

# William Wilberforce

by Michael Haykin

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*The sermon explores William Wilberforce's pivotal role in the abolition of the slave trade and the moral implications of slavery in the 18th century.*

**Duration:** 1:13:23

**Scripture:** Leviticus 25:39

**Topics:** "Social Justice", "Christian Character"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker concludes a series on the 18th century and focuses on the life of William Wilberforce and his fight against the slave trade. The church in the 18th century, like today, faced important issues. Wilberforce, after his conversion, became aware of living his life in the presence of God and the need to give an account of his actions. The speaker highlights the immense suffering caused by the slave trade and uses a film clip from Amistad to illustrate its horrors. The sermon emphasizes the importance of character and integrity in bringing about societal change and encourages Christians to pray for godly men and women in politics and other areas of influence.

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## Transcript

began the series. If some of you recall, we did have that little addition and I felt the laughter that my comments evoked indicated it was true. I felt like a talking head because it was up to about here and that's all that could be seen.

Well, tonight we want to conclude our series in terms of looking at the 18th century and what God did in that period through varieties of men and women. And we want to think about the man William Wilberforce tonight and the great struggle against the slave trade. In the 18th century, the church wrestled, as we do in our day, with some very, very vital issues.

We've seen them already. Issues dealing with revival, issues dealing with the nature of salvation, how do you renew Christian denominations, and such issues. But also, one of the critical issues that the church in the 18th century had to wrestle with can be boiled down to this question, what does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be human? And the reflections that we are going to look at tonight, while they are important in their own right, very important in their own right, also bear upon the church in the early 21st century because we too have to wrestle with that question.

What does it mean to be human? In the issues that we will see tonight dealing with the whole area of race and other races, but also in issues that we certainly will not be able to touch on tonight, but also bear on that question, and issues related to things like abortion, or genetic engineering, and so on. These questions really can only be resolved when there has been some attempt made to answer that question, what does it mean to be human? Well, when we come to the 18th century, there is no doubt that the 18th century is a period that is characterized among Christians by the phrase, doing good. In fact, there is that passage, and this is how I was going to begin tonight, with Galatians 6 verse 10, which in some ways stands over our thoughts this evening.

Galatians 6 verse 10, as we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith. But that middle phrase, let us do good unto all men. The topic we think about this evening is a disturbing one, and what is even more disturbing, as we will see, is that those implicated in the institution known as slavery and the slave trade, some of those were evangelicals, and I find it very disturbing, looking back on the 18th century, that some who acknowledged God and His revelation in Christ, and knew what it meant to be born again, were unable to see the hideousness and the abomination, to use the language of John Wesley, of this institution.

And so tonight, what we want to think about is disturbing. But on the other hand, it is also a room for great encouragement. It encourages us to realize that individuals can shape the course of history.

History is not, as it were, simply molded and shaped by economic forces, or political forces, or social forces, as maybe a Marxist would have us believe. But history is, in many respects, shaped by individuals. And we want to think of, and especially in our second hour, the man whom we call William Wilberforce.

The bulk of the first hour is set apart to thinking about how it was that English-speaking people, I'm not going to talk about the Spanish, or the Portuguese, or the Dutch, who also were involved, or the French, also involved in the slave trade, but I'm going to think about the English-speaking people who became the greatest, or had the greatest involvement in the slave trade. And then, in the second hour, we want to think about how William Wilberforce was used by God to end slavery and the slave trade in the British Empire. Now, evangelicals in the 18th century were characterized, as I said, by doing good.

And they were engaged in all kinds of philanthropic enterprises, establishing orphanages, establishing funds and societies for the help of widows, and immigrants, and the destitute. Seeking the release of many who were involved, or had been imprisoned for small debts. It's amazing to think of the fact that, even as late as the 1820s, to use one example, in Scotland, three-quarters of those imprisoned in Scotland were there because of indebtedness.

They had gone bankrupt, or they owed significant amounts of money that they could not pay, and they were imprisoned for their being in debt. Or the evangelicals were involved in seeking to bring to an end the barbarous sports like bear-baiting, where a bear would be tied or chained to a pole and some of the spectators would bet on which dog would be able to take the bear down eventually. Or bull-baiting, a similar sort of sport, very, very common in England back into the Middle Ages.

But in the 1700s, as evangelicals began to be awakened to some of the horrors of these things, the mistreatment of animals, they began to lobby in Parliament for the making of such sports illegal. In fact, Caleb Evans illustrates this very well. He was an English Baptist, and he was preaching on one occasion about the Lord's Prayer, and on that praise, thy kingdom come.

And he says, when we pray for the advancement of this kingdom, if we are not willing to all we can to advance this, our prayers cannot be genuine, they are hypocritical. And he's thinking there not only of sharing the faith and preaching, but he's also thinking of what we call doing good. Evangelicals in the 18th century were do-gooders in a good sense of that term.

But probably the most powerful example of the ways in which evangelicals sought to do good was their titanic struggle against the slave trade in the last two decades of the 18th century and the first three decades of the 19th century. It did not change overnight. The British government and British Empire had invested far too much money and commitment to the slave trade to demolish it overnight.

And it took 50 years of political lobbying and of getting petitions from evangelical congregations and of, as we will see most importantly, prayer before Britain gave up first slavery, first the slave trade and then slavery. Now what I want to do is give some idea of the background because all too frequently I suspect we have very little idea of the horror that dominated Europe and European society in between the period of roughly 1600 to 1800. And the slave trade was this horror.

