

## Servants and Masters

### Ephesians 6:5–9

The household codes, as they are sometimes referred to, were read to God's people in Ephesus for the first time in all of their beauty. Imagine, if you can, what some may have thought and felt. Beautiful, but impossible. Don't you know how the world works?

Years ago I had opportunity to visit a museum in Brussels and see several Dutch master paintings in person. I happened to be friends with a professional artist, and she was overcome by one particular painting that was spectacularly beautiful. She fixed on one particular brushstroke that seemed to make the entire painting brilliant, and it brought her to tears. It was breathtaking for her, and she stood in silence. She obviously appreciated and understood the mastery and art on a scale way above me, and later spoke of the singular talent of Rembrandt. Then she said she would never be able to do anything on that scale in a million years.

In a similar way we may say, "Oh God, what beauty you intend through my family, my household. But the bar is so high — I'll never get there." In the structure of the letter, it says the Paul anticipated how overwhelmed we would feel when we see the high bar. Just before he moves into the back half of the letter governing living as a Christian, he ends with a tremendous prayer that out of the riches of God's glory. He would grant you to be strengthened in the inner man with the power of the Holy Spirit. He prays that we will fully know the love of God — how wide, how long, how high, how deep. He closes the prayer with this truth: now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all, we can ask or think. Then he sets the stage for how we are to live in Christ: I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love. We're going to need to realize all of that if we are to walk in a manner worthy of Christ. So let's read, and pray, and give ourselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and so do it.

**Colossians 3:22–25** — <sup>22</sup> Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.<sup>23</sup> Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, <sup>24</sup> knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. <sup>25</sup> For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

**Ephesians 6:5–9** — <sup>5</sup> Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, <sup>6</sup> not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, <sup>7</sup> rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, <sup>8</sup> knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. <sup>9</sup> 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.

## PRAY

We begin with the word **bondservants** in the ESV, and translated variously as **servants** or **slaves** in other translations. They all aim at the word **doulas**, which straightforwardly means **slave**. The ESV translation as a rule applies a word-for-word standard from the Greek to English — so why not **slave**? I think they chose **bondservant** with the aim to help us understand that the slavery that was part of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome was not the chattel slavery that happened in America, Brazil, Europe, and a host of other countries. **That** slavery, which is part of our American history, involves man-stealing that started first within African tribes, and then selling those conquered people to others as though sub-human. The Roman culture, and this passage, knows nothing of that. There is no racial component. These are indentured servants of every race serving in households as a way of earning a living.

Some have used this and other passages to attempt to discredit Scripture, saying that the Bible allows slavery — it does not end it. That's not a serious argument nor an accurate representation of God's word. The Apostle Paul writes to those who have come to faith in Christ to call them to live out who Christ is in them, no matter their station in life. A third or more of the Roman population were indentured servants. His focus was not the socio-political issue of slavery; his focus, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is transformed living from a new heart, a renewed mind, and the Holy Spirit.

Having said that, New Testament scholar, John Murray deals with the subject of slavery in his book, **Principles of Conduct**. He notes that Paul does not condemn the institution of slavery as the modern mind wants him to. He simply addresses those who are servants. Murray does note, though, that all the seeds for the dissolution of slavery are found in the Bible, and the New Testament in particular. This is owing the sacred worth of the soul of every image bearer of God — which is everyone. Consider how the transforming work of grace in a person's heart is to impact the world. As

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cultural rot and evil springs from the sin-imprisoned heart, so human flourishing and dignity spring from the hearts of those in Christ.

Now, in the context of indentured servants and masters, consider the beauty of the Lord's Church, and power of his saving Gospel. We have both slaves and masters addressed in this letter. What does that mean? Obviously it means that in the Church, sitting next to each other on the same pew, if you will, are slaves and owners, servants and masters. They are all in the body of Christ, sons and daughters of the King, through no merit of their own. Before coming to life in the Lord Jesus they were all autopsy dead in trespasses and sins, separated from Christ, having no hope and without God. (Eph 2:12) But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love, even when they were dead in their trespasses, God made them alive together with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, no male and female; they are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:27–28) The one who has a slave in his house now has a brother. The slave whose master comes to Christ now serves a brother adopted into Christ in the same way he was. The head of the household who has authority over a bondservant may well sit under the authority of that godly bondservant who is an elder in the Ephesian church. Worship this King! The transforming power of salvation in Christ turns the whole misfit lot of them into a kingdom and priests to serve God.

Do you long social wickedness and injustice done away with? The Gospel was the only thing with power to do it in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Rome, and it's the only thing with power to do it in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America. Proclaim this Gospel; it alone is the power of God to make dead men live. Through the Good News that Jesus came to redeem sinners, that he commands to turn to in faith, sin is defeated and the work of the devil is destroyed.

As we now move into the workplace commands for both servants and masters, we have reinforced again that every aspect of who we are, every relationship, every assignment is transformed by Christ. There is no aspect of our lives that is not brought out of the grave with Christ and made new in his resurrection power. Work ethic, rebellion, and submission to authority our part, and parcel Christian's life. We've seen the issue of submission throughout the household codes and hear the first word to bond servant is obey your earthly masters. And do so with fear and trembling and a sincere heart.

