

Slave Yourself!

Ephesians 6:5-9 January 3, 2024

Ephesians 6:5-9 - ⁵Slaves, obey your human masters with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as you would Christ. ⁶Don't work only while being watched, as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, do God's will from your heart. ⁷Serve with a good attitude, as to the Lord and not to people, ⁸knowing that whatever good each one does, slave or free, he will receive this back from the Lord. ⁹And masters, treat your slaves the same way, without threatening them, because you know that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

You should embrace your role as a slave. That was Paul's message to the Christians who really *were* slaves in the church at Ephesus. The slave population was somewhere between 10%¹ and 33%² of the empire and probably quite a few of the members of the church were from this group.

After many words promising God's power and His using you in His unfolding work in the cosmos - after hearing that the Lord breaks down all these walls and grants us access to Himself and gives us hope and purpose and so much more - now Paul says, "Be the best slave you can be."

If you were *actually* a slave, how might that make you feel? But, did you notice? He *didn't* just say it to *actual* slaves. He included freemen. He included masters. And, as a matter of fact, he includes all of us. But he also includes himself. Paul, James, Peter, Jude, and Timothy *all* identify themselves as slaves of God in their New Testament writings.

Now, we live in a culture that prizes - almost worships - personal freedom. Personal liberty. My rights. It's baked into our American mentality. And while I'm extremely glad that we live in a relatively free society, the truth is you and I should embrace our roles as *slaves*.

The Biblical perspective on life, even daily life, is that we are God's children, we are His friends, but we are also His *bondservants*, assigned and distributed into a life path by our King. Our actions, attitudes, and behavior in the home, in the workplace, in the public square, in relaxation, in crisis, are all supposed to filter through this perspective, where we recognize that my life is *not* primarily about how comfortable I am or how successful I am. The point of my life is to receive God's love, be a conduit of His grace, and glorify Him in the process.

Because this is the Biblical perspective, because God is doing an eternal work through my life, because the Gospel applies in every generation and in every situation, that means that my *circumstances* do not determine who I am or what I should do. Circumstances are real, they matter to us and to God, but they are not the determining factor of your life and your walk with the Lord.

¹ The British Museum *Slavery In Ancient Rome* <https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/nero-man-behind-myth/slavery-ancient-rome>

² Geoffrey Bromiley *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*

Some of the people listening to Paul's letter had very difficult circumstances. Some did not. The message was the same. And it's the same for us.

Ephesians 6:5 - ⁵Slaves, obey your human masters with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as you would Christ.

What did it mean to be a "slave" in Ephesus? Scholars are often quick to point out that slavery then wasn't quite the same as it was in American history. For example, people sometimes put themselves into slavery voluntarily to pay debts. Some data shows that, around this time, 50% of slaves were freed before age 30.³ Some slaves were cooks or bakers or furniture makers. Some were carpenters, some letter carriers, some musicians or actors or teachers, or even physicians.⁴

But that was not the case for all slaves. Others experienced *extreme* abuse and misery. Slaves working in mines and quarries worked with no downtime and died in large numbers. One historian wrote, "*Death in their eyes is more to be desired than life, because of the magnitude of the hardships they must bear.*"⁵

In a home things might be just as bad. It was not illegal for a master to rape his slaves. And, some were taken as sex slaves.⁶ Not everyone volunteered for indentured servitude. Many were kidnapped or taken through conquest. Ephesus was a hub for the Roman slave trade.⁷ Slaves might come from Israel, or Arabia, or Africa. Slaves came from Ireland, Scotland, Eastern Europe.

So you have the skilled craftsman working with gold and jewels who signed up for slavery to pay off debts. And then you have people be brutalized and abused after being kidnapped from their homeland. In-between, you had jobs that weren't so bad, but weren't so good. There were things that you certainly wouldn't do if you were *self*-employed. For example (and I've been saving this piece of research since our very first study in this book): You may recall that Ephesus had a famous public toilet that was used by people throughout the day. You can visit the ruins today and sit on the seats, though they ask you not to utilize the facility.

Ephesian masters would send their servants to go down and warm the seats before using the toilet.⁸ So, there you are, working in the house, and your master says, "Head on down and warm my seat." Your job was to go and sit there, while other people sat around you doing their business, and wait till your master came to do his. I've plunged a few toilets at work, but I've never had to do *that!*

So this is the range of experience. And to *all* of these slaves, Paul says obey as if your master was Christ.

³ R. Kent Hughes *Ephesians: The Mystery Of The Body Of Christ*

⁴ Cornelia Roberts *Roman Slaves* *The Classical Outlook*, Vol. 43, No. 9 (May, 1966)

⁵ *Slavery In Ancient Rome*

⁶ Nghiem L. Nguyen *Roman Rape: An Overview of Roman Rape Laws from the Republican Period to Justinian's Reign*

⁷ *Slavery In Ancient Rome*

⁸ *The Public Toilets Of Ephesus* <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/ephesus-public-toilets>

When he says fear and trembling, he doesn't mean to cower, he means with respect.⁹ And then he says in the sincerity of your heart. This way of living comes from the depths of the new life we have in Christ. Our attitudes, words, and behaviors well up from the fount of grace the Lord has put in us.

