

***The Secret to Freedom
At Home and Work***
Ephesians 6: 1-9

**First Presbyterian Church
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We have the second part of Paul's instructions to the Ephesians about the household codes. He's teaching them about the essential relationships in their day to day lives, and what difference it makes now that they are in Christ. Once again, I want to walk us through this text with a series of eight reflections.

1) Christ Jesus Reveals the Bigger Picture. When Paul got joined to Jesus, he saw the world in new light. It's as if everything he knew before was flat and two dimensional. Then after Jesus appeared to him, Paul saw the Reality behind, within, around, the world where we live. There is a deeper meaning even to the most ordinary things we do. The Lord Jesus is the third dimension. In him we receive depth perception. He gives everything eternal purpose.

This is another one of those truths whose importance cannot be overstated. If we do not know how God has made himself known in Jesus, we cannot see what matters. We are in the shallows. No matter how sophisticated or learned we might be, we're missing the eternal dimension to human life. Our sight is limited to this world and its standards. We live for the wrong things.

But when the truth awakens us, we see so much more. The Son of God entered the world as the man Jesus. God became the brother of every boy, girl, man and woman. He conferred his eternal worth on each one of us fully and equally. He also laid claim to our allegiance. He is the true King, the one master, our brother and our Father. Apart from him, as Psalm 16 says, we have no good. But in him, there is fullness of life.

2) Children Belong to the Household of Christ. Our passage begins, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right." Today we live in a child-centered culture. Parents devote their lives, energy and wealth to enriching their children. This was not always the case. In the 1st century world of food insecurity, economic scarcity and political coercion, survival was paramount. Children were a burden until they could become useful. Jesus, of course, challenged that view. When his disciples wanted to stop the children from being a nuisance to him, Jesus

demanded, “Let the children come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus elevated the value of children. He put his hands on them and blessed them.

So let’s think about how the Ephesian Christians would have gained access to this letter from Paul. How convenient it would have been if Paul had just sent a link by text. Then every family in the church could watch the video on their own iPad in their own time in houses protected by securely closed electric gates. Alas. There was only one copy. Script, no audio. Many people could not read. So the letter would be read aloud at the gathered worship service. Probably in someone’s cramped home. And *Paul assumes that the children would be there!* No nursery. No inflatable room filled with bouncy balls to entertain them. Children worshipped with their parents. And were considered part of the eternal household of Christ.

The single most powerful way to impress upon a child the reality of God is for parents to go together with their children to gathered worship. They don’t have to understand the message fully or even know why we stand and sing. But Dad and Mom in the room, acknowledging Jesus as true king, offering attention, sharing resources, greeting the others joyfully—this is what brings Jesus into young hearts.

3) Children have power to choose and to act. Paul writes specifically to the little ones. He tells them to obey their parents *in the Lord*. Every kid has to obey. Then as now, from the moment you are born, you get taken places by your parents. They set the rules and tell you what to do. And with every year that passes, you have more and more personal power to willingly cooperate or not. Paul elevates even the children to look past life as just two dimensional. It’s not just you and your parents with their demands. There is the Lord Jesus who stands above and behind your parents. He is the master. His Father is the one Father of all. So, obey your parents in the Lord. Obey your particular parents as part of belonging to Jesus. The earlier a child learns about the reality of God our Father and Jesus his Son, the more depth the child has in realizing why we strive to do right, to please, to make the family proud. The love and Lordship of Christ stands behind and flows within the family.

4) We Parent in, for and under the Lord. It totally creeps me out to know that there are Christian groups which over stress the authority of parents and demand rigid, absolute obedience of children. They create a climate of fear. Which creates a culture of pretending. Which ends in rebellion, rejection of the faith and life long anger. All of which totally misses the heart of Paul’s instructions.

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger. Oh my, how that stabs me as a parent. So many times: Hyper-correcting. Frustrating expectations. Commands without purpose. Stifling dissent and even feelings. Legislating over nonessentials. Demanding more. To be a parent is to be haunted. As I look back, I think getting our basketball goal was a great decision. It gave me a gauge on how mad or frustrated we made our teenage boys by listening to how loud and long they pounded the ball on the driveway and against the goal.

By contrast, Paul speaks about bringing children up to maturity. The word implies a process of nurture and nourishing. We model the practices that make for good character, outward focus, patience, and encouragement. Parents quest to know Christ more and to please him, and then invite children along on that quest. It's revealing to our children that we parents also have a heavenly Father. We are actually brothers and sisters of Jesus who live to obey and worship and love our heavenly Father together. Once again, Paul keeps turning two-dimensional relationships into three dimensional ones. Christ Jesus provides the depth of an eternal perspective in family dynamics.

