

Ephesians 6:5-9 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. ⁹ Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Announcements:

1. Redemption Story: August 25th, sign up in app calendar
2. Member Meeting: 8/29 after church
3. September 5th, Family Service.

Ephesians 6:5-9 | Bondservants and Masters

Our next text chronologically is Chapter 6:1-4 where Paul addresses children and parents. On Months with five Sundays we are aiming to have a family service on the fifth Sunday. This month has five Sundays, but for some scheduling reasons, we're having a family service on September fifth. So on that day with children gathered together with us in worship, I'll preach the passage that specifically addresses them as our last sermon in Ephesians.

Today we are skipping over children and parents and moving into Paul's description of how the gospel should shape the relationships between bondservants and their masters. Now the first thing that would stand out to modern readers like us is Paul speaks into the relationship between a slave and a master without offering a condemnation of the institution itself. Isn't it passages like these that prove the Bible as the basis of western culture supports institutions like slavery and therefore continues to support modern institutions as mechanisms of inequality? Paul why didn't you condemn slavery?

Rather than offer an outright condemnation against the institution of slavery, Paul shows how the gospel creates an environment in which the institution itself becomes untenable. And it is ultimately under Christian nations that the oldest institution in the world is undone, although in the United States its support remained due to abhorrent and terrible misapplications of scripture by Christians who wanted to maintain slaves.

What we see here is a model of Christian change. Christianity is not a revolutionary religion, and it does not require the position of power in a society to affect change (neither does it fear them but it doesn't need them). Rather, by its very principles being applied in the scope of a Christian's ordinary life, change comes progressively.

Paul speaks first to bondservants, then to masters.

1. Bondservants

Ephesians 6:5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ,

One of the most interesting aspects of this passage is that Paul speaks directly to bondservants. Now while Greco-Roman slavery in many ways was less severe than American slavery we should not think that it was an any less dehumanizing institution. Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics, says “A slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave.” The slave class was thought of as sub human. But Paul in his letter to the church, speaks directly to the slave, and will likewise speak directly to the master, which means they are both expected to be in the room, gathered together in the church.

Slaves are not called to throw off the present condition that they find themselves in but rather Paul calls them to serving their earthly masters with fear and trembling and a sincere heart. Notice Paul acknowledges the reality of the hierarchy within the relationship. One person is a slave, one person is a master. And while this particular institution is certainly one of the worst examples of human hierarchical relationships Paul acknowledges this fact that humans must operate within hierarchical relationships.

This would be more evident if I kept the scripture in order, because we would have seen together Paul’s use of the fifth commandment in his admonishment for children to obey their parents. This fifth commandment of, “honor your mother and father” throughout church history has been considered to be not just about families, but about family as the fundamental structure of all of society. So the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Standards says:

Q: What is the general scope of the fifth commandment?

A: The general scope of the fifth commandment is, the performance of those duties which we mutually owe in our several relations, as inferiors, superiors, or equals.

Now the language might sound a bit broad but the point is we all participate in relationships in which we are under authority or wield authority, or are equals to one another and it is appropriate to act in accord with the position of those relationships. A king that acts like a citizen does not lead well. A boss that gives no feedback is as annoying as a co-worker who gives constant feedback. And this reality of hierarchies is based on societies development from the family outward. Family > Tribe > Nation. Therefore when Paul speaks to slaves he calls them to act in a way that is transformed by Christ because transformation is able to flow from the top down and the bottom up.

Ephesians 6:6-7 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man,

The slave can honor their master, as the master, even with a sincere heart of service toward the master, without any loss of dignity knowing that ultimately they are slaves of Christ. And the honor that they show to their master is not an honor intrinsic in their master, but is a mere reflection of the honor which is due to the ultimate and true authority which is Christ. So their service is rendered as though it were rendered to the Lord, and not to man.

Imagine, that you have a terrible boss. Well what does this mean for the way that you approach your work? You serve the work with a joyful excellence as though you are rendering work itself to the Lord. Dorothy Sayers coined that phrase in her essay “Why Work?” After WWII in England. “serve the work.” The Christian is able to serve the work itself no matter how mundane or menial as an expression of our very service to the Lord.

This in effect frees you from the people pleasing double minded disaster, in which we use the work to manipulate those around us, or dodge the work to get back at those around us. And because we are under the sovereign grace of the Lord the slave can have this amazing confidence.

Ephesians 5:8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.

There is no outworking the Lord. If you are a bondservant or free, the good work that you do you will be rewarded. We serve a God who sees what is done in secret, who understands what is accomplished with a full heart of service to him and rewards those who serve him.

2. Masters

Ephesians 6:9 Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Paul then turns to the masters. Remember this letter is being read out loud in a church. He didn't say, okay slaves you get out of here I need to talk to your masters in private. He commands the masters in front of the slaves, and the first thing he commands them to do is “the same” as what he has commanded the slaves.

Render service as to the Lord, respect, knowing the good you do to them is not lost on the Lord but will be of benefit to you. Can you imagine, hearing this said to your master as a slave? Those things I've required of you towards your master, I also require of your master towards you.

Next: Stop your threatening. What is slavery without a threat of violence? It was of course legal and typical to beat a slave, but Paul prohibits even a style of relating based upon threatening a slave.

This means that Paul prohibits the master from taking advantage of the imbalance of power in the relationship and instead requires the master to treat his slave as an equal. Why is that? Because the master has a master, and it is the same one the slave has. They are both slaves to Christ, and there is no partiality with Christ. Christ does not assess the worth of humanity, the worth of you, based upon your position in some social hierarchy. As Paul writes elsewhere,

Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

What does this mean? Is it that when Christ came he dismantled the hierarchies? Is there no more distinction? This is our natural way of thinking. There is either hierarchy or equity. But what happened with the gospel is much stranger than that.

Jesus Christ is more than a master, he is Lord of all, but he made himself cursed beneath all others for those who were his enemies. What does it mean for the world when God humbles himself to the point of death, and in his death we find our salvation? What does that do for our hierarchies. Christ fills the hierarchy and sums it all up in himself. So the hierarchy is not abolished but adheres by our following Christ.

So the master is humbled as he follows Christ in service to his slaves. While the Slave is glorified as he humbles himself in service to his master which is ultimately service to Christ. Slavery as an institution cannot hold in that context, and if it does it becomes something unrecognizable as slavery. The slave and master could gather together in church and sing O Holy Night!

Chains shall He break For the slave is our brother;
And in His name All oppression shall cease.