

Preaching Guide: The Global Slave Trade

This preaching guide provides notes that can help in the preparation of a sermon or sermon series on the modern day slave trade. It should be read in conjunction with the Fact Sheet on the Global Slave Trade.

Slavery in the Biblical World

Slavery was a common practice throughout the eras in which the bible was written. People could be enslaved in any of the following ways:

- Taken captive during war
- Kidnapped
- Sold into slavery to repay a debt
- Born into slavery

Slaves were usually considered the property of their masters, could be bought and sold, and were often subject to cruel treatment. They could be employed in a variety of ways such as laboring on building projects (eg Exodus 1); managing a household and even a nation (eg Joseph), and as domestic servants (eg Hannah in Genesis 16).

It is estimated that at the time of the New Testament around 1/5 of the population of the Roman empire were slaves. In Rome the number of slaves may have been as high as one-third of the population.

Slavery in the Bible

The bible has four main strands of teaching surrounding slavery:

- 1. Texts that show God opposed to slavery.** The exodus from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land is the primary salvation event of the Old Testament. Exodus 1-12 records the misery and oppression of the Israelites, God's concern about this, and God's action to save. A few other parts of Scripture also provide a condemnation of slavery and practices surrounding it (eg Amos 1.9-10; 1 Timothy 1.10)
- 2. Texts that permit and regulate slavery.** Holding slaves is not forbidden in either the Old or New Testaments. The Old Testament Law permits the acquisition of slaves both as captives of war (Deuteronomy 20.10-15, 21; 10-14) and by purchase (Exodus 21.1-11, Leviticus 25.39-55) and acknowledges that slaves are the property of their owners (Exodus 21.20-21). Nonetheless owners are not free to do with slaves as they please. A series of laws regulate the power of owners:
 - Owners are allowed to physically punish their slaves but must not do so in a way that permanently damages them (Deuteronomy 21.20-21, 26-27);
 - A female slave may be acquired for the purposes of marriage but she must be granted the rights of a daughter, and if not adequately provided for, must be freed (Deuteronomy 21.7-11);

- A woman captured at war, taken as a wife, but then found to be unsatisfactory, may not be retained as a slave but must be freed (Deuteronomy 21.10-14);
- Slaves must be granted a day of rest along with all others in the household (Exodus 20.8-11);
- Israelites and foreigners were to be treated differently. Israelite slaves were to be treated as hired workers and freed after seven years and with all debts forgiven (Exodus 21.2).

The New Testament acknowledges that slaves exist as part of households, and calls on both slaves and masters to exhibit the Christian virtue of love toward each other (eg Ephesians 6.3-9). Slaves are urged to see their status as radically revised in Christ (eg 1 Corinthians 7.17-24, Galatians 3.26-28). As those who belong to Christ slaves, freeborn people and masters all share the same status as children of God. If slaves can gain their freedom they may, but if they cannot they are to remain submissive to their masters even if their masters are harsh toward them (eg 1 Peter 2.11-25).

- 3. A broader theology of humanity and salvation that subverts slavery.** The biblical vision of life as God intended runs counter to the practice of slavery. The creation texts, for example, see all human beings as created to be the image and likeness of God, gifted the productivity of the earth and entrusted with the rule of the earth and its creatures. Where the creation texts shows humankind as a community of equals sharing in the rule and abundance of the earth, slavery dehumanises people, makes them unequal in status, subjects them to abuse [it is impossible to find examples of slavery where the dignity and human rights of slaves are not abused], deprives them of their share of the earth's productivity, and subverts their capacity to share in the rule of the earth.

Other biblical visions of God's kingdom and salvation subvert the institution of slavery. Isaiah 65.17-25 pictures a new universe where everyone dwells in their own home, benefits from their own labour, and experiences life in its fullness. Jesus creates a "discipleship of equals" where no-one is to be called Master (eg Matthew 23.1-12) and notions of status and power are turned on their head (eg Matthew 18.1-4). Similarly the vision of a new heavens and earth in Revelation 21-22, where there is no suffering and where all share in the abundance of the earth and the presence of God, must have resonated strongly with the many slaves in the early Christian communities.

- 4. A metaphorical use of slave imagery.** The New Testament takes the image of a slave and uses it to describe the calling and standing of believers (eg 1 Corinthians 3.5; Philippians 2.1-11). Just as slaves belong to their masters, so believers belong to God. Just as slaves exist to serve the needs and interests of others, so believers exist to serve God and one another. Indeed, Christ himself comes to humankind as a slave who serves the interests of others rather than his own. His followers should do likewise (Matthew 20.20-28)

Reconciling the Permission for Slavery with the Evil of Slavery

How are we to reconcile the evil of slavery as an institution with the permission in both Old and New Testaments for the people of God to hold slaves? One helpful approach is to distinguish between what we might call the "pastoral" and the "prophetic" functions of Scripture.

