

Work: Servants and Masters

Ephesians 6:5-9

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

Introduction: Slavery in the Ancient World

One of the most stinging criticisms that is leveled against the Bible is that it endorses and condones slavery. There is an ugly history in America of Christian slave-holders using verses like Ephesians 6:5 to justify the system of slavery. The ESV and some other translations soften the blow of these verses by translating “doulos” as “bondservants” instead of simply as “slaves.” They have just reason for doing so, because the slavery situation in the ancient world was complex and some slaves were held in lifelong slavery as essentially property and others were like contracted bondservants, held in temporary slavery for a period of years.

Slavery is an ancient practice, nearly universal in human societies until Christians led the fight to abolish slavery in the 1800’s. The story of Christianity and slavery is a complex one, as is the Apostle Paul’s treatment of slavery here in Ephesians 6. I’ll try to simplify the complexity while still remaining honest:

1. The Bible acknowledges the presence of the practice of slavery, which was deeply rooted in the fabric of society throughout biblical times. While the Bible does not seek to abolish slavery, nowhere does Scripture endorse the practice as normal or established by God for good. In fact, the Bible seeks to set limits on slavery and to protect the humanity of slaves. In the Old Testament, God forbids the practice of holding fellow Israelites in lifelong slavery, limiting the term of indentured servitude between Israelites at seven years. In the New Testament, Paul clearly asserts the equality of slave and master before God, as we can see in this passage.
2. Christians led the effort to end slavery twice. Christians replaced ancient slavery with medieval serfdom, and serfs were recognized as free persons with rights, while still being tied to the land and to the lord of the land. Chattel slavery – owning persons as property – was revived in the early 1600’s as African slaves were imported into Europe and the American colonies. This African slave trade continued until the 1800’s, when Christians again led the effort to end slavery.
3. Even today, millions of people worldwide are being held in various forms of slavery, and Christians are leading the fight for freedom for these slaves. So, Christians are leading the effort

to end slavery a third time. And the basis for the Christian desire to end slavery is the biblical truth of the full dignity, worth and equality of all human beings, which is taught very clearly in today's passage.

I. Paul & Slavery

If we focus on the specific passage before us, we can see that Paul is clearly not advocating for the abolition of slavery, but neither is he fully condoning its practice as normal and established by God for good, as he does with marriage and parenting.

A. Not Advocating Abolition

So, why would Paul not advocate the abolition of slavery? Well, the simplest answer may be found in the fact that Christians were a persecuted minority within the Roman Empire, with no authority to enact such change. Perhaps the second reason is that Paul and the Apostles were focused on personal transformation through the Gospel rather than on social transformation through revolutionary politics. He would rather see Christians display the change of heart brought about by the Gospel in their serving and even their slave-owning than to lead a doomed political movement.

In this is a lesson for us today: What should be the priority for the church, the Gospel or politics? Personal transformation or social revolution? The church's mission is a Gospel mission, to proclaim and demonstrate the redeeming power of the Gospel in our lives and our community. We are a Gospel show-and-tell outpost in a fallen world, not the wing of a political movement.

I think I can confidently say that Emperor Nero was a worse ruler than President Obama, Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, but the Gospel advanced in power throughout his reign, spreading from a small band of believers in Jerusalem to a community present throughout the Roman Empire, all within about 30 years, when one of the most notorious dictators in history was in power. The church did this by focusing on proclaiming the Gospel, planting churches, building community and living for Christ in the midst of a decadent, pagan culture.

B. Not Condoning Slavery

But it's also clear in this passage and in other places in Paul's writing that he did not view slavery as being good, normal and ordained by God.

In I Corinthians 7:21-23, Paul says, *"Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) for he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men."*

So Paul says to gain your freedom if you can and do not become a slave. Many slaves in the Roman Empire voluntarily sold themselves into slavery to pay off debts or to help their family. Paul urges them not to do so. He wants those already in bondage not to be concerned but to realize their true freedom in Christ. But if they do have an opportunity to become free, they should.

In Ephesians 6, we can see three interesting things about how Paul treats slavery:

1. He clearly does not say that it is ordained by God or good or right. This absence is important because he does say these things about marriage and parenting. He says that marriage was ordained by God as a picture of Christ's relationship with the church. He says that children should obey their parents, "for this is right." He cites Scripture to support both marriage and children honoring their parents. He does none of this regarding slavery.
2. He clearly asserts the full equality of slaves and their masters in the eyes of the Lord. He says, *"whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free."* And then later he says, *"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."*
3. He addresses slaves first, treating them as fully responsible human beings, calling them to offer willing service, as unto the Lord. This is significant because the single thing that most undermines the institution of slavery is a high view of the human dignity of the slave. In the context of the Roman Empire, such direct instruction to slaves and such affirmations of equality between slaves and their masters was pretty radical.

In these three aspects of his teaching, we could even say that Paul was sowing the seeds of slavery's destruction, by teaching the equality between masters and slaves. This touches on another very important aspect of Paul's teaching throughout this section of Ephesians: In dealing with husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves, Paul teaches hierarchy of roles but equality of persons.

A hierarchy among equals is a centrally important truth for understanding the Bible's teaching on human relationships. Some people are given leadership responsibilities by God within any human society, but all people are created equal as God's image-bearers.

Today, people don't like the word hierarchy. They think it necessarily involves oppression and inequality. They claim that any hierarchy makes some people better than others. But this is a very serious mistake: If we give in to the assertion that all hierarchy is bad because hierarchy means inequality, we're actually giving into a false belief that will undermine a belief in human equality.

