

Slaves and Masters

Table of Duties

Lent 4, 2016

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

It may be a surprise for some of you to know that God does not forbid slavery. It is not a sin to be a slave. It is not a sin to be a slave owner. In fact God not only does not forbid slavery, by giving commandments regarding its regulation God endorses slavery. God not only endorses slavery, by giving commandments regarding its regulation, He hallows slavery.

The reason it may surprise many of you to hear this is because in this country slavery is viewed as a great evil. Even in the south no one seems to want to bring slavery back. If anyone does, their view is marginalized. Our American society has made a judgment regarding slavery. We have judged it a great evil.

Another reason it might surprise you that God endorses slavery and sanctifies it with His commands is that the abolitionists in this country used the Scriptures to justify the ending of slavery. The abolitionists were all Christians. They viewed slavery as a great evil. If that is the case, why does God include in Ephesians and in Colossians instructions about slavery which do not include its discontinuance?

I think it is necessary to point out a fundamental difference between slavery in biblical times and slavery as it was practiced in the United States. As early as Exodus and then later in Deuteronomy God gave instructions regarding the regulation of slavery. In the Old Testament just like the New Testament God did not command the abolition of slavery. What God envisioned in the Old Testament and assumed in the New Testament was that a person would become a slave through two primary means. The first means was that a person would fall into debt which he could not pay. He would then sell himself to his lenders in order to repay the debt. He would then become their slave either temporarily or permanently depending on how much he owed. The second way that a person could become a slave in God's view is if another country invaded your country and took over the place and enslaved you. Outside of these two possibilities God does not address Himself to slavery. And one should always keep in mind that God does not view the enslavement of His own people with favor as He rescued them from slavery in Egypt.

The difference then between what God envisions for slavery and what Americans practiced is twofold. Africans were not indebted to Americans when they were enslaved. The Africans did not owe us anything that they should become our slaves. Secondly, America did not invade Africa and conquer it. In fact we did not even invade a part of Africa and conquer it. America did not even have colonies in Africa. In no way did our government become the authority in Africa. Therefore the Africans did not become our slaves by conquest.

What happened was that Europeans or Americans went to Africa and kidnapped Africans and enslaved them for this continent. Kidnapping is a capital offense in the Old Testament. It is on the order of murder and adultery. It does not justify our sin that the Africans would sometimes kidnap each other and sell each other to European or American slave traders. The greed of such traders and those who purchased the slaves enhanced the misery of the slave to the point where slavery in this country for the most part was under the condemnation of God in His commandments regarding slavery in Ephesians and in Colossians.

If we are going to deal with the American experience of slavery in light of God's word in the Scriptures, His word regarding kidnapping must be taken into account. For when He talks about slavery He is talking about something else.

Now having said all of that, what are we to make of God's commandments regarding slavery? We do not have members of our society who are labeled slaves. We therefore do not have members of our society labeled lords or masters. Does that mean that these passages in God's Word are irrelevant to us? Do they have any bearing on our vocations today?

Well, simply put, they do. There are equivalents of masters and slaves today. A master had to provide everything for the slave to live. A slave was totally dependent on his master to live. That means that sort of exchange took place. In exchange for the slave's labor, the master provided the means for his living. That is what employers and employees do today. An employer provides his employees with everything that they need to live. After all what is a paycheck for? An employee then obtains that paycheck by granting to the employer his work. The only real difference between slave and master relationships of the ancient world and employer employee relationships of today is that today employees may terminate their relationship with their employer with much greater ease than they could in ancient times. But in spite of that ease many people are still bound to their employer for years whether they want to be or not in order to obtain the means for living.

Therefore God has sanctified the work of people by giving commands regarding its regulation. Employees work for your employer as working for the Lord Christ. In other words out of the love that you have for the Lord Christ because of everything that He has done for you pay Him back by working for your employer with all of your might and intelligence. Work for your employer as you would work for the Lord Christ. Do not simply work for your employer while he is watching you. Work for him just as hard when he is not watching you as you would when he is watching you. Do not work for him in order to be a people pleaser. In other words do not work for him in order to win his favor. Work for him in order to win the favor of your Lord Christ. If you work for your employer to win his favor, eventually the employer may ask you to do something sinful and you will do it because your goal is to please him and not the Lord. If however, you are working for the Lord by working for your employer, you may refuse him when he asks you to sin and everyone will know that his is the fault because you worked hard for him otherwise.