5) Slavery in the First Century was Different. We switch focus now to a different pair of interlocking relationships. He turns to slaves and masters. This immediately makes us uncomfortable. Should such a thing even exist? Are we allowed to talk about this?

Slavery was a reality in the Roman world. Estimates are that as much as 25% of the 1st century population served as slaves. It was a fact of life. But immediately we have to note two realities. A) Slavery then was different than the slavery practiced in America for 300 hundred years. People became slaves through economic debt, through being abandoned infants or children, or by being prisoners of war. Much rarer was being kidnapped for the purpose of slavery. Slavery was not based on being part of a racial or geographic ethnic group.

Further, *Slavery was not for life.* It was for a designated time. Frequently, slaves worked to earned wages that were held aside for them until they could be used to buy freedom. Many slaves who became freedmen continued working for the same people as employees. This is why some translators use "bondservants" instead of slaves. Indeed these household servants might rise to being entrusted with great responsibility.

B) The Scriptures do not justify slavery as a practice. Indeed, Paul condemns those who traffic in forced slavery (1 Tim. 1: 10). He encourages any slaves who

can get their freedom to do so (I Cor. 7: 21). He begs Philemon to legally free his runaway slave Onesimus (Phl.16). Yet in the 1st century, as only a tiny per cent of the population in the Roman world, Christians did not have the power to make that change suddenly. But the seeds were being sewn by once again revealing the third dimension of the relation between bondservants and masters.

6) Work as Unto the Lord. Paul writes, “Slaves obey your earthly masters...with a sincere heart, *as you would Christ.*” Immediately, we get this transformation from two-dimensional thinking to three dimensional. It may look like the human master has all the power. Indeed, we’ve probably all had some bosses or coaches or teachers who wanted us to feel like their word was the only word of authority. It was their reality and we were just living, and obeying, in it. But Paul, even as he tells the bondservants to obey, reveals the limits of earthly masters. There’s only so much the worst boss can do to you. There’s only so much the most evil dictator can do. They cannot touch your soul. They cannot rule you forever. They are mortal and they will die. But your Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead and lives forever. He is the one true Master. The true King who shed his blood to make us his brothers and sisters. See the bigger picture. Look beyond that demanding teacher, that erratic boss, that frustrating supervisor, that demeaning coach. See the Jesus who stands behind, above and within this world. See the 3rd dimension. We live for Christ. So we work, in whatever do, for Jesus first.

Paul teaches that when we work for human authorities, we can see beyond them to Jesus. We can do even menial, frustrating work with “a good will, as to the Lord and not to man.” Run laps? OK. I’ll do that. But in my heart, I know I’m doing it as a gift of choice to Jesus. Get that report out before I go home? OK, I’ll make that report a love gift to Jesus, even when I’m the last one to leave. Take an extra shift when I’m dog tired? Sure, I’ll serve joyfully my Jesus who through you has asked me to do this.

7) It All Counts. Paul then reminds the masters to treat their servants with the same care they would have for the Lord Jesus. He commands them to stop threatening. Those with power are not to abuse those who serve or work under them. Because we see beyond two dimensional relationships. We see the third dimension. The God behind it all.

Jesus is the one true King. He is equally king over earthly kings and earthly slaves. He is equally Lord over people of great power and those with almost none. Jesus Christ brothered us by becoming one of us. He raised the value of every human being. And he claims allegiance from every human being. High and low,

educated and ignorant, resourced or empty, potent or weak, we will all stand before him. He has no partiality. Wherever we are placed in the world, we are called to do what we do as unto Jesus our King. How we treat each person, any person, counts as the way treat Christ. How we do even the most menial work counts to Jesus as much as how we do great work.

8) The Secret That Transforms Everything. You're not taking something from me if I give it to you. You didn't have the power to snatch what I freely gave. Think of Jesus in the Upper Room. His friend was about to betray him. His other disciples were about to desert him. Soldiers were about to arrest him. Religious authorities were about to judge him. Pilate was about to condemn him. The Roman power machine was about to take his life. It looked like he was about to become powerless, to be used and abused. But not so. *You can't take what I freely give.* So he took the bread, his body about to be ripped and torn. He *gave* it to them. He took the cup of wine, his blood about to be shed in the most horrible way. He *gave* it to them to drink. It's as if Jesus said, "The worst the world does to me will be the best I can do for you. You're not taking my life. I'm laying it down for you. That's how love works."

The same is true for us. A soldier demands "Carry my pack for a mile." Jesus tells us "Carry it two." Do freely more than is asked. Because you do it for Jesus. Those who demand, assign, expect. Go on and serve them. Do the work with joy. Do it seeing the third dimension. You're not the boss of me. Jesus is. And he asks that I serve you as a gift to him. With a good will and a great joy, I will do whatever I am asked and more. Because it all counts. Because it's all for him. That's the secret. Serving Jesus makes me free in every situation.