Think about it: An insistence on an egalitarian anti-hierarchical view actually undermines human equality. Why? Because you can't ever get rid of hierarchy. Someone will always be in a position of

leadership; someone will always be in charge in any organization. But if hierarchy means inequality, then that would mean that the President of the United States, the CEO of any corporation, the president of any organization is actually a superior human being, not just someone functioning in a role as a superior within an organization.

The only way to maintain the full equality of human beings is to believe that a hierarchy does not in any way destroy equality, so then hierarchy is not bad. Tyranny is bad. Oppression is bad. Bad leadership is bad. But the very existence of organizational structure and hierarchy is not bad; it's a necessary part of how any human society functions.

Okay, so we've talked about slavery and we've talked about hierarchy, now how does this passage apply to our lives, in a society without slavery? Well, it's pretty clear to see that the principles of work and supervision of workers contained in this passage have direct application to employees and employers, to workers and bosses today.

II. Servants/Employees

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.

So, if you work for someone, you should be able to glean from what Paul says here to slaves. And what does he say? Our work for others is to be guided by these principles:

1. Obedience to those placed over us should be given in the fear of the Lord. The expression "fear and trembling" is used in the Bible to describe how human beings stand before a holy God. Thus it is obedience in the fear of the Lord which should characterize our service to those in charge of us.
2. Obedience to those placed over us should not be an external show but should be sincere and generous. The word which is translated as "sincere" in "sincere heart" means both single or simple and generous. So, to obey with a sincere heart and not by way or eye-service as a people-pleaser, means that our desire is simple, single-minded and generous. We are serving with focus and energy.
3. Obedience to those placed over us should be done for Christ. Paul emphasizes this five times in verses 5-8.
 - a. *Bondservants, obey . . . as you would Christ*

- b. *as bondservants of Christ,*
- c. *doing the will of God from the heart,*
- d. *rendering service . . . as to the Lord and not to man*
- e. *knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord*

This third point is really the central truth in Paul's teaching about work:

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” – Colossians 3:17

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

What does work look like when it is done for Christ, in the name of the Lord Jesus? Well, to use Paul's descriptors here, it should be done with a sincere and generous heart, with good will, from the heart. In other words, knowing that we are serving Jesus in our work should make all the difference.

If Jesus were to come down from heaven and appear before you and ask you to do something, would you do it? Would you grumble and complain about what He asked you to do? Would you drag your feet and do it half-heartedly? No! You would be so excited that Jesus had asked you to do something for Him that you would do it joyfully, enthusiastically and to the very best of your ability. What Paul is telling us, quite simply, is that Jesus is asking you to do your job, whatever it is, for Him from the heart.

But what do we do if we work sincerely as unto the Lord and our earthly boss doesn't notice? The last thing Paul says here then comes into view: We are working for the reward we will receive from the Lord, not for the reward we receive from people here.

III. Masters/Employers

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.

For those who are business owners, employers or supervisors, Paul's teaching is simple and clear: Do the same! Now, obviously, you are not to obey those who work under you, but you are to treat them with the same sincerity of heart, generosity and good will that you expect them to offer to you.

The specific application Paul gives just for the bosses is this: “stop your threatening.” If you have problems with those who work under you, deal with them directly, humanely, sincerely and openly. Don't threaten and try to motivate by fear. That's de-humanizing, de-moralizing, as ineffective as it is wrong.

When I think about Paul's teaching on work, it reminds me of Johnny Appleseed. Parents, YouTube has the 8-minute Johnny Appleseed video produced by Disney in 1948. It's worth watching as a family. Why did Johnny Appleseed work so hard planting apple orchards?

Johnny Appleseed's real name was John Chapman. Unlike Paul Bunyan and some other American legendary folk heroes, John Chapman was a real man who planted apple orchards in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Ontario, Indiana, Illinois and Northern West Virginia. He was a devout man of faith and as he walked the land, covering more than 100,000 miles of travel in his life, he would plant orchards of 50 apple trees each and sell them to settlers.

But my favorite part of the Johnny Appleseed legend is the song:

***Oh, the Lord is good to me.
And so I thank the Lord
For giving me the things I need:
The sun and the rain and the apple seed;
The Lord is good to me.***

In this song, which John Chapman probably did not write, Johnny Appleseed thanks the Lord for giving him everything he needs to do his job well. He pursues his calling with joy, gratitude and a single-mindedness that really embodies Ephesians 6:5-8. He's able to do so because he understands who has given him life, who has called him to his work and who has given him everything he needs to do his work well.

Conclusion: It's All for Jesus!

In the end, our work is just another area of our life that must be transformed by the grace of God for the glory of God through Jesus Christ. Remember that, in the scope of Ephesians, we're in the Gospel Application section, where we're learning all about what it means to live life in the light of the Gospel, the good news of what Jesus has done to save us and make us His own.

In a fallen world, alienated from God, full of spiritually dead people, it's no wonder that people live for themselves. After all, we are born as spiritual zombies, the walking dead, cut off from the life of God by our sinful nature and by our ongoing rebellion against Him. We naturally don't know God, don't love God and certainly don't want to live for the glory of God.

The Gospel changes all of that. As we are made alive by the Holy Spirit and as we are joined to Jesus Christ by faith, everything in our lives changes. We see that life is a gift, given to us by a gracious, loving, patient and kind Heavenly Father. Because we know our Father loved us so much that he gave

His only Son for us, we know that He gives us what is for our good, always, whether we can see that or not. So, redeemed by His love, we trust Him and seek to live our lives in obedience to His will and for the praise of His name. One way we do that is in our work. Our work, and all our lives, are from Him and through Him, redeemed by Him and lived for Him!