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Bondservants and Masters **Ephesians 6:5-9**

Intro: After a relatively short exhortation to children and fathers (6:1-4), Paul now turns his attention to the 3rd and final part of the household code he wishes to address, that of bondservants (slaves) and masters. Before we dive into Paul's instructions, it's important that we get a grasp on the nature of slavery in the Roman era and how much it differed from the more recent forms of slavery that existed in the US and Britain up until the 19th century. Within the Roman Empire, slaves constituted at least 10% of the population, but that increased to between 30% and 50% in the capitol of Rome. The slave class was a major part of Roman society. But, instead of being based solely on race, people could become enslaved for a number of different reasons: economic necessity, war, kidnapping or by birth.

Also, unlike slaves in the US, Roman slaves could often rise to prominent positions of responsibility in society. They could work as doctors, teachers and even government officials. They could manage household finances, earn their own money and even purchase their own freedom. In spite of this, there were still plenty of horrible features of Roman slavery, with many slaves literally worked to death or constantly subjected to awful conditions. A slave could be whipped, branded, mutilated, or killed. Barclay says, "The terror of the slave was that he was absolutely at the caprice of his master." Female slaves served their masters' sensual desires and all slaves were considered the property of their masters. So slavery in the ancient world wasn't any more civilized, beneficial or socially necessary than what existed in the American South.

But, just like the ante-bellum South, slavery was part of the social and economic fabric of the ancient world. This terrible institution was eventually changed by Christianity, just as Christianity also bettered the status of women and children as time passed. But it's the nature of Christian work, not slavery, that's Paul's chief concern in this passage.

But that's not the whole story because the discussion of the duties of slaves and masters is the last of 3 examples of the submission of one class of persons to another which Paul introduces by the topical sentence:

“Submitting to one another in the fear of God” (5:21). Since Paul is presenting these as parallel examples, we can’t help but wonder if he is maybe suggesting that slavery has the same permanent validity as the marriage or home relationships. Or, since we would all say that slavery has been rightly abolished in our Western society, should we then also infer that each of these other relationships is also just temporary? Although Paul’s not directly dealing with the rightness or wrongness of slavery itself, the very way in which he speaks of slaves inevitably raises this question. To put the matter even more stringently, what do we say to those who condemn Paul because, when he had the chance, as here, he did not denounce slavery outright?

The 1st thing we can say is that although Paul didn’t directly condemn slavery here, he also didn’t condone it. That makes his treatment of slavery entirely different from his treatment of marriage and the home. In the first case Paul grounded the relationship between spouses in the relationship of Christ to the church. Marriage is an outgrowth of this eternal, previous relationship. In the second case, he grounded the duty of children to parents in natural law (for this is right) and revelation (first commandment with promise). This isn’t the case with his discussion of slaves’ duties to masters or masters’ responsibilities to slaves. Nothing in the passage affirms slavery as a naturally valid or divinely mandated institution.

2nd, Paul’s discussion of the duties of Christian slaves and the responsibilities of Christian masters transforms the institution, even if it falls short of calling for outright abolition. In the ancient world the slave was a thing. Aristotle, the most brilliant of the Greeks, wrote that there could never be friendship between master and slave, for master and slave have nothing in common: “a slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave.” The institution was so much a part of the fabric of Roman society that directly challenging it would have been like insisting on banning internal combustion engine vehicles today.

Paul’s words are entirely different. He calls the slave a slave of Christ, one who wants to do the will of God (6), and who will receive good from the Lord for whatever good he does (8). Likewise, the master is responsible to God for how he treats the slave, who ultimately is God’s servant rather than the master’s own property (9). This is another way of saying that the slave, no less than the master, has been made in God’s image. As such, he

possesses inestimable worth and great dignity. He is to be treated properly. In such a framework, slavery, even though it remained slavery, could never be the same institution for believers as it was for non-Christians.

Third, it was this transformation (which came from viewing all persons as made in God's image) that ultimately destroyed slavery and continues to transform work relationships today. It's almost laughable in our modern society how people are quick to disparage Christianity and faith in God while clamoring and demanding all of the societal benefits that originated with the preaching of and widespread acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Being ignorant of true ancient history, they fail to understand just how drastically Christianity has transformed the world, including the abolition of slavery. Christianity was a new theology. This theology changed the philosophy of every society it invaded. One's philosophy affects one's ethics. And transformed ethics determine how we treat people at home, school, church, and in the marketplace. Because Christianity brought a new, true theology, it inevitably uplifted man—and continues to do so. This is a continuing transformation, and we must all be involved in it.

The ultimate answer to the critic who asks, "Why didn't Paul condemn slavery? And why did the Christian church take so many centuries to abolish it?" is simply a counter-question: "Why are you not treating other people as God has treated you?" The problem isn't why didn't somebody else do what they should have done quicker, but rather why are we not doing what we know we should be doing now. In the ancient world slaves were often very unjustly treated. But workers are often treated unjustly today. Sure, in most countries, workers can't be killed for poor performance. This is due in part to a pervasive Christian ethic. But workers can be scorned just as thoroughly, wounded just as deeply, threatened just as harshly, and despised just as cruelly. We can often be complicit in those injustices. That's why these verses continue to speak just as insistently to us as they did to those who lived in the first century.