Britain had gotten involved in the slave trade in the 1600s. There are instances of Britain's involvement with transporting Africans from West Coast or West Africa to the New World as far back as the 1560s. 1562 is generally given as the first day in which the English took Africans from Africa to the American continents.

And it was done through a man named Sir John Hawkins, one of the Elizabethan naval men, something of a pirate. Many of the men who sailed under the flag of England during the Elizabethan times, many of them were half pirates, men like Francis Drake, Martin Frobisher. They tread the border between piracy and legitimate defense of the realm.

And Sir John Hawkins got involved in taking 300 Africans from Africa and selling them in what is now the Dominican Republic to the Spanish. Elizabeth, who was queen at the time, Elizabeth I, was not impressed. She described his actions as detestable.

And well into the 1600s, up until the 1650s, one of the things that the English prided themselves on is that while the Spanish and the Portuguese and the French were involved in the slave trade, they were not. But that would change. It changes because of British conquests in the West Indies or the Caribbean.

Britain, engaged in wars with both the French and the Spanish and the Dutch, begin to acquire a number of colonies in the West Indies, places like Barbados and Jamaica. Alongside that, there was also their involvement or their desire to grow sugar in the New World, sugar cane. They initially tried growing sugar cane in Bermuda, but it was far too expensive.

They couldn't do it. And then they tried it in Virginia. And again, the same problem.

But it was when they took Barbados in the 1620s and began to grow sugar there, within 30 years, they were reaping a huge harvest of sugar cane and realized the possibility of the West Indies being a major source of sugar. It's interesting to note, and again, these are fascinating things and how they shape history. It's interesting to note that up until the advent of Europeans into the New World, they did not have access to sugar cane.

Sugar was not part of their diet. They used other sorts of sweeteners like honey, but not sugar. Sugar is one of the products of the New World.

And so as Britain gets involved in conquering islands in the West Indies or taking them from the Spanish or the Dutch or the French, and as they get involved in growing sugar, they begin to find themselves slipping into the involvement of the slave trade, because both the Spanish and the Portuguese had been involved for a number of decades in enslaving Africans and bringing them across the Atlantic to work on plantations in the West Indies. For instance, consider Jamaica. Jamaica was seized from the Spanish by the English in 1655.

By the end of the century, within 45 years, it was home to 45,000 Africans who had been enslaved. Within 75 years, by 1775, there were close to a quarter of a million Africans who were being enslaved in Jamaica, with the white population being around 18,000. They worked on more than 750 plantations.

And the revenue, this is the number I'm about to give you, is the revenue from that period. It's not in contemporary pounds. 1.6 million pounds a year is what the revenue brought of the selling of the sugar cane.

That is in the 1770s, over 230 years ago. To get an equivalent price today, you probably need to multiply that by probably something around the figure of around three or four hundred, to give you a contemporary figure of how many pounds. Obviously, if you're doing it in pounds, you get dollars, you need to multiply by 2.4 or whatever.

So you're looking at a vast sum of money, and that's just Jamaica. It's not the other Caribbean islands. And so when evangelicals at the end of the 18th century begin to raise the question, the slave trade is an abomination in the eyes of God.

It has to be ended. The powerful vested interests in Britain, those who moved and shook that society then, they were not about to consider it. There was too much at stake for them in terms of financial commitments and so on.

Now, I want to sketch a little, and this is very disturbing. I want to sketch a little of how the slave trade, the mechanics as it were, of slavery as it were of it. One, if you want to see this graphically portrayed, I think recently it's been very well done in the movie *Amistad*, which details the revolt on a Spanish slave ship in the 1830s.

And the Africans involved were able to take the ship and sought to get it back to Africa, but they had no idea of really where to sail it and ended up off the coast of Massachusetts, where they were picked up by the American Navy. And then there began a massive court case in which the Spanish owners of the ship came and demanded that the Africans be returned. They were going to go to Cuba.

And the movie is about that. And it ends very well. The Africans are released and they go back to Africa.

But a number of the things that they indicate about those key figures involved, some of their later lives, were unhappy. But there is a portion in the movie which is deeply disturbing where the leading character remembers how he was enslaved. And it runs for about 10 minutes and it's very disturbing.

The British would do what they called the triangular passage, where ships would sail from three of the major ports in England, London, Bristol and Liverpool. The great wealth that Liverpool and Bristol had in the 19th century was built on the slave trade. Those ships would sail from those ports.

They would sail with various types of cheap goods like metal goods and woolens and beads and mirrors, sometimes alcohol, sometimes even gunpowder and firearms. And they would sail down to what we describe today as West Africa. And where they would sell these things to either Arabs who were involved in the slave trade or also Africans.

Initially, many of the slaves who were enslaved had been enslaved through tribal wars or various differing groups in West Africa had conquered another group and they enslaved them and sold them to Westerners as slavers. As the slave trade developed though, the Westerners themselves would be going in the interior to capture slaves. Many of those who were enslaved would walk miles to the coast.

And that in itself was a trauma. And then they would set eyes upon people they had never seen the like of before, namely Europeans, whites. And then they would go through the horror of being split up if they had been captured in families, husbands and wives split up and packed into the holds of slave ships, where they would be packed closely together, so close they could hardly move and chained together through the voyage.