Sincerity is a word that means integrity,¹⁰ and bountifulness,¹¹ and generosity.¹² God commands them to be *generous* as slaves. Now, we are *not* slaves, though I'm sure some of you feel chained to your desk or your boss is a taskmaster. These verses apply to our life at work.

You may not love your job, you may want out of your job, you may be overqualified for your job, you may see a lot of wrongdoing at your workplace. But, the fundamental command God has for you as you work is: Work respectfully, treating your fellow employees *and* your boss with grace and generosity because you should think about your job as if you were doing it for Jesus Christ. Because as far as He is concerned, *you are!*

Ephesians 6:6 - *Don't work only while being watched, as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, do God's will from your heart.*

What Paul is saying is not only challenging to *us*, it was also challenging to the Roman culture. You see, guys like Aristotle said slaves were just living tools.¹³ They had no rights. Culturally and legally they did not have the *option* to obey.¹⁴ But here's Paul, speaking in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and he's says, "No, *you* are a free moral agent. *You* are an individual with value and dignity and the capacity to *choose* whether you will do what God says you can do or to not do that."

And it wasn't just "have a good attitude." Paul challenges all of us to have the highest quality of work, not just for our own career advancement, but because it is *right*. In a mind-blowing revelation, Paul says, "You're in a job somewhere. It may not be what you want, but there you are. As you work, energized by God's grace, as you accomplish your job with integrity and respect and diligence, *you are doing God's will!* He counts it as ministry. He counts it as service to Him.

Some Roman slaves had very individualized or limited roles. One job, for example, might be to drape the toga on his master.¹⁵ That menial, seemingly unnecessary job, can be spiritually glorious. God is *that* involved in our day-to-day. He's *that* interested in our lives.

Ok, but what if my slave job was in the mine? What if I'm being sexually exploited? Those are *very* hard circumstances and hard questions. We can look to a Biblical example like Joseph in the book of Genesis. He knew something about being enslaved, about serving in a cush job and in the worst job imaginable. He dealt with situations where his Godliness clashed with his circumstances. It wasn't easy, but he was able to stay true to his faith and be used by God all along the way.

⁹ Darrell Bock *Ephesians: An Introduction And Commentary*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary Of Old And New Testament Words*

¹² Bill Mounce *Greek Dictionary*

¹³ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians Through Philemon*

¹⁴ Stephen Fowl *Ephesians: A Commentary*

¹⁵ Roberts

At the same time, he suffered greatly. It's not that God *wanted* him to suffer, but that difficult road led to the salvation of thousands of people. He is an Old Testament example of the New Testament reality that God's strength is made perfect not in our comfort, not in our ease, but in our *weakness*.

That's one reason why Paul didn't say, "Just escape your slavery." Some say, "Why didn't the New Testament writers come out more strongly *against* slavery?" Some go as far as saying the Bible *endorses* slavery. It doesn't. What Paul recognizes is that slavery was a *reality* in their time. Just like *having* to work is a reality for the vast majority of people. And God *does* scatter His people into all these places and corners so that they can shine the light of the Gospel in all places.

The Gospel *does* lead to the abolition of slavery. We've seen that in history and we'll see elements of it in our text. But Paul is talking about here-and-now Christianity in practice. And he says, "Ok, you *are* slaves. Here's the way you should slave." Now, if you could buy your freedom, *great*. If your master *wanted* to free you, Paul didn't say, "No, stay as a slave." *But* it was always about glorifying God and doing what was Godly, even if your circumstances weren't good.

Paul met this guy named Onesimus. He became like a *son* to Paul.¹⁶ As an old man, Paul was so helped by Onesimus and he wanted him to stay and be a part of the ministry. But then he found out that Onesimus was a runaway slave. And he told him, "The *right* thing to do is for you to go back and present yourself to your master." Luckily, his master was a Christian and Paul even knew him. But *that's* how serious Paul was about not reacting to circumstances, but living with Christian character. "Go back to the slavery you escaped and be a Christian there."

If you are a Christian, the goal of your life is not the exaltation of yourself. The goal of your life is the exaltation of Jesus Christ in whatever circumstance you're in.

Ephesians 6:7-8 - ⁷ Serve with a good attitude, as to the Lord and not to people, ⁸ knowing that whatever good each one does, slave or free, he will receive this back from the Lord.

So, for like the millionth time, Paul says "As to the Lord. As to the Lord." You're not actually working for your boss, you're working for Jesus. You're not a cog at your company, you're an emissary of Christ's Kingdom, on location. Everybody wants to be stationed in Hawaii. But Lemoore needs staff.

In verse 8 Paul includes free citizens, too. This isn't just a *slave* thing, it's a *Christian* thing. And though a Christian may be unrecognized or under-compensated, the Lord promises to reward our day-to-day faithfulness in the life He has scattered us into.