On the one hand, the bible provides a vision of life that exposes slavery as an evil. Slavery by definition dehumanises people by demanding they exist solely for the economic or sexual gains of others. Even where a slave is treated considerately, he or she experiences the world in a way that falls far short of

the full enjoyment of community, dignity and share in the productivity and rule of the earth that God intends for human beings.

On the other hand, the bible writers addressed particular people living in particular communities at particular historical moments. In these communities slavery was a fact of life. Rather than calling for a reformation of the institution of slavery, many biblical authors called for a reformation of the behavior of masters and slaves. In the Old Testament this meant regulating the harsher dimensions of slavery and providing some protection to slaves. In the New Testament it meant that master and slave were to both act out of love for one another.

Where the “prophetic” strands of the bible subvert the institution of slavery and identify it as an evil, the “pastoral” strand asked how people who lived within this institution might conduct themselves. Over time the church came to recognise that the pastoral strand was not sufficient to fully respond to slavery. The institution of slavery is inherently dehumanising. It depends upon the threat of violence, economic exploitation, and the loss of free will and has never been practiced in a way that does not result in widespread abuse of slaves. To fully combat the evil of slavery it is necessary to end the practice altogether, in line with the biblical vision of life as God intended.

Modern day slavery

It is estimated that there are up to 27 million slaves in the world today. Unlike slavery in the past, slavery today is illegal in almost every country on earth. It is not protected by the law but operates in defiance of it.

Like slavery throughout history, the modern day slave trade has three realities at its core:

- Control through violence
- Economic exploitation of slaves
- The loss of free will

The experience of modern day slaves is one of misery, brutal oppression, and denial of the most basic human rights. It is completely antithetical to the virtues, values and vision of the kingdom of God.

A more detailed exploration of modern day slavery is found in the accompanying fact sheet.

A Suggestion for Preaching on Slavery

Most Australians are entirely unaware that slavery exists in the world today and will be quite shocked when they discover the truth. Some may respond with denial, so it is important to tell slave stories and point out that slavery is recognised as a serious global problem by the Australian Government, the US Department of State, and the United Nations (see the Fact Sheet for references).

Use the sermon outline below to preach on the issue. The sermon compares the experience of Israel while enslaved in Egypt (Exodus 1) with the experience of slaves in the world today and calls the church to be an agent of liberation.

Point 1: The Dark Heart of Slavery

The three core features of slavery are: control through violence; economic exploitation; and the loss of free will. Show that this was the experience of the Israelites in Egypt, and that it brought them untold misery. The same is true for the 27 million slaves today. Tell one of the slave stories below and use it to illustrate the three core feature of slavery.

Point 2: The Compassionate Heart of God

Exodus 2.23-25 shows that God's heart was broken for the Israelites. God heard their cry and determined to rescue them from slavery. He "remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob". This refers to God's promise to bless Abraham, his descendants and all humankind through them (Genesis 12.1-3, Genesis 15). God must remain true to his promise and so their suffering cannot be allowed to continue.

Likewise God's heart is broken for the millions of people suffering as slaves today. And just as God remembered his covenant with Israel, so God remembers the covenant with all creation to bring salvation and blessing and is passionately committed to the liberation of all people.

Point 3: God's Heart, Our Hands

God called Moses to be the agent by which the Israelites were liberated from slavery. Who will be the agent God uses to liberate slaves today? If we truly are God's hands, feet and voice on earth, then the church must rise up and act to stop this great evil. Some ways people can do this:

- Support the work of an aid and development agency such as Baptist World Aid. Poverty is one of the main reasons people are vulnerable to slavery, so reducing poverty reduces the likelihood people will be enslaved;
- Buy fair trade products wherever they can. Fair trade products come from companies that observe proper labour standards and make sure workers are paid a decent wage. Fair trade tea, coffee and chocolate can be purchased from many supermarkets. Fair trade clothing, sneakers, and sports gear can be purchased from Etiko (www.etikosports.com.au)
- Write a letter to their local member of Parliament expressing their concern about slavery and calling on them to act on the Plan to End Slavery (you might like to distribute copies).