The voyage might take anywhere up to three or four months to cross the Atlantic. It was called the Middle Passage. And those in that environment found themselves, many of them died in that context.

And often the dead were shackled to the living. It was an incredibly unhealthy environment. That's just looking at it from a medical standpoint.

Many of the British Royal Navy would say that they could, they knew when they were coming close to a slave ship, they could smell the ship from miles away. The inhumanity, it's horrendous to think of it, the inhumanity that was done to these men and women. Many of the sailors, historians now as they study this period are realizing many of the sailors on these slave ships also died of the diseases.

And then once they got to the New World, there was another trauma to face. And that trauma was to be sold and to be handled and manhandled like animals with no concern for their humanity. And sometimes they'd be sold and resold a number of times before arriving at their final destination.

And again, you've got the language barrier. They have no idea of the language because they're speaking a variety of African languages. Upwards, again, it's estimated upwards of 25% of Africans would die within three years of their arrival in either America or the Caribbean.

The British eventually would be involved. I mean, we talk about the Jewish Holocaust, and I don't want to misuse that word because sometimes it is misused. But the British would be eventually involved in transporting around 50,000 a year by the end of the 18th century.

In total, around 3 million Africans were transported by British slave ships from Africa to the New World. And that's just the British, not the Spanish, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese. And it's horrific.

It really is horrific to think about. All of this human suffering, in many respects, escapes the power of the historian to describe. And that's why I do think, I do a section in a church history course that I give on contemporary and 18th century evangelicalism up to the present time.

And one of the things I do when I deal with this issue is I use that film clip from Amistad. And it's shocking because it cannot be described in words. Here is William Cooper, the great evangelical poet, or his name is spelled Cowper, but pronounced Cooper, lampooning the defense of the slave trade.

And those who defended it really defended it on economic reasons, but a lot of it came down to the fact that it filled the pockets of British consumers and it produced a number of luxury goods, in particular, sugar. Here's Cooper, his poem was called Pity for Poor Africans, and it's a satire on the English attitudes. I pity them greatly, but I must be mum, for how could we do without sugar and rum? Especially sugar, so needful we see, what give up our desserts, our coffee and tea.

And it's an attack on the British attitude. We often wonder, I was raised in England, and one of the things the English have is a sweet tooth. Where did that come from? Well, it comes from this period.

Where they become deeply addicted to sugar. And one doesn't want to say that the whole of the slave trade amounted simply to sugar, but sugar was a major, major factor in it. When evangelicals begin to raise the cry that there is something deeply wrong in English society, that they would perpetuate the slave trade, that they would tolerate the slave trade, the responses are, from our standpoint, amazing.

William Young, the personal owner of some 1,300 slaves, said commerce in the West Indies, if they stopped the slave trade, would be utterly ruined, and the entire existence of the British Empire would be jeopardized. Some said that if we tried to end the slave trade, there'd be a revolution in England, equivalent to the French Revolution. Wilberforce, as we will see, is critical in ending the slave trade.

He said, if it took a revolution, it must be stopped, even if a revolution came, like the horror of the French Revolution. Mr. Grosvenor, I'm quoting here, admitted in the House of Commons in 1791, the slave trade was not an amiable trade, this is in his very words, but neither was the trade of the butcher an amiable trade, yet a mutton chop was nevertheless a very good thing. It's hard for us to think of the reasoning.

This is a politician, arguing that in the House of Commons, and basically winning the day at that time, that's 1791, the beginning of the slave trade, or the beginning of when the evangelicals were beginning to be concerned. John Newton, who was a slave trader in his early years, in his 20s, in the 1740s, he was a slave trader, and he actually saw both sides of the experience, because he ended up for two years a slave in West Africa. Very interesting, if you read his autobiography.

But he was converted on a slave ship, in the midst of a storm in the Atlantic. One would think he would have immediately given up slave trading. He did not.

He continued to captain a slave ship for about three years or so after his conversion, until around the age of 29, he had a stroke, which prevented him from putting to sea. Many years later, he would be disgusted by his involvement. When he was in his late 50s and 60s, he learned much better, and he could say this, I think I should have quitted, I would have quitted the slave trade sooner had I considered it, as I do now, to be unlawful, unwronged, but I never had a scruple upon this head of the times.

Neither was such a thought ever suggested to me by any friend. What I did, I did ignorantly, considering that the line of life which divine providence had allotted me, and having no concern in point of conscience but to treat the slaves while under my care with as much humanity as a regard for my own safety would admit. Newton, we might say, well, he was unique, but he wasn't unique, and this is a disturbing thing.

We noted earlier in the series something of the greatness of George Whitefield, and I have great admiration for Whitefield. The only blot on his character is in this area, that he tolerated and supported the slave trade. He was critical in introducing slavery into Georgia.

He had started an orphanage in Georgia, a place called Bethesda, the orphanage still exists, actually. And he wanted people to work on the grounds. He couldn't find people, and he lobbied the governor of Georgia to allow them to introduce slaves, and they could work there.

Now, some might argue and offset this, well, he always emphasized the importance of being good to slaves, and treating them humanly, and he criticized slave owners who ill-used their slaves. But still, did he not see that there was something fundamentally wrong with slavery? Now, the one argument that many evangelicals made in this period, and I'm actually going to read a section of the way in which certain evangelicals in this period responded to this whole issue, before there is a growing awareness of the wrongness of the slave trade. Some evangelicals argued, well, it's endorsed by the scriptures.