But, the focus of the passage is on the relationship that existed between slaves and masters. Paul's purpose in dealing with the household code of his day was for the immediate and practical benefit of those who were living in the Christian households. We will deal with Paul's focus first and then apply it to our modern situation after.

5 – As with children, slaves are instructed to obey their human masters as obedience was the culturally appropriate form of submission of slaves to their masters. Also, as with children, it's significant that slaves are addressed directly by Paul as people possessing their own agency in the household as well as the church. This would have been unprecedented in the ancient world. You don't kick the tires of another man's vehicle and you don't address another man's property. As we will see through the course of our study, Paul, little by little and chip by chip is slowly but most definitely undermining the institution of slavery by placing the Christian slave and the Christian master on the same level or class before God.

Paul pointedly makes the distinction that slaves are to obey their masters according to the flesh, or human masters because in the very next verse he will say that they are actually bondservant (slaves) of Christ (**6**). In doing this, Paul offers Christian slaves a way to navigate their unfortunate role in the institution of slavery that doesn't outright abolish the institution on the one hand but effectively undermines it at the same time. Slaves are to obey their human masters but not because they belong to them. Instead, since they are slaves of Christ, they're to obey their human masters as an expression of their ultimate obedience to their heavenly Lord. Slavery to Christ actually puts believing slaves on an equal footing with their believing masters since Christ is master of both (**9**).

Ultimately, slaves and human masters are subjected to the same Lord and both must obey Him. This undermines the institution of slavery by refusing to accept that slaves are nothing but the property of their human masters or possess less inherent value as them. What Paul is saying in this passage is that, at least for believers, slaves and masters stand on equal footing before Christ.

Still, a slave's obedience to his master is to be taken seriously, or with fear and trembling. This may sound odd when referring to a relationship between believers but it's actually not. These 2 words are often used together as an idiom by Paul. An illuminating example is found in **II Cor 7:15**. Paul's referring to Titus' visit to the Corinthian church. Titus wasn't their slave-master but it's clear the Corinthians treated him as an authority figure worthy of their respect (protégé of Paul). Their fear and trembling wasn't the posture of true fearfulness or threat but that of respect and deference. In the same way, slaves are to respect their human masters with appropriate

reverence and deference.

At the same time, this respect and deference isn't to be faked or done for show but is to be genuinely expressed in the sincerity of their heart, just as they would give it to Christ. If a slave was unclear what his attitude should be to his human master, he could draw on his own reverence and respect for Christ as an example of how they were to act in their position. Sure, some masters may not have been worthy of respect, but slaves weren't given the option of evaluating the worth of their masters, or lack of. Their role as slaves was to offer respect, a role that was devised from outside the slave – master relationship. The slaves' relationship to Christ is the source of their conduct toward their human masters.

Charles Spurgeon put it this way, "Grace makes us the servants of God while still we are the servants of men: it enables us to do the business of heaven while we are attending to the business of earth: it sanctifies the common duties of life by showing us how to perform them in the light of heaven."

6 – Paul expands on the expected sincerity of a slave's obedience in this verse. Slaves are to do their appointed work sincerely, not just when they are being watched. Paul uses the term eyeservice, which is a term that appears to have been coined by him as it's only found in his writings (**Col 3:22**). Men-pleasers also seems to have been invented by Paul. Clearly, he had given some thought to the phenomenon of slaves working for eyeservice as men-pleasers which was likely a fairly common practice – even to the extent of inventing his own terminology for it. The work ethic of many slaves was that of a refrigerator light bulb – they only work when someone is looking. The point of these expressions is to make the distinction between doing the right thing and being seen to do the right thing.

Slaves of Christ are always seen by their heavenly Master; but the higher motivation for their sincere work is to do the will of God from their heart. The Christian slave wants to do sincere work because they have been transformed by Christ to want to do God's will. This desire flows from the center of their Holy Spirit transformed inner being. In Greek culture, manual work was despised and the goal of being successful was getting to the point where you never had to do any work. This mindset doesn't exist in God's

kingdom where hard work and manual labor are honorable.

Now, it may seem strange that God's will for slaves is to obey their human masters. Does this mean God's will for slaves is to remain indefinitely in bond-service? That's not exactly Paul's intent here. Slaves are to play their role in the harmonious operation of the household. Just as a child will one day grow up and leave their parents; so too, a slave may find themselves in a different situation. But until that day, in their current situation, they have an expected role to play for the benefit of the household and that is God's will for them!

7 – Doing God's will from the heart is what enables slaves to serve with a good attitude. The word service is literally *slaving*; not very genteel but an accurate expression of what was expected of a Christian slave. Goodwill refers to a positive attitude exhibited in a relationship. This is actually a further outworking of a transformed heart with a genuine internal (spiritual) motivation rather than just work done for the sake of appearance.