In Colossians 3 and 4, Paul says very similar things as we're reading here. But there he says, "the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever *wrong* he has done."¹⁷

¹⁶ Philemon 10

¹⁷ Colossians 3:25

God is watching. He cares about our conduct. He pays attention to the things we do and the things done to us. You may have a terrible boss who doesn't treat you right. In the end, God will hold them accountable. Meanwhile, we must keep a Biblical perspective. *Your boss isn't the problem!* In fact, your boss is an *opportunity*. They are a potential sibling in the family of God. And *your* behavior may be the one demonstration of Gospel grace they see.

One of the important things we learn here is that oppression is not an excuse for wrong-doing. That's a popular idea in our culture right now. If I decide I'm oppressed, then I'm excused for bad behavior or lashing out or abandoning my duties. But that's not Godly. It's not the Christian way.

Slavery wasn't a "good" thing. But, for the Ephesians, their work situation was an opportunity to exercise faith. *Did they believe* that God was in charge? *Did they believe* that vengeance belonged to Him? *Did they believe* that the best is yet to come? *Did they believe* that life was not defined by circumstances but by the power of God? For some of these people, this was a very hard ask.

It shouldn't be so hard for us. That doesn't mean some of you don't face difficulties at work. But *do we believe* God? That my work is really about me doing it for Jesus? That I *can* be gracious and diligent even when circumstances aren't good? Do I believe that the Lord is looking out for me, or do I think I should demand all of my rights and take revenge for the wrongs done to me?

In our final verse, Paul turns to masters.

Ephesians 6:9 - ⁹And masters, treat your slaves the same way, without threatening them, because you know that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

Some commentators say, "Paul didn't have much to say to the masters because there were so few attending the church." But notice the beginning of this verse: "Masters, treat your slaves the same way." So verses 5 through 8 apply to masters *and* verse 9 applies to masters.

He tells them, "In addition to being respectful and generous and having the proper perspective on who you're really serving in your day-to-day life, you need to give up the threat of violence against your servants." Frank Thielman writes, "[with these words] Paul has cut the thread that held the institution of slavery together."¹⁸

The threat of violence was all masters had to *make* slaves obey. But Paul reprograms the perspective here, too. He says, "This person isn't your property. They aren't a living tool. They aren't a tea cozy to warm up your toilet seat. They are *just like you*, because guess what: *You* are a slave, too. *You* have a Master in heaven. And He sees every single person as equal."

¹⁸ Frank Thielman *Ephesians*

When Paul wrote to Onesimus' owner he told him, "I want you to receive Onesimus back into his job as a slave, but you are no longer to think of him as a slave. He is much *more* than a slave, he's your *brother*, and not *just* your brother, but a *dearly loved* brother."¹⁹

When Paul says "without threatening," it not only means don't threaten to hurt them. It literally means, "you need to loosen up."²⁰ Masters had a moral responsibility to their slaves. That was very counter-cultural. It would require a serious dedication and change of heart for a Roman owner.

Ben Witherington writes, "*Both parties are called on to be proactive, not reactive to their situations. In both cases their eyes must be on the Lord and on how to please Him.*"²¹ To do so, they must ignore what culture said. They abandoned the Roman ideas of how this relationship was supposed to work. Instead it was all about my duty to Christ and how to be flowing in grace toward others.

Now, of course, not all masters were Christians. Not all slaves were Christians. But these callings weren't about whether the *other* person was a believer and doing what they should. It was about *your* life, *your* choices. As a slave, you'd have to set aside some wrongs. As a master, you'd have to set aside a lot of your "rights." But God says, "If you do this, I am glorified, lives are changed, and reward is waiting for you."

So now for you and me. We live in a culture obsessed with personal freedom and personal rights. We live in a time when it's accepted and expected for everyone to just sue their way out of discomfort. We live in a society where any time we feel unhappy one of the first solutions is to find a *different* job or work to change our circumstances or escape as quickly as possible.

These are not the Biblical answers. God *may* want you to change jobs. But Ephesians 6 reveals that your circumstances are not the determining factor of what you should do. Earthly circumstances may discourage or deflate you, but they do not define you. You are defined by the calling of God and the power of God and the specific path carved out for you to discover and walk in. As we walk, God tells us, "By the way, My strength is made perfect in your *weakness*." But that's *good* news. Because we *do* face difficulties. We *are* surrounded by nonbelievers. What a wonderful thing to know our 9-to-5 has value and worth and dignity. That our faithfulness in small, seemingly menial things, counts as doing God's will, and He will reward us for it. We can be excited about whatever we do, because God says, "I'm with you and you're doing it for Me and I'm watching and I'm counting it."

Our part is perspective which should make us the best workers in whatever job we have. We recognize that we are children of God and friends of God, but we also want to be like the apostles and self-identify as the *slaves* of God, or we can use bondservants if that feels better. It may not make every circumstance feel easy, but it keeps our purpose in the forefront. And it gives us a rudder and fuel and spiritual navigation for daily life.

¹⁹ Philemon 16

²⁰ Bob Utley *Paul Bound, The Gospel Unbound: Letters From Prison (Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon, Then Later, Philipppians)*

²¹ Ben Witherington *The Letters To Philemon, The Colossians, And The Ephesians*