And if you go back into the scriptures, you find in the Old Testament, you certainly find provisions made in this whole area for slaves. If you come into the New Testament, you never find any of the apostles urging those who own slaves to free them. At least you don't find it explicitly.

I think there are a number of texts in the New Testament that hint at a full Christian understanding is that slavery is wrong. Passages like 1 Timothy 1, verses 8 through 11, where the apostle Paul is enumerating that the law is not given for the righteous, but for the unrighteous. And then he enumerates a list of individuals in 1 Timothy 1, and among them he mentions in verse 10, I'm reading, I have a King James, but he says, the law is made for murderers of fathers, murderers of mothers, for manslayers, whoremongers, for them that defile themselves in mankind, for men-stealers, and the word is kidnappers.

And in common Jewish thinking, kidnappers were those who were involved in kidnapping people for slavery. And I think that's a criticism of the slavery in the ancient world. I think it's a criticism of slavery in the ancient world.

The book of Philemon, I think if you read it closely, seeks to undermine the whole concept of slavery. Here, Onesimus, a slave of the man Philemon, a Christian, had escaped and made his way to Rome, and Paul had met him in Rome, and Onesimus had been converted through the apostle Paul's ministry in Rome. But Paul realized that this man legally is the property of Philemon, and so he, although Paul says he'd like to keep him, he needs to go back.

But then he tells Philemon in the letter, he said, I'm positive, I'm certain you will receive him back, not merely as a man, as it were, but as a Christian, as a brother. I would dearly have loved him, kept him with me, he says, but I expect you can do more than I ask. And there is a hint there, I think, that he expects Philemon to free Onesimus, that Onesimus might come back and minister to Paul in Rome.

It's not explicit, I grant you, but I think there is the hint of it there. There is a passage also in 1 Corinthians 7 where Paul is talking about slavery, and he is arguing that in some respects the context in which we are born is neither here nor there, but then he says in 1 Corinthians 7, verse 21, Art thou called, being a slave, servant of King James? Care not for it, but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. In other words, you get an opportunity to get free, take it.

And I think he wouldn't say a thing like that unless he recognized that there was something wrong with the institution of slavery. Now, having said those things, one has to recognize that there is a critical difference between slavery in Bible times and slavery as it has existed in recent memory, recent Western history. And the difference is the basis upon which the slavery in the Old Testament and the ancient world is constructed, and the slavery in which the Europeans engaged.

In the ancient world, people were enslaved on the basis of their being conquered by another people, and the Romans basically enslaved everybody they conquered. And many of their slaves were Greeks and Egyptians and you name it. It was not, my point is, it was not racially based.

And in the Roman Empire, there was a flexibility within the structure that a person could start off their career as a slave, be paid for their services, and actually get enough money to purchase their freedom, and end up working up the social ladder and die a senator. And that happens, where a man has started off his career as a slave, he'd been a Greek slave, he'd got enough money to win his freedom, and ended up being a multi-millionaire in the Roman Empire, and being a very powerful figure. There are some recent studies, and I'm thinking here by a man named Frank Snowden, who has argued that, in fact, the modern concept of what we describe as racism, the distinction of men and women on the basis of colour, did not exist in the ancient world.

The Romans were, in their concept of slavery, it was not racially based, it was when they thought of others, they divided themselves on the basis of language. If a person didn't speak Latin properly, he was a barbarian. It didn't matter what he looked like.

Slavery in the ancient world, that the scriptures speak of, is very different from slavery as Westerners have known it, or have been in Western history in recent times. Because in recent times, it has been racially based. It stems from the arguments that were made that the Africans were, in some respects, the argument being, that they were inferior to Europeans.

And there was no way, in the period we're looking at, that if an African was able to win their freedom, that they would be able to work their way up the echelons of society. There was a deep racism that was deeply rooted in this whole practice. And as I say, it's very disturbing, as you look back.

In some respects, well, when you look at unbelievers, fine, they're not believers, they don't know the Lord Jesus Christ. They don't know the great truth, that in Christ, there is neither slave nor free, Jew or Gentile, male or female, that Christ breaks down racial barriers and cultural barriers. What is disturbing to me is that evangelicals, like Whitfield, or like Newton, could, for a period of time, be involved in the slave trade and see nothing wrong with it.

Well, let me illustrate this by a letter written by a group of Baptists in 1711. These Baptists are in South Carolina. And in the town of Charleston.

And in their church was a number of slave owners. And one of the slave owners did something which shocked others in the church who were not slave owners. There was a law in the books in South Carolina between 1696 and 1722 that required slave owners, if their slave ran away, male slave, ran away more than three times and was caught, he was to be castrated.

And this slave owner had a slave who did that. And he did, he followed the law. Other Baptists in the church were shocked.

And they wrote to a group of Baptists in England, in a place called Devon, a little Baptist church called South Molson. I'm not sure, and I'm not being able to discover why they wrote to those, all those groups, all the way across the ocean, but they did. And they asked them, what would these Baptists advise? These people were shocked, they were going to disfellowship the man.

What is shocking is the response of the Baptists in England, which I think indicates, one, the inability to think this thing through in terms of the entirety of the Scriptures. Two, the way in which racism, even in the early 1700s, had become deeply part of British thinking. They emphasized that the action of, these are the Devonshire Baptists, they emphasized the action of the slave owner, and I'm going to be following my notes here closely because I need, I want to quote the exact words.

