

# Paul's Household Codes: Repressive or Redemptive?

*“Wives: be submitted to your husbands as is appropriate in the Lord.*

*Husbands: love your wives, and don't treat them harshly or respond with bitterness toward them.*

*Children: obey your parents in every way. The Lord is well pleased by it.*

*Fathers: don't infuriate your children, so their hearts won't harbor resentment and become discouraged.*

*Slaves: obey your earthly masters in all things. Don't just act earnest in your service only when they are watching. Serve with a sincere heart, fearing the Lord who is always watching! So no matter what your task is, work hard.*

*Always do your best as the Lord's servant, not as man's, because you know your reward is the Lord's inheritance. You serve Christ the Lord, and anyone who does wrong will be paid his due because He doesn't play favorites. Masters: treat your slaves fairly and do what is right, knowing that you, too, have a Master in heaven.” (Colossians 3: 18- 4:1, The Voice)*

This passage (as well as similar ones in Ephesians and 1 Peter) is often cited as a confirmation that the Bible is pro-slavery and anti-woman. At first glance, that certainly appears to be the case. I believe a deeper look at what's going on in this letter ( [and in the letter to Philemon](#), which was written about the same time and addressed to a member of the Colossian church) will help us understand what is truly happening here.

## **First, we need to know something about life in first century Colossae.**

As far back as the fourth century BC, there is a record that the Greeks viewed the household to be a miniature version of the order found in society, the realm of the gods, and ultimately the universe. [Aristotle even identified the three key relationships within the household that mattered](#): “The smallest and primary parts of the household are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children.”

Aristotle believed free men were by nature intended to rule over their wives, children, and slaves because they were created by the gods to be better. His writing is pretty clear on this point, noting that “the one gender is far superior to the other in just about every sphere,” and that “the slave has not deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature.” Considering this type of philosophical background, it’s worth understanding how life looked like for women, children, and slaves in the Greco-Roman world before we look at [Paul’s Christianized household code](#).

## **WOMEN**

Marriages were typically based on economic considerations. Wives were often young teens who married much older men. They were the property of their husbands. Marriage was not meant to join two lovers; it was a union for the raising of legitimate children to keep the family line going (Demosthenes noted: “Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children”). Women existed to please the men around them, and a husband could do with his wife (or wives) whatever he wanted. Women had almost no voice in the home or in the city. They could not testify in court because they were considered unreliable (that was true in Judaism as well). Some were educated; most were not. They rarely joined their husband and his friends for meals, which was where all the important conversations happened.

## **CHILDREN**

The father also had authority over his children no matter their age. They were to submit to his will even after they had families of their own. Once again, his children existed to serve and please him. He could set them outside the city to die when they were babies if he didn’t like what he saw. He had absolute control over their lives. They were meant to bring him honor and perhaps wealth. It was all about him, not them.

## **SLAVES**

[Aristotle said slaves were “living tools,”](#) akin to animals. They were by nature created to serve. The Romans had a saying translated as “*a slave has no persona,*” or no personality. They were seen empty shells, blank slates with no identity or status apart from what their master granted them. In fact, in legal

cases, the “character” of the slave was considered representative of the master’s character. When we read the dramas and poetry that have survived from Paul’s time, we see that the Athenians viewed household slaves as skilled and productive (the were often highly educated, and many were doctors, professors, teachers, administrators, public servants and even policemen), but assumed they were con artists who acted nice while planning devious things.

## **Second, Christians were already at odds with both the culture and the law as they came to grips with what it meant to follow Christ.**

They were now part of what Paul called a [“new humanity”](#) in which the divisions of race, gender and freedom were meant to dissolve in mutual love toward Christ and each other. Of course, that was a work in progress. There were at least four ways in which the early followers of Christ began pushing back against the commonly accepted social norms as they sought to embody this reality.

- First, Jew, Gentile, slave, free, men and women were sharing common meals together in their meetings (1 Corinthians 11). This was simply not done in Greco/Roman culture. Meals separated the free men from everybody else.
- Second, [they organized their meeting times so that religious and social distinctions were minimized.](#)
- Third, Christian women learned philosophy, which the Greeks thought was nonsense ([see Chapter 33 in Tatian’s Address to the Greeks, “Vindication of Christian Women”](#)).
- Fourth, while the Romans passed laws forcing widows to get remarried (to keep society in lines with the order found in the realm of the gods), the early church helped the widows (1 Timothy 5:3-16) without always insisting they get remarried.