Slave Stories

Ning's Story

In 1995 a 13 year old Thai girl with the nickname 'Ning', was promised work in Australia as a nanny. For many poor families in South East Asia opportunities such as these are too good to refuse. Ning's parents readily accepted. When Ning arrived in Australia she was not taken to a home to serve as a nanny, but to a brothel in Surry Hills, Sydney, where she was forced to work as a prostitute. The traffickers claimed it had cost them around \$35,000 to bring her to Australia and that she would have to work off this debt by having sex with 650 men. When not working in the brothel Ning was kept in a "safe house" with other prostitutes. She had no money, no contacts in Australia, and was not allowed to leave.

Immigration officials discovered and liberated Ning during a routine compliance raid just 10 days after her arrival. During that short period of time she had been raped 100 times. Although Ning was compensated as a victim of trafficking, the crimes against her by the brothel owners and traffickers were never investigated.

Source: Details derived from Natalie Craig, "Sex Slave Victim Wins Abuse Claim", The Age, May 29, 2007.

Maya's Story

Maya lived in a village in India with her husband Aja and their eight year old son. Trapped in desperate poverty, she was delighted when her brother Narayan found jobs at a brick kiln for herself, her husband and four other couples from their village. The kiln owner extended a loan of \$650 to the group to help them cover immediate costs and the move to the kiln compound. The villagers would provide labour exclusively for him until the loan was repaid, after which they would earn wages and be free to work for other kiln owners too.

The brick works was surrounded by a tall fence and the gate was padlocked behind the villagers when they entered. The accommodation for the five couples and their children turned out to be a rudimentary single room.

Work at the kiln began at 6am each morning and continued to sunset, with a one hour lunch break. Within a week of their arrival, the kiln owner began beating Maya and the others if their work did not satisfy him. When food was needed only a few adults were allowed to go to the market, with the threat that should they fail to return "I will make this place a living hell for those who are left behind."

After 6 months Maya summoned the courage to ask how much of the \$650 debt had been repaid. The kiln owner replied that because of interest on their loan and money he had provided for their food, the amount owing had gone up! The villagers were trapped. The kiln owner refused to credit them more if they increased their output and they had signed contracts saying they would work for no one else until the debt was paid. They, their children and grandchildren would be debt slaves for their entire lives.

As part of their duties the kiln owner insisted the women start cleaning a temple he had built. During these trips the women were gang-raped by the owner, his son and their friends. Fearful of even greater violence against their families if they revealed what was happening, the women remained silent about the rapes. But when they started occurring at the brick works, it was decided they must escape.

The villagers did escape and went into hiding with relatives on the other side of the province. The kiln owner sent bounty hunters after them, and when they couldn't be found, he abducted Maya's brother, uncle and cousin. They were tortured for 5 days, before the uncle, Amar, was released. Narayan and his cousin would be tortured until Amar returned with the escapees. When Amar eventually found Maya and the others they all agreed they could not return. But what could they do about Narayan and his cousin? This dilemma was resolved when the International Justice Mission learned of the situation and launched a raid that freed Narayan and his cousin.

Source: Details reported in Batstone, Not for Sale (HarperOne, 2007)

Deng Ater Kwany's Story

The Sudan, in Africa, has recently experienced severe conflict. After seizing power in 1989 the new Government declared militaristic jihad against all who opposed it. Part of the Government strategy was to encourage bands of Arab militias to raid Africans in the southern regions and to use slavery as a weapon of war. One man, Deng Ater Kwany recounts his experience.

"My wife and four children were abducted during a raid in March 1994. Three of the children and my wife managed to escape. But my eight year-old-daughter, Abuk, remained behind. She is now kept in Naykata in southern Dafur by a man named Ahmed Ahmed, who bought her from her captor. When I discovered where she was, I went north and tried to get her back by legal means. I opened a case against Ahmed Ahmed at the police station at Dira Dira and had to pay the police 20,000 Sudanese pounds to do this. A police officer named Abdullah accompanied me to the home of Ahmed Ahmed. This man refused to give me my girl and demanded 50,000 Sudanese pounds for her release. The policeman said that, as Ahmed Ahmed had bought the girl from her captor, she was his property, and he could not insist on her release. I was forced to leave her there where she is badly mistreated by Ahmed Ahmed's wife, who calls her by the Muslim name Howeh...I also lost the 20,000 pounds, which the policeman refused to return to me. I had to return home empty-handed."

Source: Cox and Marks, This Immoral Trade (Monarch 2006) 46-47

Further Reading

Kevin Bales, *Disposable People* (University of California, 2004)

Kevin Bales, *Ending Slavery* (University of California, 2007)

David Batstone, *Not for Sale. The Return of the Global Slave Trade and How we Can Fight It* (HarperOne, 2007)

Caroline Cox and John Marks, *This Immoral Trade. Slavery in the 21st Century* (Monarch, 2006)

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