They said the action of the slave owner would have been, quote, an abomination, savoring of injustice, cruelty, and un-Christian behavior if he had castrated his slave without the law of the magistrate. But they said the man who had done this had not sinned because the punishment was regarded as legal in South Carolina. The law was made by the magistrate, and therefore is binding.

Yes, they went on to say they knew that man-made laws were not binding in themselves, but they emphasized that if man-made laws were agreeable to God's word, serve the common good, hinder not liberty of conscience, end of quote, they should be obeyed. And then they went on to say that if this was not done, who knows what could have happened. There could have been a massive revolt of those Africans who were held in slavery in South Carolina.

Then they went on to quote biblical texts. And I suspect you probably know from the lectures we've had in this series that I am committed to the scriptures as the authority for the believer's life, and I'm committed to the scriptures as the inerrant word of God. But it is dangerous to quote verses out of context without looking at the entirety of scripture and the spirit of scripture and the principles of scripture.

All kinds of things can be supported if you pull a verse out of context and in isolation. And this is what we see them doing. They quote a passage from Leviticus 25, which fields this place and Deuteronomy 15.

And in Leviticus 25, 39 to 46 and Deuteronomy 15, 12 to 13, a distinction is made in those two passages in Leviticus 25, 39 to 46 and Deuteronomy 15, 12 to 13. A distinction is made between Jewish slaves and slaves who belong to other nations. Jewish slaves could only be held in captivity six years then released.

Slaves from other nations could be held in captivity without that seven year kind of granting of release. Well, the argument that these men then made was, well, look, it's quite clear then that there was a difference made between Jewish slaves and slaves from outside other nations. They argued, is this not parallel to the situation of the African slaves? Now, as I say, the only way you can make that jump is you have to have already accepted the idea of the more modern form of slavery being based on racism.

And the upshot of the paper was they eventually said, no, the man is not being guilty of sin. He has not done anything wrong. They should have fellowship with him.

But he should be advised not to treat his slaves inhumanly. What is amazing, that's easy to see this in hindsight. But what is amazing is the burden of the passage is the unity of the church and not the humanity of these men and women who are involved.

The concern didn't lie with the slave. And the danger, there's a real danger here of taking verses in isolation to justify things that are biblically wrong, that go against the spirit of the scriptures. Well, I want to stop here at this point.

And then in the next hour, we want to see how evangelicals begin to recognize there is something flawed with the institution of slavery, deeply flawed. And in particular, we want to think about the life of William Wilberforce. At the end of the next hour, we'll have some time for questions and comments.

So William Wilberforce and the way in which evangelicals began to realize that the slave trade was intrinsically wrong. And that they, under God and before God, were responsible to do something about it. The first denominational body that begins to criticize the slave trade in the English speaking world are the Quakers.

Very different from what they had been in the 17th century, when many of them had been fairly wild in their Christian lives, in terms of what they professed. But by the 18th century, they had, in many respects, quietened down. And by 1760, on both sides of the Atlantic, Quakers condemned slavery.

And you could not be a slave owner and be a Quaker. You would be disfellowshipped. It is very important to note this, because one of the very important books that is written against the slave trade was written by a Quaker named Anthony Benzet, B-E-N-E-Z-E-T, B-E-N-E-Z-E-T.

He's the son of French Huguenots, refugees. The Huguenots had been driven out of France in the 1680s, many of them anyway, it's estimated probably anywhere up to half a million had been driven out of France in the late 17th century. And Benzet, if you think of his name, it's obviously French as you look at it in origin, his parents had come to the United States, to Carolina, and he had become a Quaker.

And he is the first major figure to write a tract against slavery. Anthony Benzet, B-E-N-E-Z-E-T, died in 1784. What's important about his book is that he emphasised two things.

First of all, that Africans were just as much human beings as Europeans. That issue that I mentioned right at the beginning, the question that evangelicals had to deal with in the 18th century, is what does it mean to be a human? And the reason they could justify slavery was to argue on racist grounds that in some sense they were never able clearly to delineate that Africans were not as human as Europeans. And he challenges that, and argues against that.

He also argues, in no uncertain terms, that slave traders and slavers who said they were Christians were violating Jesus' commandment to love their neighbour, and to do good to all men. Now that tract is of influence because it's John Wesley who picked it up. Wesley, who died in 1791.

In the 1770s, when the book was published, Wesley read it. And by this time George Whitfield was dead. One would hope, you can't deal in what if, one would hope that Whitfield would have come out along with his fellow Methodist evangelist Wesley, and agreed that the slave trade was wrong.

But there is no hint in any of Whitfield's writings before his death in 1770 that he thought so. But after a few years after his death, John Wesley reads this tract of Benzay, and it firmly puts him in the anti-slavery camp. He's probably the first key figure who was an evangelical, who argues against slavery.

And he describes it as the excrucible sum of all villainies. Excrucible, a word that we hardly use today. But he certainly hammers it.

He writes a book in 1774 called Thoughts Upon Slavery. He uses traditional Western thought, thought that was going to be used in a few years after this, in the founding of the American Republic. When he argues this way, liberty is the right of every human creature.

And no human law can deprive him of that right which he derives from the law of nature. He argues that there is a solidarity between white Europeans and black Africans. Why? They are all made by one common creator.

They are all human beings. They are not inferior to Europeans. Now what he's arguing here is derived from Benzay in many respects.