This was not necessarily sitting well with Rome. The early Christians were called “haters of humanity” because they so willingly broke down the structures that the Greeks and Romans believed brought stability to the nation and honor to the gods. When the husband/father of a household became a follower of Christ, his conversion brought him and his household shame and suspicion in the eyes of the Romans and Greeks. They were pretty sure this man and his family were on the

verge of becoming traitors to their country, the gods and the order of the universe.

Paul was trying to show a fledgling church how Christ would transform a culture beginning with the households in the church. It wasn't going to help if those households were eliminated before the message took hold. His approach needed to be full of both truth and tact.

## **Third, we need to know the Biblical explanation of what has gone wrong with the world - and how to fix it.**

The Bible presents the power struggle between people as having entered the world as a result of sin. We read of women in in Genesis 3:16 that, as a result of sin, "You will want to control your husband, but he will dominate you" (NET Bible). I saw a website for wives that posted this verse with the comments: "Could your desire for your husband be a little stronger? Could you let him rule over you a little more than you did last week?"

They are missing the point badly. This verse is not a promise of blessing; it's an observation about how life will now look in a fallen world. Rebellion broke the world. Genesis 3 is not a list of how things ought to be; it's an explanation of how things have become. One thing we learn right away: ***The fallen nature craves domination and hates servanthood.***

Christianity claims that Jesus Christ came to redeem not just people but the ways in which people have grown comfortable in their fallen state. As we ponder questions about leadership and submission, we see that Jesus did not seek the position His power offered him. Instead, he became a servant and gave his very life for those he loved as an example for how we are to live. Three examples from Scripture:

- Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).
- In speaking about authority Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your

slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25–28).

- When his disciples argued amongst themselves about who would be greatest in the kingdom, Jesus told them that “anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

In Colossians, Paul is showing how redemption looks in relationships. For those who had been raised in submissive roles, he offers a new motivation as they move toward honor and equality. For those who have perpetrated an unjust use of power, he demands an entire makeover.

**Men - the culturally privileged and powerful - have to care for the people within their household *for their own sakes* with the same level of committed, self-sacrifice that Christ himself showed for us all.** Men who mistreat anyone in their household will eventually answer to God. In fact, the New Testament writers use figurative language to show men that they are spiritually in the same position as everyone in their household is literally: men are part of the bride of Christ; men are children of God; men are slaves to God. As God treats men in these roles spiritually, so men should treat those around them who have those roles physically. In a radical departure from what most of the people reading this letter would have been raised to believe, men must learn to genuinely love and serve those whom their culture said they could use and control. The redeemed nature chooses service over power.

This was unprecedented in the history of household codes. No one is told that they are better. No is told they have a right to rule. No one is told what their rights are or what is owed to them. They are all told what their responsibilities are to those around them: mutual service to honor Christ. The language used to describe each relationship is different, but the principle remains the same.

[A careful reading of the book of Philemon](#) will show that Paul wanted Philemon (who also received the letter to the Colossian church) to view Onesimus as a human being, a brother in Christ, a man of intrinsic value and worth. If Paul could accomplish that, all forms of injustice and inequality would fade away. The best way to change a cultural mindset that accepts inequality, dehumanization, and injustice is to change the hearts of those who perpetuate it in all its forms.

The wary eye of Rome would see the Christian household codes and look

elsewhere for subterfuge; meanwhile, the voice of truth within the church began to spread a message honor, worth, and dignity to those who has spent their lives on the margins of society.

---

## RECOMMENDED READING


[N.T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon \(Tyndale New Testament Commentaries\)](#)

[Aristotle and the Household Codes](#)

[Aristotle vs. Jesus: What Makes the New Testament Household Codes So Different](#)

---

# Paul, Philemon, and the Problem of Slavery

Though Paul's letter to Philemon is often used to accuse Paul of supporting (or at least being okay with) slavery, the criticism misses the deeper purpose of this letter. Paul presented a radical message that to Philemon would have undermined everything he had been taught about masters and slaves, and could only lead to a world without slavery. 