That commandment sanctifies your work and makes it holy. If you are really working for the Lord Christ when you are working for your employer then everything that you do for your employer provided that it is not sinful is actually in fact holy. Going to the fields and working the soil is holy. Selling insurance and dealing with money in banking or real estate or for a business is holy. It is as holy as raising your children. It is as holy as what I do. It is a lie perpetrated upon laypeople that they are not doing holy things unless they are doing something that looks like what the pastor is doing. You do holy things all of the time by doing what God has commanded you to do. For example, you do not need to be a lector at Divine Service or an usher or an elder assisting with Communion in order to be doing something holy for God. While those are holy things, what you do in raising your children and in going about your daily work is just as holy and just as much fulfilling the will of God. The difference between my vocation and other vocations is that I tend to deal with eternal things although I deal with temporal things also. You tend to deal with temporal things, but even at work and definitely in your homes you will deal with eternal things also. This shows the comprehensive nature of being a father or a mother. Fathers and mothers deal with temporal and eternal things together all of the time without any tendency toward one or the other.

Employers are also sanctified. God imposes regulations on them as well. Employers are to provide for their employees what is right for their work. Do not steal from them by paying them less than what they are worth. God forbids employers from threatening their employees. Simply administer

appropriate consequences. There is no need to threaten them. Employers should remember that they have a Lord who is heaven. Employers who believe in Jesus realize this and will not exploit their employees or mistreat them. Employers who believe in Jesus know that they will have to stand in front of Jesus on the Day of Judgment and answer for how they treated their employees. Employers who believe in Jesus also realize that when they do stand in front of Jesus for judgment He will show no partiality toward them simply because they were the employer or the supervisor or the boss. If they have not fulfilled their vocation as God has granted it, they will answer the same as an employee who was lazy and did not do his duty. Employers who are unbelievers will stand in the judgment the same as the believers will but employers who are unbelievers do not realize this and they will pay for it.

If workers are doing their work and serving the Lord Christ by doing so then Christ sent those workers to that employer. The employer should thank God that God sent him such employees. If employers are doing what God commands them to do, then God has sent them to employ the people that they employ. The employees should thank God that He has sent to them an employer.

That does mean that all work comes from God. That also means that all blessings done by those people to others also comes from God. Let us take a simple example. A teacher teaches at God's command under the regulation of those who have hired her. That means that God sent that teacher to that classroom to teach. She teaches with God's authority. Therefore her students are taught by God while she is teaching. In this way the students may thank God for the education that they receive and thank God for the teacher that He provided. In this way God educates the young and provides for the continuance of our human society.

The teacher on the other hand owes her position to God. She thanks God for the school district and those who operate it for granting to her a vocation. Since God granted her the job through the school district it is in fact a vocation from God. She engages in holy work as she teaches on God's behalf.

The same is true for all of the vocations who serve us. My doctor speaks for God to instruct me on how to take care of myself and when necessary performs procedures for the sake of my health. In this way God heals me. My mechanic repairs my car, but since God provided him with that vocation it is actually God who repairs my care. My mechanic receives his vocation from God and therefore when I pay him for his services, he is actually receiving that money from God for he would not have the vocation that he has were it not that God sent him into that work to do that work.

I could go on, but you get the idea. Your work is holy. Like all holy things it is not to become an idol that you worship and set ahead of your Lord Jesus Christ. You are not to look to your work for your salvation or to set it as more important than our Lord's Divine Service. But it is nevertheless holy. God has organized His creation to exist in this fashion. In the beginning God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden to work it and to keep it. Even in the perfection of creation God created salutary work for human beings to do so that through them God would provide for the creation and its care. This is why God granted authority to humanity over all the earth and over every living thing. He did this so that we may care for all of it and through us God would provide for the continuance and maintenance of His creation.

Because God has organized work the way that He has, He provides for all in due season. While the creation is broken and work and labor do not always come to us the way that they should and unemployment is an increasing problem, God nevertheless sanctifies work and makes it holy so that His good will is accomplished through it.

There are several other vocations on the Table of Duties. There are commandments regarding young people, that all young people should be subject to older people. Our egalitarian United States has

destroyed this on purpose making young people the vocational equal of adults. While young people are persons in the eyes of God and are not to be lied to, but rather treated with love, for the sake of good order God does still command young people to be subject to older people. I think that the old American custom of young people addressing older adults by their last name saying Mr. or Mrs. was a good custom and we have lost that to an egalitarian notion that no one has to submit to anyone else any more. But God is still God and He will judge us.

He commands widows to be dependent upon their children if they have them or their grandchildren. That means that he commands children and grandchildren to care for their aging parents when they can no longer care for themselves. If widows have no children or grandchildren, God commands the congregation to care for them.

He commands all of us, no matter who we are or what our station in life is to pray for everyone and to love everyone.

These are the vocations that God has issued. Now, what has any of this to do with the usual themes of Lent? Typically during Lent we focus our devotional attention on our Lord and His Passion for our salvation? Instead I have chosen to catechize all of you on the doctrine of vocation as outlined in the Table of Duties in the Small Catechism. What this has to do with Lent is this: even our Lord Jesus Christ has a vocation from God. And He fulfills it.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.