulse, seeking social transformation, is to [call for action]...We see the social implications of sinfulness & wonder...Why won't Christians stop this? We ask "Why won't PAUL stop this?" N.T. Wright probes Paul's thinking:
- "What alternatives were actually open to [Paul]? He's committed to the life, &...standards, of the New Age over against the Old [Age] (Col. 3). But a loud protest, at that moment in social history, would've functioned simply on the level of the Old Age: it would've been heard only as a criticism by one part of society (Paul, not himself a slave-owner, had nothing to lose) against another [part of society]. *It would, without a doubt, have done more harm than good*, making life harder for Christian slaves, & drawing upon the young church *exactly the wrong sort of attention from the authorities*. If Paul is jailed for proclaiming 'another king' (Acts 17:7), it's...clear that the kingdom in question is of a different order altogether from that of Caesar. In addition, inveighing against slavery per se would have been totally ineffective: one might as well, in modern Western society, protest against the mortgage [finance] system! ...Paul's method is subtler... like Jesus, his way of *changing the world is to plant a 'grain of mustard seed'* which, inconspicuous at first, grows into a spreading tree...In the meantime ...he teaches slaves & masters to treat...each other, as human beings [& fellow-brothers in Christ]."—N. T. Wright
- It "is not...that Paul saw nothing wrong with slavery itself. *Perhaps, before the apostles could condemn the institution [of slavery] & call for its abolition it was necessary for them to convince their churches that slaves were equal & responsible human beings.*" [Michael Parsons, "Slavery & ...NT Equality & Submissiveness," *Vox Evangelica*, Vol. 18 (1988) p. 96]

D. Other Scriptures condemn the Slave-trade (Rev. 18:11-13)

- "The merchants of the earth will weep & mourn over ['Babylon'], because *no one buys their cargo* any longer— 12 cargo of gold, silver, jewels, & pearls...cattle & sheep; horses...and *slaves—human lives.*" (Rev. 18:11-13 CSB)
- "The NT writers are not unaware of the wrongness of slavery. Paul's list of lawbreakers includes 'slave-traders' (1 Tim. 1:9-10). John incorporates *slavery [slave-trading]* into his analysis of wrongs which pervade 'Babylon': wrongs for which the city is judged (Rev 18:13). Social comment is certainly implied in these two verses." [Michael Parsons, "Slavery & the NT Equality & Submissiveness," *Vox Evangelica*, Vol. 18 (1988) p. 91]

QUESTIONS: Read Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 6:1-9

1. Which directives do you think probably *match the prevailing values/roles* of 1st-century Greek-Roman society?

2. Which statements (directives) do you think were probably *strikingly counter-cultural* in the 1st century?

3. Some scholars emphasize the adaptations—differences between NT codes & their secular equivalent—to discern the *direction of change God desires* for Christian communities. Do you agree with this view? Why/why not?

4. Some “Bible literalists” assert that the whole of the Household Codes are God’s Word—every single phrase is Godordained—for all time & for all Christians. So, we ought to practice every word today. How would you respond?
 - Consider the directives to slaves & masters

5. How might implementing the Household Codes have improved the slaves’ condition in Christian households?

6. Critics assert that Paul (& the NT) condoned (endorsed) the institution of slavery. Do you agree? Why/why not?

7. Why didn’t Paul *explicitly & publicly* call for slavery’s abolition & slaves’ emancipation in his churches?

8. When Paul personally faced the issue of slavery (individual slaves) how did he respond (e.g. *Philemon*)?
 - a. What might this indicate about Paul’s personal attitude towards slavery?
 - b. What might Paul’s “public policy stance,” diverge from his “personal pastoral counsel”? Discuss.

9. Others assert that Paul introduced elements that eventually undermined slavery & led to its abolition. Do you agree?

10. 150-years ago in the US, some argued that Paul never called for slavery's abolition, & the 'household codes' endorse it—therefore (based on the Bible) slavery *ought to be tolerated, not abolished!*

a. How would you respond to this assertion?

b. Does the Bible provide any other perspectives on this issue? If so, what?