Does that seem like a bold claim? Perhaps it is. But I believe an honest reading of the text within the context of 1st Century Greco-Roman culture leads us to this conclusion.

The term "slave" finds its origins in 13th century France; linguistically, it's only fair to acknowledge that any discussion of 1st century conditions will be distorted if we use the word "slave" indiscriminately. The Greeks used many different words to describe people in servitude or slavery. *Doulous*, the word Paul uses throughout the New Testament to reference someone who is not free, [cannot be indiscriminately translated as "slave" without poisoning the well](#). *Doulos* could

mean slavery, servitude, or simply self-sacrificial commitment. Jesus took upon himself the nature of a *doulos* (Philippians 2:7); all people are either the *doulos* of sin or of Christ (Romans 6:17-18); Paul said he was a *doulos* to everyone (1 Corinthians 9:19). In order to do justice to Paul's message in Philemon, we must be honest about the intricacies of the language.

When the writers of the ESV sought to translate both the Hebrew and Greek words that had been commonly translated as "slave," they ran into some problems:

*"A particular difficulty is presented when words in biblical Hebrew and Greek refer to ancient practices and institutions that do not correspond directly to those in the modern world. Such is the case in the translation of 'ebed (Hebrew) and doulos (Greek), terms which are often rendered "slave." These terms, however, actually cover a range of relationships that require a range of renderings—either "slave," "bondservant," or "servant"—depending on the context. Further, the word "slave" currently carries associations with the often brutal and dehumanizing institution of slavery in nineteenth-century America.*

*For this reason, the ESV translation of the words 'ebed' and 'doulos' has been undertaken with particular attention to their meaning in each specific context. Thus in Old Testament times, one might enter slavery either voluntarily (e.g., to escape poverty or to pay off a debt) or involuntarily (e.g., by birth, by being captured in battle, or by judicial sentence). Protection for all in servitude in ancient Israel was provided by the Mosaic Law. In New Testament times, a doulos is often best described as a "bondservant"—that is, as someone bound to serve his master for a specific (usually lengthy) period of time, but also as someone who might nevertheless own property, achieve social advancement, and even be released or purchase his freedom. The ESV usage thus seeks to express the nuance of meaning in each context."* ["The ESV Translation Committee Debates the Translation of "Slave"](#)

*Doulos* made up about [40%](#) of the Greek and Roman population. This seems like an astonishingly high number, but *doulos* in some fashion formed the backbone of the economy. There were absolutely brutal forms of *doulos* (particularly for captured soldiers and criminals), but [other forms that bore little resemblance to what we think of today.](#) Many were what we would think of as indentured



servants ([similar to what happened in the early days of American settlement](#)). Greek and Roman *doulos* were often highly educated, and many were doctors, professors, teachers, administrators, public servants and even policemen.

There were a number of ways people could become *doulos*. Ancient cultures commonly forced captured soldiers and hardened criminals into the most brutal forms of slavery. The poor would sometimes volunteer; others were born into a life of *doulos*. There were no bankruptcy laws, so this was also a way in which the bankrupt found work and worked off debt. "[If a man be enslaved his debts cease to bind him, and his liability does not revive if he is manumitted.](#)" *Digesta Justiniana* 28. 8. 1. pr.

Household *doulos* were much better off than even the free-born poor. The poor were often day laborers competing for jobs that went to the well-connected *doulos*. Slaves like Onesimus were paid for their work, which provided them the means to eventually buy their freedom. Some owned other *doulos* themselves (think of [the parable of unforgiving servant](#), who owed his master, but was in turn owed by another worse off than he was).

In Greek and Roman culture, *doulos* such as Onesimus often earned their freedom by the age of 30 or were granted freedom in their owner's will. In the city of Rome, freed *doulos* enjoyed not only passive freedom from ownership but also active political freedom, including the right to vote. They even had a title: "the free ones."

This system was the way for someone like Onesimus to move up in society and become a relatively successful free man. Even nobleman were known to sell themselves into the service of greater noblemen so they could move up in the Greco-Roman world. Onesimus himself probably did not ask Paul to abolish the institution of slavery, since what most likely had awaited him on the other side of his service to Philemon was a decent life and reputation. For a *doulos* who was a bondservant or household servant, their story often ended well.