Can you imagine slaving with a genuinely good attitude? Most of us have "slaved away" at a job, if only just in our minds. The key is to do it as to the Lord and not to people. Slavery was an unjust institution but a believing slave's work (slaving) was a legitimate expression of service to the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul appears to insist that this slaving be done in the service of Christ and not in the service of people. This simple phrase had the potential to undermine the entire institution of slavery since it rejected the cultural assumption that slaves belonged to their human masters as their property. More than other Christians, slaves had to look past their unjust situation to see that their service was ultimately to their heavenly Master, who would give them their just payment.

8 – This last verse is significant for 3 reasons: 1) it reiterates that the slaves' heavenly Master sees all their deeds so they shouldn't just work when being watched by human masters; 2) the injustice of their slavery will ultimately be rectified since they will receive back from the Lord for the good they have done, even though they're never paid for their labors by their human masters; 3) it further undermines the institution of slavery by putting slaves on an equal footing with free people since both will receive the same treatment from the Lord.

Some scholars see this receiving as a reward that is granted in heaven but that's not necessarily the case. The word can refer to receiving something that is owed (like wages) or receiving compensation for loss or harm. As an encouragement to both slaves and mistreated free people, Paul reveals that the wages that were owed to them for all their hard work and good attitude – would be paid back to them by the Lord. This is a reward as much as it is a promise of back-pay. This isn't necessarily a reward for good behavior as much as it is their just recompense.

9 – The address to masters is short compared to that of slaves. Paul exhorts them to do the same thing towards their slaves. This doesn't mean masters are to obey their slaves! Instead, it's the expectation to do the right thing before the heavenly Master is what human masters have in common with their slaves. Masters are to treat their slaves with respect, without threatening them. Since slavery offered no wages for work done well, slaves were naturally tempted to do their duty only when being watched and masters were tempted to motivate their slaves through the use of cruel means. In fact, in that day, threats and punishments were the normal way of controlling slaves. Believing masters must reject such methods as they are incompatible with the way they are treated by their heavenly Master, who showers them with love and blessing.

Christian masters' attitude towards their slaves must also be shaped by the theological reality that their heavenly Master is the same as the slaves'. This reality affects 2 things: 1) Both share the same Master so both are put on an equal footing before Him. This powerful principle undermines slavery by erasing the class distinction between slaves and masters by eliminating the notion that slaves are the property of their masters. 2) The fact that their shared Master is in heaven reminds both slave and master that their Lord sees all. Thus, both masters and slaves are to be motivated to do good deeds out of reverence for the One who sees all and to whom they are ultimately accountable.

The class status of the Roman Empire will have no bearing on the Lord's assessment and judgment of slaves and masters. Both will be equally accountable to Him and must bear this in mind as they relate to each other.

Of course, besides the indentured servitude of your own children, the institution of slavery has thankfully fallen by the wayside for the most part in

civilized countries around the world, thanks in large part to the Christian gospel. But, although that particular relationship has disappeared there's still a need to recognize that these principles still aptly apply in the arena of employer-employee relationships and still need to be applied today. What does an employee owe an employer?

1. Obedience. In terms of the work to be done, employees stand in the same relationship to employers as children to parents. It is the employer's job to determine what must be done and (in many cases) how it should be done. It's the employee's job to obey his employer in these areas. Now this does not mean that the employee is free to disobey God, even if his employer tells him to, or that he is forbidden to make suggestions. But it does mean that he should willingly do all honest work assigned without assuming he knows better than his boss or bosses.

2. Respect. This may be difficult at times, particularly if the employer is unwise or arbitrary. But it's made easier by the idea that the employee ultimately serves Christ, even in a difficult situation. This Godward relationship is the key to the entire paragraph. For slaves are to obey their earthly masters as they "would obey Christ," strive to win their favor "like slaves of Christ," and serve them as "serving the Lord."

3. Sincerity. The word Paul actually uses in this sentence is *aplotemti*, which has the idea of generosity or liberality as well as sincerity. It suggests that the employee should not hold back from his best but should actually pour himself out liberally in honest service.

4. Loyalty. Paul recommends a steady, faithful service that comes from having the heart in the right place loyalty. It involves loyalty to the employer and to the company and a desire to see the work done.

5. Good will. As John Stott says, employees should work as if their "heart and soul" are in it. This term comes last because it aptly summarizes the preceding.

Employers, on the other hand, are exhorted to treat their employees with the same respect that they would want to be treated with. All are God's children. So in the final analysis both are to be serving God and are to be rewarded or judged by that Master. Again, it's not the position we hold, whether it is

high or low, management or labor, or even slave or master. What matters is whether we are treated with dignity, whether we are regarded as having real worth. Christianity declares, "You do have real worth! You are made in God's image! What you do does matter!" If so, we should do our own work well and value others. 😊