And so that little tract, nobody remembers Benzay today, but he influenced greatly John Wesley. To the end of his life, Wesley fiercely denounced, publicly, the slave trade. In print and from the pulpit.

If you recall, when we went through Wesley, one of the centers of Wesleyan Methodism was Bristol. And he would regularly go to Bristol to preach. He was not afraid, in Bristol, to denounce the way in which that city had made its wealth and its fortunes and enriched its businessmen on the blood of Africans and through the slave trade.

Now Wesley would die in 1791. One of the last letters he ever wrote, about a week before he died, was to a man he hardly knew, a young man named William Wilberforce. And he didn't know Wilberforce that well.

Wilberforce was 50 years, 55 years younger than Wesley. He'd had a little contact and he wrote him this letter about a week before he died. And the letter deals with this issue of the slave trade.

And he says this to Wilberforce. And this is the way I want to introduce the life of Wilberforce. Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as an Athanasius Contramundum, I'll explain that in a minute, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that excrucible villainy which is a scandal of religion, of England and of human nature.

Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you'll be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But of God before you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing. Go on in the name of God and the power of his might till even America before it.

Wesley begins this very interesting letter with an allusion back to the early church. Athanasius was the great early Christian leader in the 300s who opposed Arianism. And those of you who may be familiar with the life of Athanasius spent 45 years fighting against this heresy that actually had brought imperial approval.

A number of the Roman emperors were Arians and defended the fact that Christ is not fully God. And Athanasius was persecuted for that and underwent a number of times of exile. And so what he's encouraging William of Wilberforce to do is to take stock from the life of Athanasius, to emulate his perseverance.

He also mentions though that unless God is behind him, he will not be able to last. Now he rightly recognized that the powers in England that stood behind the slave trade were powerful men and individuals. And they would oppose everything that Wilberforce would try to do in bringing the slave trade to an end.

And so God has to be before him if this was ever going to be ended. The conclusion of that, he says, be not weary of well-doing. And that's what we began with, this whole emphasis on doing good.

Well, Wilberforce had been born in 1759. He would die in 1833. He was born in a port, the port of Hull.

There are four main ports in England. London itself at this period of time, Bristol and Liverpool and Hull. Hull was the only one that wasn't based on the slave trade and it didn't earn its money or wealth from the slave trade.

He was raised in an environment in which a number of evangelicals were part of the scene of his upbringing. His aunt and uncle were friends of George Whitfield and John Newton. Wilberforce, as a young man, remembered hearing Newton preach.

But those early influences were lost when he went to university. He went to the Cambridge University in the fall of 1776 and he left there in 1780. He idled away his four years.

Later he would realize he had not used his time there at all constructively. He had spent the four years in self-indulgence and the pursuit of pleasure. When he left Cambridge in 1780, he decided to enter politics.

And that September in 1780 he was elected the Member of Parliament for the town of Hull. And he would be in the House of Commons from 1780 until his retirement in 1825. His early years in the House of Commons had one main goal, which was his own distinction.

He could say of his early years in the House of Commons many years later, my own distinction was my darling object. He was in politics to get his name known and so on. But in 1785, when he had been at that point a politician for about five years, he happened to take a tour of the European continent.

And he picked up a book to take with him, a book by a man named Philip Doddridge, one of the great evangelical writers of the first half of the 18th century. Doddridge dying in 1751. The book was called *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*.

And it shook Wilberforce deeply to the core. It showed him that really his goals in life were sinful goals, that there was a creator whom he would one day have to give an account to for all of his gifts. Later in life he would describe his experience this way, as he was converted through the reading of this book.

For several months I continued to feel the deepest convictions of my own sinfulness, rendered only the more intense by the unspeakable mercies of our God and Saviour declared to us in the offer of the Gospel. However, by degrees produced in me something of a settled peace of conscience, I devoted myself, for whatever might be the term of my future life, to the service of my God and Saviour. The problem, though, that he found, and he was fairly well placed, one of his closest friends was the Prime Minister of England, William Pitt.

And he was in that circle of the movers and shakers of British society. And those men and women, many of them with aristocratic backgrounds, despised evangelicals. They had a deep, deep contempt for evangelicals.

And so when Wibbleforth was first converted, he found himself in a very difficult situation. He decided he would go and visit John Newton for advice about what he should do in his career. He felt that he had now been converted, he needed to give up politics and become a minister.

But he thought he would look up his old boyhood influence, the man who had influenced him as a young boy. And so he went to visit Newton, but he was ashamed to go up to the door. In case somebody he knew saw him.

And he walked around the block three times, the story is, before he finally got the nerve to go up to the door, because he knew if anybody saw him going to visit the house of John Newton, Newton was known all over London as an evangelical. He'd be disgraced. But he finally got up the nerve to go up to the door and knock on Newton's door.

And in the weeks that followed this issue of what should I do now with my life, and Newton wisely encouraged him, do not give up politics. No, no, you're wrong to think you should become a minister. Stay in politics and use the gifts and opportunities God has given you there for Christ.

And he said this to, Newton said this to Wilberforce, it is hoped and believed the Lord has raised you up for the good of his church and for the good of the nation. What Wilberforce's conversion, and this is very important to see, Wilberforce's conversion had given him the energy and it would give him the spirituality that would enable him to persevere and to fight against the slave trade. There were other men and women in England who criticized the slave trade on philosophical principles.