There were, however, at least three ways the story could end poorly.

**A freed *doulos*** needed the patronage and favor of his owner, or buying his freedom was not necessarily helpful. A *doulos* had to be, above all things, useful (which is the meaning of "Onesimus," a title probably given him by Philemon). The *doulos* were commodities, investments. It's not as if the owners were



educating them and giving them responsibility out of the goodness of their heart. The useful *doulos* earned the master's "stamp of approval." The lazy ones did not. For those that did not, their eventual freedom would not necessarily be a good thing. They would become one of the working poor who scabbled to survive and lost the day jobs to the *doulos* with patronage. If their former master chose to retain them, they would serve in a reduced status with only a taste of freedom and a portion of the master's provision.

**A runaway *doulos*** was a nobody, useless to his master and the state. As much as a *doulos* could gain honor, privilege and status when he was useful, he lost it all immediately and usually irretrievably when he ran away. Runaway *doulos* forfeited all their ties and privileges. They were a lost cause. Their owners could pretty much do with them what they wanted. Typically, a captured runaway was either sent to hard labor (which was a death sentence), branded (the Latin word for fugitive began with an "F," which was burned on their forehead), crucified, or whipped to death.

**A revolutionary *doulos*** could only hope for a swift death. The Romans brutally crushed the individuals involved and slaughtered the groups with which they associated. Spartacus (70 BC) had more than 70,000 in his rebellion; Rome eventually smashed the revolt and crucified 6,000 slaves.

Assuming that the biblical portrayal of Philemon is accurate, Onesimus was probably not running away from abuse and poverty; he had most likely stolen from a man who invested time, money and trust in him, and whose patronage was giving him access to a better life than many around him had. That's not to say Philemon was off the hook (more on this in my next post), but in *that* culture, at *that* time, this was Onesimus's ticket to freedom and respect. But now he was in trouble. Captured and awaiting impending judgment, Onesimus sought out a new person to serve. His choice of Paul - himself a prisoner - shows the level of desperation.

---

So what should Paul do?

He could write a blistering missive that condemned the whole system. He could command Philemon to free Onesimus and his other *doulos*, spread the word of freedom and inequality, and basically take on Rome. But Rome tended to view any

shaking of the social order as potentially seditious. A Roman guard would certainly have read Paul's letter, and if it looked like Paul was encouraging revolution, Paul and the letter's recipients would most likely be killed. Nothing would change.

Even if Paul *could* start the overthrow of Rome's existing social order, history suggests that the people would just substitute one form of injustice for another ([I'm talking to you, French Revolution!](#)). We even see this frustrating cycle of tyranny and corruption in popular stories like *The Hunger Games* and *Captain America*. If you change the laws on an issue but don't change the hearts of the people effected by the issue, [the same problem will just keep coming up](#).

Paul cared about the lives and reputation of the *doulos* in Rome (more on this in the next post), but he knew that to truly change a cultural of slavery and serventhood, he had to get to the root of the problem in Philemon: sin, which resides in the human heart, which in this case was expressed through injustice and discrimination, and could only be resolved through the transformation that Christ brings. As important as cultural transformation is, the message of the Gospel neither starts nor ends with external behavior modification. Paul goes for something much bigger than merely Onesimus's freedom. His goal is to change the source of the problem: Philemon's heart.

*Mark 7:20-22: "Jesus went on: 'What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' "*

*Luke 6:45: "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks."*

If Philemon's heart was changed, he would help to usher in a church community in which *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* (*Galatians 3:23*). Paul was challenging the hearts of society's gatekeepers, the ones who stood to benefit from the inequality inherent in the Greco-Roman economic and social system. Paul was challenging those who demanded that people be useful above all else,

or they were worth nothing. Paul was challenging the way in which we can all see people as things that exist to serve us and make us happy, not image bearers of God for whom Christ gave his life.

