



The Gospel According to Jesus

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

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Part 1

TODAY'S
GOSPEL:
GOOD NEWS
OR
BAD?

1

WHAT DOES JESUS MEAN WHEN HE SAYS, “FOLLOW ME”?

Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3).

That is the single, central, foundational, and distinguishing article of Christianity. It is also the first essential confession of faith every true Christian must make: “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved” (Rom. 10:9). The belief that someone could be a true Christian while that person’s whole lifestyle, value system, speech, and attitude are marked by a stubborn refusal to surrender to Christ as Lord is a notion that shouldn’t even need to be refuted. It is an idea you will never find in any credible volume of Christian doctrine or devotion from the time of the earliest church fathers through the era of the Protestant Reformation and for at least three and a half centuries beyond that. The now-pervasive influence of the no-lordship doctrine among evangelicals reflects the shallowness and spiritual poverty of the contemporary evangelical movement. It is also doubtless one of the main causes for evangelicalism’s impoverishment. You cannot remove the lordship of Christ from the gospel message without undermining faith at its core. That is precisely what is happening in the church today.

Jesus’ teaching and ministry always kept the issue of His lordship at the center. As we survey His earthly life and ministry in this book, you will see the pattern quite clearly. He never once shied away from declaring His authority as sovereign Master. He proclaimed it to disciples, to enemies, and to casual inquirers alike — refusing to tone down the implications of His demand for unconditional surrender. So the true gospel according to Jesus is a message that cannot be divorced from the reality of His lordship. When Jesus called people to follow Him, He was not seeking companions to be His sidekicks or admirers whom He could entertain with miracles. He was calling people to yield completely and unreservedly to His lordship.

A WORD ABOUT WORDS

The expression most often translated “Lord” in the English New Testament is the Greek word *kurios*. It speaks of someone who has power, ownership, and

an unquestionable right to command. A nearly synonymous Greek term also sometimes translated “Lord” in the New Testament is *despotes*. That word (the root of our English word *despot*) describes a ruler with absolute power over his subjects. Professor Murray J. Harris distinguishes the two terms this way: “Clearly *despotes* and *kyrios* largely overlap in meaning; both may be rendered ‘lord’ or ‘master.’ If we are to distinguish the two terms with regard to emphasis, *kyrios* signifies ‘sovereign Lord,’ and *despotes* ‘absolute Lord.’”¹

Both words are used in reference to Christ as Lord in the New Testament. For example, in John 13:13, Jesus took the title *kyrios* for Himself: “You call Me Teacher and Lord [*kyrios*]; and you are right, for so I am.” And Jude 4, a text written by Jesus’ own earthly half brother, employs both words in parallel fashion: “For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master [*despotes*] and Lord [*kyrios*], Jesus Christ.”

Both words are extremely powerful. They were part of the vocabulary of slavery in New Testament times. They describe a master with absolute dominion over someone else — a slave owner. His subjects are duty-bound to obey their lord’s directives, not merely because they choose to do so but because they have no rightful liberty to do otherwise. Therefore, wherever there was a lord (*kyrios*) or a master (*despotes*), there was always a slave (*doulos*). One idea necessarily and axiomatically implies the other. That explains Jesus’ incredulity at the practice of those who paid homage to Him with their lips but not with their lives: “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46).

You may recognize the Greek word *doulos* because it is quite a common term in the New Testament. The word and its derivatives appear more than 130 times in the New Testament — frequently as a description of what it means to be a true Christian: “He who was called while free, is Christ’s slave [*doulos*]. You were bought with a price” (1 Cor. 7:22–23).

Doulos is not an ambiguous term. It suggests a very specific concept, which — while repugnant to our culture and our natural minds — should not be toned down or backed away from. It is the main Greek word that was used to describe the lowest abject bond slave — a person who was literally owned by a master who could legally force him to work without wages. In other words, a *doulos* was a person without standing or rights. According to Kittel’s definitive dictionary of New Testament expressions, words in the *doulos* group

1. Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Apollos/InterVarsity, 1999), 112.

serve either to describe the status of a slave or an attitude corresponding to that of a slave. . . . The meaning is so unequivocal and self-contained that it is superfluous to give examples of the individual terms or to trace the history of the group. Distinction from synonymous words and groups . . . is made possible by the fact that the emphasis here is always on "serving as a slave." Hence we have a service which is not a matter of choice for the one who renders it, which he has to perform whether he likes or not, because he is subject as a slave to an alien will, to the will of his owner. [The term stresses] the slave's dependence on his lord.²

Unfortunately, readers of the English Bible have long been shielded from the full force of the word *doulos* because of an ages-old tendency among Bible translators to tone down the literal sense of the word — translating it as “servant,” or “bond servant” rather than “slave.” The practice goes back hundreds of years, even before the King James Version. The Geneva Bible, the main Bible of the Puritan era, consistently translated *doulos* as “servant” (though in the distinctive spelling of the time, it appears as “seruant”). Murray Harris surveyed twenty major translations of the New Testament in English and found only one, E. J. Goodspeed’s *The New Testament: An American Translation* (1923) — where *doulos* was consistently rendered “slave.”³ No doubt that reflects our society’s longstanding discomfort with the practice of slavery and the severe abuses that have always occurred in institutionalized versions of human slavery.⁴

Still, service and slavery are not really the same thing, and it is extremely unfortunate that the full impact of the expression *doulos* has been obscured in our English translations for so long.

2. Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, “Doulos,” in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., Geoffrey Bromiley, trans., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:261.

