



CHRIST OUR LORD

Ephesians 6:5-9
Dan Claire
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This is the penultimate message in a sermon series on the letter to the Ephesians. Next week we will conclude with St. Paul's commission in Ephesians 6:10-23 to put on the armor of God and stand strong against the darkness. Our present text (6:5-9) is Paul's last word prior to the commissioning, in which he reiterates that Jesus is Lord. It is Jesus who leads the church into spiritual battle against principalities and powers, evil and injustice.

Each week, at the conclusion of our worship gathering, we are sent out on mission into a broken world, with darkness and difficulty at every turn. As we go out our best hope for the world is Christ our Lord. We need Christ the sun of righteousness to scatter the darkness from before our paths. Because Jesus is the best hope for our world, he's also our best hope as individuals. Nobody wants to take on the darkness alone. You won't have to do so if you make Jesus your king.

The Lordship of Christ is the main point of Ephesians 6:5-9. But there's a big problem with this passage: it sounds as if Paul supports the institution of slavery. Paul's instructions are addressed to bondservants and masters, and he doesn't say a word about the abolition of slavery. Even though Paul's message is to exalt Jesus as Lord, we're completely distracted by the reference to slavery. It's like attending an AA meeting in a liquor store—it's hard to stay focused.

So before we study the passage, we need to consider Paul's beliefs regarding slavery. Then, hopefully, we'll be able to focus on the main point of this passage: making Jesus our King.

DID ST. PAUL CONDONE SLAVERY?

Slavery is an ancient scourge that has persisted up to the present day. Almost 36 million people are enslaved around the world today.¹ About one-fourth of these slaves are children.² No one should suffer in this way.

Like a virus, slavery has mutated through the centuries, with some variations being more or less virulent than others. Slavery during the Roman Empire wasn't as brutal, generally speaking, as

¹ According to 2014 Global Slavery Index data. www.globalslaveryindex.org

² International Labour Organisation. "ILO 2012 Global estimate of forced labour: Executive Summary." www.ilo.org/forcedlabour

modern slavery, though it would also be inaccurate to equate it with something like blue collar labor today. Without question, slaves could be and often were mistreated during the Roman period. But there are several important differences from our modern conceptions of slavery:

1. Roman slavery wasn't primarily racial, as our modern notions of race only developed in the past millennium. In the Roman period, you couldn't distinguish slaves by skin color. The Romans were "equal opportunity" enslavers, as their slaves could come from anywhere, and could look just like anyone else.
2. Roman slavery wasn't always permanent. While there are many examples of defeated enemies being forcibly enslaved, there are also many examples of people choosing to become slaves for other reasons, including the benefits and protections slavery could provide. There are also many examples of people working their way out of slavery and going on to become Roman citizens, without any stigma resulting from their years as slaves. Just as there are young adults today who do a stint in the military, or in an apprenticeship, there were those in the Roman era who chose to be slaves for a season in early adulthood, before going on to do something else.
3. Roman slavery wasn't always humiliating. While there were many slaves who did the grunt work, slavery didn't always entail manual labor. Slaves often worked as tutors and professors, accountants and physicians in the Roman world.

For these reasons, historians regard slavery in the Roman era as more complex and morally ambiguous than the forced-labor slavery of Africans in the New World. That later form of slavery was so wicked and destructive that it demanded a higher-level response, namely, abolition. William Wilberforce and the Claphamites put on the full armor of God (Eph 6:10-23), and their courageous spiritual warfare to abolish the slave trade is perhaps the church's finest hour during the last millennium. Yet abolition was a new idea in those days. It developed as an appropriate Christian response to the terrible evil that slavery had become. Rewind 1800 years to the Roman era, when slaves sometimes suffered and sometimes prospered, and Paul's silence regarding abolition shouldn't surprise us.

However, it would be wrong for us to conclude that Paul was pro-slavery. After all, he was first and foremost a Jew who traced his ancestry back to the people God rescued from slavery in Egypt. He believed that their oppression under Pharaoh was a terrible evil, and that God's redemption was a great good.

Having met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul converted from Pharisaism to Christianity. Then as a Jewish-Christian theologian, Paul understood Jesus' redemption in light of the original Exodus. Indeed, the very word *redemption* describes the purchase price that Jesus paid in order to ransom his people from sin and death. Consequently, Paul made sharing Jesus' redemption his life work. As a Christian, he helped people escape from spiritual slavery.

Furthermore, Paul became Jesus' ambassador to the Gentiles. In contrast to his former xenophobia as a Pharisee, Paul taught that everyone was made in God's image and could join Jesus' church. Both Jews and Gentiles, men and women, citizens and slaves, parents and children.

As a result, we find Paul throughout Ephesians elevating and affirming marginalized groups, whether talking about racial reconciliation in 2:11-22, or the personhood of women, children, and slaves in 5:22-6:8.