But when it came to action, it was evangelicals who did it. And in the last hour, yes, we saw how evangelicals, numbers of them were blameworthy. But it was evangelicals ultimately who ended the slave trade.

And there's a lesson here, and I'm veering off now to the side, there's a lesson for us in this. That Christians in that day brought changes in their culture because they outlived their pagan or unbelieving neighbors. The same has to be true today.

About four years after his conversion, he could say of this, that he now had a profound awareness of living his life in the presence of God, that one day he would have to give an account to God. He says, a man who acts on the principles I profess, Christianity, reflects he is going to give an account of his political conduct at the judgment seat of Christ. In 1787, he resolved this, he wrote this in his diary, it's a very important date, October the 28th, 1787, a Sunday, thinking about what had God saved him for and why had he stayed in politics.

God Almighty has placed before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners. And the reformation of manners is the renewal of English society. You cannot, a society cannot be involved in the horror of the slave trade, in the inhumanity of the slave trade and justify it and carry it on at such length without the wrath of that affecting the entirety of culture and society.

Just as, and here is one area I think that we need to give great thought to, just as in our midst, the abortion of thousands over the last 20 or so, more than 20 years since the whole issue became an illegality in our culture. It cannot have had but an effect upon our culture. From 1789 onwards, Wilberforce, he recognised that he wasn't going to accomplish this by himself.

Great good that God does through men and women is never accomplished by one individual. But it is a group of individuals acting in concert. And he gathered around him a variety of men, some of them politicians, some of them wealthy individuals in other contexts, some of them people like Josiah Wedgwood.

He was a potter, you might have heard of the Wedgwood. And Josiah Wedgwood had a very influential business of pottery. And he asked Josiah Wedgwood to mint a coin.

And on the coin was a picture of a slave shackled. And then around it were the words, Am I not a man and a brother? And I'm not sure how many of these were made, but a large number were made that Wilberforce would use when people opposed him. He just placed it in their hands.

And it was a way of provoking conscience and thought. And so there were a number of men devoted themselves to opposing slavery on the floor of Parliament. Many of them lived in a place called Clapham.

Clapham today was, well Clapham then was a village separate from London. And it was countryside between the city of London and Clapham. Well it's not that way anymore at all.

Then it was three miles outside of the city of London. And many of the wealthy of this group lived there. And they became known as the Clapham sect.

And Wilberforce year after year began to introduce bills and petitions to end the slave trade. He was vilified. And one historian says he was probably at the time, over the next 10, 15 years, the most vilified man in England.

He was opposed. When he started advocating that the slave trade be ended, in the House of Commons there were about 300, 400 members at the time. There were only two other evangelicals.

When he ends, and the slavery is ended in the 1830s, there are around 200 evangelicals in the House of Commons. And about 100 in the House of Lords. There's another type of fruit that's going on.

There's conversion of men and women, or men, in the House of Commons. Many of the royal family opposed him. One of the great heroes of England, I was raised in England, and there was a kind of, I was still in that period as a young boy when you got the traditional history of England, and there were certain great heroes.

And one of the great heroes was Horatio Nelson, the hero of the Battle of the Nile, and the victor of the Battle of Trafalgar, though he died in it. Well, Horatio Nelson, it's a shock to discover, utterly opposed Wilberforce. He said he would uphold the rights of the slave owners.

He only had one arm. He said, while I have an arm to fight, I will uphold them in their defence, as long as I have a tongue to launch my voice against the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and its hypocritical allies. And Horatio Nelson, he was a national hero.

In England. And so when you've got these sort of powers ranged against you, it is only God that can enable him to go on. On two occasions, he was physically attacked, this is Wilberforce, in the street.

Finally, after 18 years of tireless political struggle, on February the 23rd, 1807, a bill was passed that ended the slave trade. It did not end slavery, but it ended the slave trade. The vote, when it was taken, was carried by 283 votes to 16.

But notice that, if you go back to 1787, nearly 20 years. One of the things I think that evangelicals in North America need to realise, that the problems that confront our culture are not going to be solved overnight. There needs to be this man and woman in it for the long haul, as it were.

Wilberforce, apparently, when it was passed, that the slave trade was to be ended, the House of Commons erupted, ensuring he apparently simply bowed, his head bowed, his face drenched in tears. One of the things that certainly motivated Wilberforce was the concept of what we would describe as humanity and benevolence. His love for Africans, and his realisation that what the British were doing was dreadfully wrong.

He hoped that once the slave trade was ended, the slave owners would automatically free their slaves. He was wrong. And soon he realised, by around 1810, 1811, he had to engage now in another battle, which was the end of slavery.

That battle lasted till the 1833. By that time, most of his friends were dead, the men who had fought the earlier battles. He was in constant ill health, he had ulcerative colitis in the 1780s, and he had constant pain in his stomach.

He took what was then the common aspirin of the day, which was small doses of opium, which made him sleepy and depressed, and he had to struggle against that. By the 1820s, the curvature in the back, he had some spinal problems, prevented him being able to hold his head upright. And his head would droop down onto his chest, and so he had to rig up a metal brace that held his head up.

It was not until three days before he died, in 1833, on July 26th, 1833, that a bill was passed, the Emancipation Bill, that freed all the slaves in the British Empire. He could write this, or he said this when he heard the news, he died three days later. Thank God I have lived to witness the day in which England is willing to give 20 million pounds sterling for the abolition of slavery.

