

Ephesians 6:5-9

Slaves of Christ

As we come to our passage this morning, Paul is continuing his application of the work of the Holy Spirit, who is filling us full of Christ, to the everyday vocations of the members of Christ's body.

Normally when this particular passage is addressed today, preachers may focus their attention on the horrors of slavery. While we will not be presenting a Christian ethical response to slavery this morning, let me say upfront that the "involuntary" enslavement of a portion of the human race is an abominable evil that God finally excised from our culture through His dreadful judgment of a horrific, bloody civil war. But it is not clear whether Paul is dealing with involuntary or voluntary slavery, which was quite prevalent in his day. Also, Paul is addressing slavery as normative institution in his day and seeks to regulate that institution by the transforming power of our union with Christ rather than condemning the institution wholeheartedly and requiring all Christian slaveholders to free their slaves. Paul's approach may also be due again to the question of whether or not he may be addressing a "voluntary" enslavement. We could spend much time on this topic, investigating the cultural norms of Paul's day but we want to look at this passage to see Christ and how our Lord truly affects our every day lives.

Another approach to this passage would be simply to address the slavery issue in brief, condemn it while explaining that we no longer practice slavery in our country, and then seek to apply this passage to our everyday employer and employee relationships. However, while I certainly believe that what Paul says here has much to say about our vocational responsibilities today, we must be careful not to leap from Paul's present concerns lest we miss several extremely important points that Paul is making.

First, remember that is addressing the church and our relationships with one another in the body of Christ. He has already told us in **5:10** that we are to "try and learn what is pleasing to the Lord" and in **5:17** that "we are to understand what the will of the Lord is." Having been translated from the kingdom of darkness and safely delivered into the kingdom of God's marvelous light we are now the children of light and therefore we are to walk as children of light. How do we do this? The Spirit of God, who unites us to Christ through faith, is filling us more and more of Christ through the means of grace until we all grow up into the mature man, the glorious image of Christ. In light of this, it is truly amazing how Paul now addresses the slaves who are members of the household of God. Imagine living in Paul's day and culture and hearing him address the slaves who are as much members of the body of Christ as are their masters. They are addressed as full members of Christ's body, just as were the women and children of the church. Truly as Paul confessed before the Galatians:

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.
28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong

to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (**Gal. 3:27-29**).

It is clear that Paul does not mean that these relationships are now completely obliterated in our present day world and culture, but that our having been united to Christ and raised up into the heavenlies with him has so redefined those relationships that our one union with Christ preeminently defines who we are. Truly as Paul says and the whole household of God can confess including men, women, children and even slaves:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me (**Gal. 2:20**).

Paul stresses this fact in **v. 5** by reminding both the slave and the master that on the one hand the "earthly" master of the slave is the master he serves but on the other hand both the Christian slave and the Christian master serves a greater Master of them all (**v. 9**). Truly in Christ we have all taken on Paul's favorite title of himself; we are all the privileged slaves of Christ. There is a sense in Paul's understanding of the nature of the body of Christ in that even though we continue to live in a world that is passing away in which we are still responsible to follow certain cultural norms that in the body of Christ, whether husband or wife, child or parent, slave or master, we are truly all one in Christ Jesus. Together we make up the one body of Christ, the one temple of the Holy Spirit, the one holy and royal priesthood so that together we may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (**cf. 1 Pet. 2:5, 9**).

Therefore, when we remember that both the Christian slave and the Christian master are equally members of the body of Christ who are both being filled by Christ's Spirit then they too will display the characteristics of "submitting to one another in the fear of Christ" (**5:21**). Just as the husband and wife and the parent and child all submit their wills in service to one another then also the slave and master as Christ's servants must learn to humbly submit their wills in service to one another in the fear of Christ.

Another thing to remember is that Paul hasn't simply jumped from the immediate family to what we normally think of as the workplace where employers and employees relate to one another. Paul is still addressing the family or the household itself. With this in mind it's interesting to stand back and look at the larger picture of the home that Paul is addressing. As Paul specifically applies our union with Christ to our everyday vocations, why does he specify three relationships? Surely, he could have addressed many more as well as even fewer ones? Why three? Look at this entire passage as a Christian man and note that there may in fact be many men in the congregation who could fill all three of these roles at the same time. There may be many men who are husbands, fathers, and masters in Paul's days. It is also interesting that Paul tells each of these men to fulfill their responsibilities in a manner that is consistent to Christ. They are truly to model Christ in every one of these three relationships. They are to love their wives, disciple their children and oversee their slaves as Christ would do each of these. But notice something else about the specific nature of each of these relationships: Paul uses the

language of a priest in **5:26-27**; the language of a prophet in **6:4**; and the language of a king in **6:9**. In other words, I believe Paul is pointing out the fact that while each member of the body of Christ has their specific roles and functions in living out their union with Christ, in many ways the Christian man functions as a model and example of Christ's person and work. He serves as Christ's representative to the body of Christ in his office of prophet, priest, and king.