Paul wanted something better than freedom for Onesimus: he wanted Philemon to view Onesimus as a human being, a brother in Christ, a man of intrinsic value and worth. And if Paul could accomplish that - well, all forms of injustice and inequality would fade away. A transformation inside - if it's genuine - will inevitably result in a change outside. In this case, ***the best way to change a culture of inequality, dehumanization, and injustice was to change the hearts of those who perpetuated it.***

[There's more to say on this topic.](#) As generous as he apparently was in the context of his culture, Philemon seems to have accepted a deeply entrenched Greco-Roman view of all *doulos* in which they were perceived as an inferior, almost sub-human element of society. Paul's letter has more to say to Philemon - [but that's a topic for the next post.](#)

---

## **SOURCES and RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary, N.T. Wright

The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, Douglas Moo

Paul Among the People, Sarah Ruden

"New Testament: Philemon," (enterthebible.org)

"Philemon: Introduction, Argument and Outline," bible.org

"The Epistle to Philemon," ccel.org

"The Unique Characteristics of Christian Forgiveness," Eric McKiddie (pastoralized.com)

"Keller and Carson: Greco-Roman Slavery and Race Based Slavery," Andy Naselli (andynaselli.com)

“What Were Early Christians Like?” Christianity.com

“Philemon and Its Connection to Colossians,” Mike Rogers (healingtothenations.net)

“Resisting Slavery in Ancient Rome,”  
bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/slavery\_01.shtml

“Women, Children and Slaves,” <http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk/staff/resources/background/bg18/home.html>.

“Slavery in Ancient Greece,”  
<http://slaveryinjustice.wordpress.com/slavery-in-ancient-greece/>

---

## [The Lord watch between you and me](#)

*(This post is part of a series. For an introduction to the topic read, “[How ought we read the Bible?](#)” To see all posts in this topic, go to “[Hermeneutics](#)”)*



Surely you’ve seen one of these necklaces. Maybe you’re even wearing one. But do you know what it means? I know what you *think* it means. Actually, we all interpret it the same way. It’s a pair of simple charms. Mother and daughter, best friends, or two lovers each wear one on a chain. They are given as a symbol of “until we meet again”, or an expression of a prayer for protection.

In the picture above, you can see the phrase that is often inscribed. Sometimes the scripture reference is included as well. Here is the actual verse for context:

*“...May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other.” ([Gen 31:49, NIV](#))*

Or is that in context? Kind of a funny way to say it, isn't it? The Lord watch *between* us? Why wouldn't we ask him to watch *over* us? If we are concerned for our special someone, don't we want God to look out for them? Why are we concerned about the space between? I'm glad you asked! Let's actually look at some context. This will require a brief story.

*Once upon a time, a man named Jacob wanted a wife. In order to get a wife from among his people, he traveled to the town of his fathers called Haran. Haran would be a better place to find an acceptable bride than the foreign land he was living in. When Jacob arrived in Haran, he saw a woman named Rachel, and they fell in love instantly. Rachel ran home to tell her family about this wonderful man, and they came to meet Jacob. He soon struck a deal with Rachel's father Laban, that he would work for him for seven years in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage.*

*At the end of his seven years, Jacob went to Laban to arrange the wedding. After the ceremony was complete, Jacob realized he had been tricked into marrying Rachel's less desirable sister Leah! Laban told Jacob he could take her or leave her, but Rachel could not be given in marriage before her older sister. As a concession, Laban offered Rachel to Jacob a second time - he would just have to work another seven years! Jacob wanted Rachel, so he agreed.*

*After many years tending Laban's sheep, Jacob's debt was paid and he wanted a flock of his own. So he set up his own household and herds separate from Laban's. This went ok for a while, but Laban's sons started causing trouble between their father and Jacob. Eventually, Laban became very jealous of Jacob's herd. Jacob picked up on this, and God told him to return to the land he had come from 20 years prior, and where his immediate family still lived. Fearing Laban's wrath over Jacob taking his daughters and his grandchildren away, Jacob decided to sneak away without telling him.*

*When Laban found out what happened, he and his men left in pursuit. Over a week later, they overtook Jacob's company and Laban confronted him. (Hold on - we're almost to the necklace verse!) Laban was irate! "Why did you take my daughters and grandchildren without telling me?!" Jacob replied that any debt*

*he had to Laban was long since paid off and he just wanted to move on. Laban had been warned by God that this was his will, so no matter how mad Laban was, he could not harm them. So they made a truce on that spot. They built a monument of stones as a reminder of their pact. The first part was a bit of a warning to Jacob. Here is my paraphrase: "While I may not be able to watch you, God can see everything. So if you dare mistreat my girls, don't think you'll get away with it!" The second part was the promise they made to each other. They agreed that this pile of stones would always be a reminder that neither party could pass that point in order to harm the other. If either one was coming with malicious intent, they would see the pillar and remember their agreement. To seal the deal they said "The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight.*