That's in that 20 million pounds, an enormous amount. And what was it that brought Britain and the British Empire to do that? It was the overwhelming conviction brought about by his constant lobbying lobbying and those who stood with him that slavery was wrong in the presence and sight of God. Three days later, he fell into a coma and died July 29th, 1833.

What enabled him to persevere all that period of time? Well, a number of those who have studied his life pointed to one thing in particular. It was his Christian faith. It was his spirituality.

He maintained a constant life of prayer and meditation. There were times, though, he couldn't pray. And he notes in his diary, his distresses.

He was so overworked. He didn't have time for prayer. He didn't have time for Bible study.

And so what he regularly did was he slotted days in the month where he would be able to leave London and go out into the countryside where he said he could see God through nature. Nature. And he could find God as he contemplated the country.

Through nature, he says, I look up to nature's God. He also sought to maintain Sunday as a day of spiritual refreshment and rest. Many of the evangelicals in that period knew the blessing of one day in the week as a day set apart for worship, reflection, prayer, and relaxation.

This is something that many of us as evangelicals in our day need to recover. And he knew the importance of that. A number of historians, when they think about what is it that kept him going, it was his faith in God.

It was his spirituality. It was that which enabled him to persevere. If you go to Clapham today, you'll find virtually nothing to honor Wilberforce.

Charles Colson, in an article, Colson has taken great interest in Wilberforce. Colson, who was involved in politics, very intimately involved in politics before his conversion, has used Wilberforce in quite a number of ways as a model for how a Christian should be involved in politics. Wilberforce, in the late 70s, went out to Clapham to find some tangible evidence of Wilberforce.

He said he was taken by some friends to an old soot-stained Anglican church in Clapham. In the church, there apparently was a pulpit from which it was said Wilberforce had once spoken there. There was a

likeness of him in a stained glass window.

There was a small little plaque commemorating him. And then there were a pile of little booklets about Wilberforce. Under a sign, he said, 50p a piece.

And he was angry. He said, after all that this man did, nothing to remember him by. But he began to think about it.

Yes, there was something by which he was remembered, although it wasn't in any physical object. He said the great tide of spiritual vision and cleansing that went through the Victorian era. And we look back and we have some problems with the Victorian era.

They didn't do everything right. But there was a great period there in the latter part of the 19th century in which there was a conviction that there were certain things that were right and certain things that were wrong. There was an emphasis on Christian morality.

He said this is his legacy. The legacy enjoyed today by millions of freedom Britain, because of Wilberforce, the British Empire did not have to go through the horror of a civil war to free the slaves. Why it was, and I don't have an answer to this question.

It's something I'm thinking about and I'm probing. Why was it America, which had so many evangelicals, it took a civil war to bring about the end of slavery? Why was the British Empire and their British experience different? I don't know the answer. But certainly Wilberforce is at the centre of that.

Wilberforce also leaves, Colson said, a spiritual legacy. And this whole area of the vital importance of prayer and spirituality. One of the things I've done a lot of in the last, probably eight to 10 years, is I've spent a lot of time reading Baptist church minute books from this period.

And not directly related to this issue. But one of the things you come up again and again in the 1780s and the 1790s and the early 1800s is little Baptist churches tucked away in the country making motions that they will commit themselves to prayer that the slave trade will be ended. Or making petitions that they would sign to send to the members of parliament protesting against the horror of the slave trade.

And you see in that that behind Wilberforce stood an army of men and women praying that this would end. These are the words of Wilberforce with which I will close and then we'll have some time for questions. My only solid hopes for the well-being of my country depend not on her fleets and armies, not on the wisdom of her rulers or the spirit of her people, but they depend on the persuasion that she still contains many who in a degenerate age, we think we live in a degenerate age, but he saw his age as the same.

In a degenerate age, these people still love and obey the gospel of Christ. My hopes for my country depend on the humble trust that the intercession of these may still be prevalent, that for the sake of these, heaven they look upon us with an eye of favor. In other words, as he thought about how is the slave trade going to end? How is God ever going to be good and smile with favor upon our country? It's got nothing to do with our military might.

It's got nothing to do with our wisdom of our rulers. It's got nothing to do really about the spirit of our people. But there are many in our country who love the Lord Jesus Christ and that God will honor their prayers.

One of the lessons and Colson doesn't make this in the passages that I'm referring to there. One of the lessons I think about Wilberforce's life, he reminds us of the importance of character, that what changes societies and cultures is men and women of character, who are men and women of integrity, that what they say with their mouths, their lives reflect that. He also reminds us, and I think evangelicals need to be strongly reminded of this in our country, that Christians ought to pray that God would raise up godly men and women in politics.

And we should pray that there would be Christians in the political realm, that the problems that afflict our nation, there will be Christians seeking to give an answer to that. Not only in that realm, but in the whole area of law and judges and media and so on. But ultimately he reminds us, his life reminds us of the importance of prayer and that God can turn societies around and change cultures and lead them in directions that are God-honoring.

One of the great concerns that I said earlier, just off to the side, that I think we need to take to heart is the whole issue of abortion. And we've become almost immune to it, I think. The numbers that are regularly killed.

And it comes down again to that issue, what is that issue we began with? What does it mean to be human? If there is no change in that end of the scale, we should not be surprised if we find the horror at the other end, with men and women being euthanized. So we have, in our day, many great struggles, things to struggle for, and we can take encouragement from the life of Wilberforce. Well, let me close here and ask if there might be any questions or comments.

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