3. Harris, *Slave of Christ*, 17.

4. For a fascinating discussion of early English Bible translators’ hesitancy to render *doulos* as “slave,” see Edwin Yamauchi, “Slaves of God,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1966): 31–49. Yamauchi shows that by the end of the thirteenth century, “slavery disappeared from northwestern Europe. . . . Slavery therefore was known to the 17th century Englishmen — at least at the beginning of that century — not as an intimate, accepted institution but rather as a remote phenomenon” (p. 37). Their concept of what it means to be a “servant” was shaped by their knowledge of serfdom — a type of servitude where the laborer was bound to the land where he worked. He was duty-bound to the landowner, but his services could be sold only when the land itself was sold. By contrast, “slavery” in their minds evoked “the extreme case of a captive in fetters” (p. 37), so they doubtless wanted to avoid the implication of cruelty inherent in that imagery. But in doing so they have unwittingly diminished the force of the actual biblical expression. In Yamauchi’s words, “If we keep in mind what ‘slavery’ meant to the ancients, and not what it means to us or the 17th-century theorists, we shall gain a heightened understanding of many passages in the New Testament” (p. 37).

There are at least six Greek words for “servant,” and *doulos* is not one of them. For example, *diakonos* (from which our word *deacon* is derived) means “servant.” *Oiketes* speaks of a domestic servant. *Pais* denotes a young boy who runs errands. *Huperetes* (usually translated “minister”) literally signifies a low-level servant who pulls an oar on the lower deck of a large ship. *Leitourgos*, also meaning “minister,” designates someone who performs some kind of religious service. *Therapon*, used of Moses in Hebrews 3:5 (“faithful in all His house as a servant”), refers to a dignified kind of high-level service. And there are several more specific Greek words that describe service in terms far loftier and more respectable than *doulos*.

Doulos speaks of slavery, pure and simple. It is not at all a hazy or uncertain term. It describes someone lacking personal freedom and personal rights whose very existence is defined by his service to another. It is the sort of slavery in which “human autonomy is set aside and an alien will takes precedence of one’s own.”⁵ This is total, unqualified submission to the control and the directives of a higher authority — *slavery*, not merely service at one’s own discretion.

For example, in Matthew 6:24, Jesus said, “No one can be a slave to two masters” (literal translation). That translation is much stronger (and actually makes better sense) than what you will find in most versions: “No one can serve two masters.” An employee with two jobs could indeed *serve* two masters. But slavery — not merely service — is what the word *doulos* and all its derivatives speak of.

As Harris points out, “there is an important difference. A servant gives service to someone, but a slave belongs to someone.”⁶ It is not merely a nuance. Scripture repeatedly and emphatically places Christians in the latter category: “Do you not know that . . . you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:19–20). We have a Master who purchased us (2 Peter 2:1). To be specific, we were purchased for God with the precious blood of Christ (Rev. 5:9). This is the very essence of what it means to be a Christian: “For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Rom. 14:7–9).

WHY SUCH A REVOLTING CONCEPT?

In one sense, we can understand why Bible translators have tended to soften the implications of *doulos*. The word *slavery* conjures up so much negative

5. Ibid.

6. Harris, *Slave of Christ*, 18.

imagery and so many strong passions for us that we instinctively shy away from it. I spoke on this subject at a pastors' conference in North Carolina not long ago, and during the Q&A session afterward, a soft-spoken black pastor stood up and gently, graciously posed this question: "How am I supposed to communicate to my congregation that they are slaves of Jesus Christ when slavery is such a distasteful part of our past?"

He was, of course, simply giving voice to the same dilemma every preacher and every faithful Christian faces when it comes to proclaiming the unadulterated gospel to unbelievers in our culture. We are proclaiming a message that is inherently offensive to human wisdom (1 Cor. 1:22–31; 2 Cor. 4:5). Slavery is distasteful to *every* sane person. A black person whose ancestors were slaves as recently as three or four generations ago may be more *conscious* of his or her contempt for slavery than someone whose ancestors were neither slaves nor slave owners. But being a slave is not an appealing (or dignified) prospect for anyone, regardless of his or her background. The idea that Jesus demanded absolute slave-like obedience to His lordship is a particularly difficult concept for people from contemporary Western cultures to grasp. But that is no reason to ignore or soft-pedal what Scripture clearly teaches about our duty to submit to Christ as Lord.

What we must not forget is that slavery was by no means a glamorous institution in first-century culture, either. It was a fixture in Roman societies — perfectly legal, pervasive, and rarely challenged. Not all slaves were mistreated, but many were, and Roman-style slavery was notorious for its inability to curtail the terrible abuses that *did* occur. Slaves themselves, of course, had absolutely no control over whether they were well treated or oppressed. So even though slavery was widely regarded as a necessary component of the social and economic structure, the idea of *being* a slave was universally loathsome. No one wanted to be anyone's *doulos*.

In that regard, Jesus' portrayal of discipleship as slavery had no more appeal to the popular tastes or felt needs of His time than it does today. In fact, because most people in Jesus' time were so familiar with real-life slavery, they surely had a much more vivid mental picture than we do of what Jesus was demanding when He called for absolute self-denial and surrender to His lordship. He was certainly not trying to appeal to a longing for self-esteem or make discipleship look enticing to the people of Galilee and Judea when He spoke about the cost of following Him. They understood far better than we do what a menial position He was calling them to. In fact, many people in the early church *were* slaves. That is why there are so many passages in the Epistles giving instructions about how slaves were to behave in order to reflect the character and holiness of Christ (Eph. 6:5–8; Col. 3:22; 1 Tim. 6:1–2; Titus 2:9–10; 1 Peter 2:18–21).