Now, as we look at the specific responsibilities of the slaves and masters we must remember what we have said from the beginning that in God's kingdom we must not think of headship, authority, and servanthood in the same way that unbelievers think about these. Even those whom Paul sees having authority are to submit to one another in the fear of Christ. Just as the husband uses his headship to lovingly serve his wife as Christ loves the church and just as the parent uses their leadership to graciously disciple their children, so the Christian master must use his authority to sincerely oversee their slaves. Notice how Paul stresses this fact in **vv. 5, 9** (i.e. both are to serve one another with sincerity of heart).

It is true that we no longer have these exact same roles in the life of the church but we can learn much from what Paul says to both of these roles in a way that applies to all of our relationships. Remember what we have said from the beginning that just because you are not married, or you do not have children everything that Paul says in these specific relationships you can apply to many other areas of your Christian life. The same is true here. Even though we don't see slaves and masters in the church today, much of what Paul says we can, by looking at the bigger picture, see how we live out our Spirit-filled union with Christ together in all our relationships within the body of Christ.

Slaves are told to obey their masters. While we may not literally fulfill the roles of slave and master today, clearly, in every relationship we have whether at home or at the workplace we relate to those who are our superiors and to those who are our inferiors. There are those we must answer to (whether our employers or customers) and there are those who in the chain of command must answer to us.

Well, in those diverse relationships, how can we apply what Paul says to us here? First, Paul addresses those who are to relate to their superiors or to those we must answer to. Basically, we are to respond to our superiors by doing what we are told, whether they are standing over us and watching or they are absent, "as to Christ." This means that we don't simply do our work for the pleasure of our employer but even more so for the pleasure of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, we serve our employer as if we were serving the Lord Jesus Himself. Practically this means that we will work diligently whether or not the boss is looking (**v. 6**) and that we will not worry if we do many things behind the scenes that no one ever sees or praises us for (i.e. without reward), knowing that our reward is ultimately in Christ in heaven (**v. 8**).

Peter points out that we should do this whether or not our employers are believers or unbelievers (**1 Pet. 1:18ff.**).

But those who are Christian employers or managers or who have people under them in some way must also treat those under their authority with the same sincerity of heart (**vv. 5, 9**). You can always tell the character and nature of a person most in watching how he or she treats those who are under their authority. Basically, Paul says that they are to treat their inferiors as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. They are not to mistreat their employees or those who are under their authority by threats that manipulate, demean or terrify them. Rather, just as the slaves must show respect, sincerity of heart and goodwill so those in authority must do the same.

Note how both the traditional roles of the slave and master, or inferior and superior, are dramatically transformed by the gospel of Christ. The future kingdom of God has broken into our present age and dramatically affects each of our relationships so that our heavenly union with Christ transforms each of our everyday vocations: whether it is our vocation of husband or wife, parent or child, employer or employee. Everything that touches our lives is now transformed by our union with Christ. Again this reminds us of an important doctrine that was revived during the Reformation: the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. To live a life that is pleasing to God, you don't have to sale everything you have and become a missionary to Zimbabwe. Rather, as the Spirit is filling you full of Christ every vocation that God has given you, no matter how menial, falls under the lordship of Christ and is done in order to please the Lord. As you serve as a husband or wife, or child or parent, or whatever other vocation God has called you, you are serving as Christ's representative in loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and in loving your neighbor as yourself.

This is what Christ has accomplished in you and is how God is summing up all things in Christ. He has gloriously lavished the riches of his love and mercy on you by giving up his only Son Jesus Christ to die for your sins and be raised to give you everlasting life. This is the work of grace that has saved you by faith in Christ so that you have now become God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand that you should walk in them (**2:8-10**). What a glorious privilege you now have to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ (**4:1, 13**).

Amen!

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