On the other hand, Paul was not libertarian. He always understood Jesus' redemption as a *transfer* of ownership. Paul taught that in rescuing us from spiritual slavery, Jesus purchased us for himself. According to Paul, if you're a Christian, you're a prisoner of Jesus. That's why Paul went to great lengths in Ephesians 3-4 to clarify his own imprisonment, saying:

Oh, you thought I was a prisoner of the Romans? No! They have no hold over me. Rather, I'm a prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ. He plundered Hades to capture me. He defeated principalities and powers, and made me his captive. He led me out in triumphal procession, and then he gave me as a gift to you. Because I am a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ, I am a servant to you. And because he has captured and enslaved all of you, Ephesians, he has also made you gifts to one another, for the building up of the whole body in unity and maturity under King Jesus.

So, was Paul pro-slavery? Yes and no. Paul *wasn't* pro-slavery, in that he spent his life as an ambassador of Christ helping people escape oppression and injustice of every kind. He wrote that free Christians should not enslave themselves to others (1 Cor 7:23). He also said Christian slaves who had the opportunity to gain their freedom should go ahead and do so (1 Cor 7:21).

On the other hand, Paul *was* pro-slavery in the sense that we were made to follow God, and if we aren't serving him, we will inevitably end up serving someone or something else other than him. Paul foretold a day when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). From Paul's perspective, serving Jesus was a no-brainer. Jesus said, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

In other words, Paul believed that you should make Jesus Lord of your life. That's what Ephesians 6:5-9 is all about.

INSTRUCTIONS TO INFERIORS

In vv 5-8, Paul addresses the bondservants, or slaves, who were in the Church in Ephesus. Think about that for a moment! Not only was their church comprised of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, parents and children, but also slaves! Imagine a colonial church in the Deep South allowing slaves as members! Paul, on the other hand, was matter-of-fact about it. No need for further explanation, after everything Paul already wrote in previous chapters about our unity in Christ. By addressing slaves in 6:5 as those who render service *to Christ*, Paul was affirming them as equals, brothers and sisters in God's family, and fellow inheritors of God's kingdom.

Paul instructs slaves to obey their earthly masters as if they were serving Jesus himself. Paul called them to an obedience that was completely sincere—no faking, no double-talk, no saying one thing and doing another, no mocking the boss behind his back. Rather, serving in good will.

Why? He gives two reasons in this passage.

1. (vv 5-7) They should obey because their true master is the Lord Jesus, and everything they do and say ought to be done as unto the Lord. If this sounds familiar, it's because Paul has been saying the same thing to everyone else since 5:21. Whatever your role, Paul says, you should fulfill it as if you were directly reporting to the Lord. Treat your master as you would Jesus Christ.
2. (v8) They should obey because whether or not their earthly masters appreciate them, or reward them, that the Lord Jesus loves them, and their sincere service is a blessing to him. He will affirm and reward them. Indeed, he has promised them an eternal inheritance overflowing from the infinite grace of God.

How ought we to apply this to our own lives? Our modern connotations of slavery are so radically different that we mustn't close our eyes and imagine our teachers and bosses as slave-masters. On the other hand, the underlying principles are relevant. So do close your eyes, and think of that person or persons who serves as your supervisor. Do you treat your supervisor as you would Jesus Christ?

At school, at work, or wherever there is someone in authority over you, the Lord Jesus would have you obey them with sincerity. No half-hearted efforts. No malicious gossip.

Does your teacher or boss give you an assignment and then you roll your eyes? Do you take on tasks but then never follow through? Are you doing the work, but not honoring the person in authority over you? Paul is asking us to follow this golden rule: do unto your superior as you would have your superior do unto you.

But what if your superior is a hypocrite, or crazy, or worse? Unless you're being asked to do something wicked or illegal, you should do as your told, with a sincere heart, *Coram Deo* (before the face of God). Because whether or not your superior likes you, or even sees you, the Lord sees you. The Lord loves you. And he will reward you for your labors.

In Ephesians 4, Paul said it this way: "If you're a Christian, you have been captured by the Lord. He is now your master. He loans you out to others, as a gift to them." Maybe your obedience helps your superior do something good for our broken world. Maybe your obedience leads your superior to faith in Christ. Or maybe your obedience heaps burning coals on the head of a selfish, hateful supervisor. Regardless of the outcome, when it comes to serving your supervisor as a Christian, make sure you act like a gift rather than a curse.

Onesimus was a runaway slave who met Paul while the latter was imprisoned. Paul, who was in chains but not in spiritual bondage, shared the Gospel with Onesimus, who was free but still enslaved to sin. And there in prison, Onesimus was redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ.

As it turns out, Onesimus' master was Philemon. Paul had led Philemon to the Lord some time earlier. By the grace of God, all three of them were ἐν Χριστῷ (*en Cristo*) as they say in Greek. Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus were all *in Christ*.