We see again the God establishes authority structures in the church, as we saw in chapter 4, in the home, as we saw in chapter 5, and come in through our passage today, and in earthly spheres,

including the workplace. The more we push against these authority structures that God has established, the more we should realize how deeply impacted our hearts are by the sins of our parents in the Garden. Rebellion against God's authority is a root sin that goes back to Adam and Eve rebelling against what God told them to do. But we are reminded that God sets of these Authority structures for our good, for our blessing, and for human flourishing. We are to think this way, which will help us do what the second part of v 5 commands — obey with fear and trembling as you would Christ. If I am to obey as I would Christ, I must understand that where I am in life is ordained by him. It is his sovereign will that I am where I am, that am in the situation I am in — He rules and reigns over all things. As the 2<sup>nd</sup> London Confession says: From all eternity God decreed everything that occurs, without reference to anything outside himself.

The sovereignty of God may on one hand be very difficult to embrace in our finite understanding of things. But on the other hand, it is life-giving and bracing against a tsunami of painful circumstance that threatens to sweep us out into unbelief. Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword — none of these great challenges in Romans 8 thwart the plan of God for our good and his glory. In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Rejoice that the God who loves you is orchestrating your life so that you are in the absolute best place to know him, experience his grace, and grow in faith.

In terms of applying this truth to 21<sup>st</sup> Century America, as an employee, obey with a sincere heart, knowing God has not forsaken you. Don't just check the box, or phone it in. See God's hand working in your life as you serve him in the workplace. Preach this truth to yourself and humble yourself under God's authority and his good plan for you. Cultivate gratitude for his grace and his ordaining kindness — though perhaps unseen for a lifetime.

- **What if I don't like my job and can't find a way out?**

Trust in the Lord, and do good... – **Psalm 37:3a**

- **What do I do if my boss mistreats me or persecutes me?**

**Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.** (Matthew 5:11-12) That was probably where your mind went immediately, right, since it's our final week on this memory passage. Rejoice and be glad. Let's further be sure that what we feel as persecution is owing to

our Christlikeness and humble speaking of truth in love — not because of rebellion, or rule-breaking, or complaining, or dissension, or clock-watching, or laziness. It's not persecution to correct behavior that doesn't point to the diligent work and greater glory of Christ. Such behavior should be corrected for the glory of God.

How disoriented to God's word for a Christian worker to think they should receive preferential treatment from a Christian employer because of their faith. As with everything in Christ, the reality of a new heart, a renewed mind, and the filling of the Holy Spirit raises the way I live my life for God's glory. It does not gain me some privilege so that I have to do less, but empowers me to do more. We obey as we would Christ, bowing to his sovereignty, and we render service — we work industriously as slaves of Christ. We work for him, not a junior grade supervisor. We are not “the boss is coming” people. We don't just try and please people when they're on my is on us. That is an error in and of itself. Because we work for Christ, and all things are laid bare before him. There is never a time he does not see us. So we don't just work when somebody calls get busy here comes the boss.

**Colossians 3:23–24** — Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, <sup>24</sup> knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

As we understand our work is ordained by God, understand that we are to work as servants of God, we also understand that our accountability is ultimately to God.

- We receive reward from the Lord — v 8.
- The Lord in heaven judges sees and judges without partiality — v 9.

Ultimately it is not a supervisor or CEO that we give account to — It's to the Lord. He knows my heart, and judges, punishes, and rewards without partiality.

In **v 9** we moved to those who are higher up the chain of authority. Masters, same for you. Treat those under your authority as though you would the Lord. Everything that applies to the servant in terms of diligent work done as unto Christ, a sincere heart, an awareness that the Lord sees and will judge — all that applies to the master, or boss, as well. Do not threaten those under your authority, but see to it those you rule over receive Christlike treatment. This is 180° away from the Roman standard for masters, who could act with impunity toward those they owned. In spiritual death you thought and lived as there was no accountability. Now those masters realize they are not ultimate. The ultimate master is the Lord Jesus Christ, who will measure and weigh the heart and behavior of every human, including bosses. This should cause masters to tremble in any case. But remember

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that this is the church. The Christian master who has Christian servants doesn't have property in the Roman sense of ownership. He has a borrowed authority over brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. What he does to them he does to the body of Christ.

To summarize the household codes that we have seen starting with wives toward the end of Ch 5, remember that we are all under authority, and we are to submit to the authority that God places over us, and that will involve human authority. That submission is a pointer towards something greater than just that relationship. The submission of wives or husbands is a pointer to the way that the church submits to Christ. The submission of servants or employees is a bowing to the sovereign goodness of God. And on the other side of the coin, for those who exercise authority:

Husband, Love your wife as Christ loved the church. This is not about you being the boss of something, though leading certainly goes with it. This is about you giving yourself away for the sake of your wife and family. In so doing it points to what Christ has done. That's a massive assignment. We see a sense of accountability again as we wrap up the household codes with masters, who are reminded that they are to treat their servants, as though they are treating Christ. And they are to do so with an awareness that they will answer to Christ. This is a sweet way of living, but it will put to death all of your flesh. May God help us to do all that we see. We obey him. We serve him. We work for him. We give account to him. We received back from him. All to the glory of God. So, as we look at these life lessons for our daily work and endeavors, we see that all of it points to Christ. Paul in his letter to the Philippians has one condensed statement that summarizes all of it: For me to live is Christ. To be a Christian is to spend the whole of the gift and resource of life for Christ and his glory.

Now, as Paul anticipates the overwhelming nature of the assignment when he moved into the Christian living section and prayed powerfully for them, he knows there is massive opposition and hostility from the enemy of your soul. So before the Apostle has completed his letter he gives us spiritual tools and weapons to fight the battle. We begin there next week, Lord willing.