So, this verse was not a prayer of protection per se. It was a promise not to be the one that caused the other to have a need for protection! It was not about people being separated by circumstances of life, but out of safety from each other! If these people were near one another, someone likely would have ended up dead. But they agreed to a ceasefire, and set up a monument to memorialize the event, and to warn each other that this was the line that could not be crossed. So today, we Christians wear this verse around our neck, but I doubt that we mean it as a vow not to kill the other, or a promise to keep our distance!

If you have one of these necklaces, I wouldn't feel guilty about wearing it. The sentiment in which it was shared is a good one. Keep it as a reminder to pray for the person who holds the other half. Even better, keep it also as a reminder to read the bible and see if it actually says what you think it says!

(And if you want to check out my version of the story for yourself, it's in Genesis chapters 29-31!)

---

# For God so loved the world...

(This post is part of a series. For an introduction to the topic read, "[How ought we read the Bible?](#)" To see all posts in this topic, go to "[Hermeneutics](#)")



*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. - John 3:16 (KJV)*

This is the version most of us are familiar with - but I think the wording in this version is misleading, or at least incomplete. To be fair, it's worded this way in a number of versions. The common understanding isn't horrible, but I think it misses something.

When John says that God *so loved* the world, he isn't saying God *soooooo* loved the world. In other words, **it's not the same meaning that your grandma would have in mind if she said it.** John was not trying to communicate that God really, really, really loved us, though that is how I think we usually read it. John was trying to communicate *how* God loved us.

I think the NET version of the Bible is helpful here. Check out [John 3:16 in the NET Bible](#):

*For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.*

Or in Wuest's Expanded Translation:



*For in such a manner did God love the world, insomuch that His Son, the uniquely-begotten one, He gave, in order that everyone who places his trust in Him may not perish but may be having life eternal.*

There are other versions that translate along these lines as well. **This phrase “so loved” ought to be read as “this is how much”, or “in this way.”**

Does this explain how much God loves us? Yes, but it does so by illustration not hyperbole. You can think of it like this: “*God has shown his love to the world in this way.*” In what way? From the prior verses, much like the way Moses [lifted the snake](#) in the wilderness. He loved the world by giving His Son to be lifted up on a tree for the salvation of mankind.

Is this to say that the traditional understanding is blatantly wrong? I don’t think so. The common view doesn’t do any real damage to Christian doctrine. That said, I think this view gives us a richer understanding of God’s love and its expression.

---

## **Lift Him up!**

*(This post is part of a series. For an introduction to the topic read, “[How ought we read the Bible?](#)” To see all posts in this topic, go to “[Hermeneutics](#)”)*



**“Lift Him Up!”** You’ve likely heard this in reference to worship before. Many well-meaning people will use it to mean that we ought to proclaim Jesus’ name, and that our act of worship will draw people to Christ. This is a nice thought, but a complete misreading.

This is taken, though loosely, from John 12:32. The verse says, “*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*” **It is taught by many**

**that this means when we worship God and publicly “lift Jesus’ name” in song that people will see this and be irresistibly drawn to Christ.**

To take this meaning though, you have to ignore everything around it. Any possible confusion about what Jesus meant is cleared up by simply reading the following verse: *“He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.”*

Flipping back a few pages in John’s gospel brings even more clarity. John 3:14-15 says, *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*

So there you have it. **Jesus already has been lifted up.** He was lifted up on the cross at Calvary. It’s already done. Christ was lifted, he died, and he rose again. Without this lifting, his earthly mission would not have been accomplished. **Jesus was lifted up, and ever since then he has drawn all people to himself, just as he said he would.**

But let’s be clear:

- God is deserving of worship.
- We ought to give him the glory he is due.
- Worship through song has a long established history in Christianity.
- We should not be ashamed to proclaim Jesus’ name publicly.
- None of these principles is in play here.

**Worship certainly does bring honor to God’s name, but this is not at all what John - or Jesus - had in mind when using the phrase “lift him up”.**