Paul wrote a letter to Philemon that has been preserved for us in the New Testament. With his letter, Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, in order that Onesimus might be reconciled to Philemon and welcomed back as a brother rather than a slave. In his letter, Paul wrote:

I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. (Philemon 10-11)

The way this reads in the original Greek is particularly arresting and beautiful, because the Greek word for *useful* is χρηστός (*craystos*), which is just slightly different from the Greek word for Messiah, Χριστός (*Cristos*). Put it all together, and what Paul is saying to Philemon about Onesimus is this:

Now that both Onesimus and Philemon are one *in Christ*, ἐν Χριστῷ (*en Cristo*)
This runaway who, from Philemon's perspective, used to be *useless*, ἄχρηστον (*a-crayston*)
Has now become, to both Philemon and Paul, *useful*, εὐχρηστον (*eu-crayston*)

Maybe this is helpful to you as you think about how to honor your supervisor. How can you make sure that you act like a gift rather than a curse? Be useful. And if you're a Christian, then your supervisor ought to know that it's because of Jesus that you are useful rather than useless. Be useful, for the honor and glory of King Jesus.

INSTRUCTIONS TO SUPERIORS

Paul turns his attention to masters in v9. The Greek word for master is κύριος (*kurios*), which is the same word that precedes Jesus' name throughout the New Testament:

κύριε Ἰησοῦ (*kurie Iaysou*) = Lord Jesus

All through Eph 6:5-9, every mention of "master" could and probably should be translated "lord" instead. In this case, here's how Eph 6:9 would read:

Lords (i.e. Masters), do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their *Lord* and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. (Ephesians 6:9)

This way of reading the verse makes Paul's point especially clear. Christian masters must treat their servants with dignity and sincerity and good will because Christ is their master, too. Jesus

has shown them kindness rather than wrath. Consequently, they mustn't be like the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35) who showed no mercy for much smaller debts. They must rather do unto their servants as they would have their servants do to them.

We can apply this lesson to our own lives because we're all superiors in one way or another, whether in the workplace, or at school, or even in the checkout line at the supermarket.

- Before you write a scathing online review about a rude waiter, think about what kind of online review the Lord could have given you.
- Are you a high schooler who has no time for middle schoolers, or an upperclassman who's too cool to talk with the younger kids? Remember your own Master, the Lord Jesus, who stooped down and lifted you up when you were far below him.

You're not autonomous. You're a woman or a man under authority too. Wherever you have people working for you, or somehow of inferior status, make sure you treat them with dignity and kindness, as your Lord has done for you.

Think of those people whom you supervise. Consider how you treat them. Do you love them as the Lord loves you?

If you're a Christian, the Lord is at work in you. It is he who empowers you to imitate him and to extend his grace to others. Therefore, by God's grace, do unto your servants as you would have them do to you.

CONCLUSION

As we come to the end of a lengthy section on relationships within the church, we can summarize Paul's words in terms of both good news and bad news (which in fact isn't bad news at all):

The **good news** is that if you're a Christian, you've been highly elevated in status. No matter who you are, whether single or married, child or adult, staffer or boss, layperson or clergy, immigrant or citizen—no matter who you are, if you're a Christian then you're God's image-bearer, and you're of equal value before the Lord. We may show deference and respect to someone like Archbishop Rwaje of Rwanda, but your worth is the same as Rwaje's in God's eyes. You have honor and dignity and value as a child of the King.

At the same time, there's some **bad news** (which isn't really bad news at all). If you're a Christian, you're a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ. You're someone whom Jesus purchased from slavery to sin and death so that you might serve in his kingdom. Whereas we were formerly useless to the Lord, now we're useful as his servants. And that's not really bad news at all, because his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

If you're not a Christian, the Lordship of Christ is genuinely good news. You're never really autonomous. You're never truly master of your own life. Take inventory of the principalities and

powers in your own life and you'll find that someone or something else always owns you. The biggest secret of contemporary culture, in which we celebrate freedom at every turn, is that you're never really free.

Before his conversion, Paul had no idea that he wasn't free. But after having met Jesus and been blinded by him, Paul began to see how zeal and ambition and rage had seized control of his life and made him a murderer. So he came to the end of his so-called freedom and he gave his life to Jesus. Why? Because Paul believed that the Lordship of Christ was a life-giving, attractive alternative to life on his own.

How else could Paul be so giddy about his imprisonment? He mentioned it at every turn, emphasizing that the Romans couldn't hold him because he was a prisoner of Jesus. You can't miss Paul's unbridled joy at having given his life to Christ. By making Jesus Lord of his life, Paul was set free to change the world.

Sooner or later, we all despair of our own ability to direct our lives for good, selfless, constructive purposes. When this happens to you, remember Jesus' promise:

Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)