

The Letter Of Paul To The Ephesians

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

(Ephesians 1:7-10. ESV)

Message 26

Bondservants And Masters

December 1st, 2013

Ephesians 6:5-9

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Ephesians 6:5. Today we reach the final sub-point of the fourth result clause associated with the main verb provided way back in 5:18. In verse 18 of chapter 5 Paul told us to be ever being filled by the Holy Spirit and then he went on to talk about the four things that would result from our being so filled. He talked first about our worship as a gathered church and he talked about our behaviour as a scattered church. That took us to the last result clause about submitting to one another. He then broke that point down into three further sub-points. The first one was about wives and husbands, the second was about children and parents and this last one is about bondservants and masters. In a nutshell, Paul is saying that if you are truly saved and if you are being ever filled by the Holy Spirit it will show up in your worship AND it will show up in your outside behaviour – Christianity may be personal BUT IT IS NEVER PRIVATE. It affects every area of your life and today we will look at how it affects your work-life.

Now, normally the task of preaching is pretty simple: Read the text, explain the text, apply the text. But today we need to add one more step; we need to talk about how we should discuss this text with outsiders because this is one of the dozen or so passages in the Bible that every skeptic and first year sociology student wants to discuss as a way of discrediting Christianity. If you ever want to share your faith at Tim Hortons, then you need to be equipped to defend and discuss how

the Bible treats slavery. We will undertake to do that at the very end. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

⁵Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or free. ⁹Masters, 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)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let me pull out for you just one “forest level” observation before we drill down to text and tree level.

Forest Level Observation On The Text:

1. The text assumes that servants and masters are sitting in church together

We made this same point last week with respect to wives and husbands and children and parents. This letter would have been read by an elder in one of the branch churches, probably with a little bit of explanation and application as the Sunday morning sermon. Paul is therefore assuming that in the worshipping congregation, sitting side by side would be slaves and masters. That in itself is rather remarkable. One thing that is often overlooked by critics of Christianity is the extent to which the church has been the context and vehicle of massive social change. No reasonable historian would question the fact that the early church was the most radically inclusive social body that had ever existed in human history. Women were treated as full members and as soteriological equals, children were accorded worth and dignity and SLAVES participated side by side with wealthy land owners. The Romans used to deride the church as a religion for women and slaves precisely because they were scandalized by the dignity and place given to classes of people that were normally marginalized in secular society. In fact, church history records that Onesimus – the slave that ran away in Paul’s Letter To Philemon, eventually became the Bishop of Ephesus after Timothy. We don’t know for sure where Onesimus was from – most scholars assume Colossae because many of the same people are mentioned in Philemon and Colossians, but many scholars believe that Onesimus visited Paul in Ephesus and it is not out of

the realm of possibility that Onesimus heard this letter read aloud in church as he sat beside his master, whether in Ephesus or in Colossae as the Letter made its way there and was read aloud in service. Hearing this, we can well imagine that his sense of dignity in Christ grew such that eventually he would sit confidently as head over the church in Ephesus, a church including rich and poor, perhaps even his former master Philemon. The Christian church was a radical place and we mustn't miss that or fail to celebrate that because of the questions that many contemporary skeptics bring to bear on this text. The church should always be a place where the hierarchies of the world are left aside at the door as we sit together as slaves of Christ under the authority of His Sovereign Word.

From the forest level, we drop down now to the level of the text itself. In this passage there is a series of commands given first to bondservants and secondly to masters. Paul says first to bondservants:

To Bondservants:

1. **Bondservants must obey their masters as they would Christ**

The main verb in this section is an imperative; “you must obey” and then it is accompanied by several different modifiers all of which are capped with some version of the phrase, “as you would Christ”. The point Paul is trying to make here is that our work as Christian servants is not really “unto our earthly masters” it is really “unto the Lord”. This has the effect of making all honest work sacred work. Paul says that in Colossians 3:17:

¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (ESV)

This was actually one of the battleground issues of the Protestant Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church taught that there was a two-fold division in the world between the sacred and the secular. The priests and monks were doing “sacred work” and everybody else was doing “secular work” which really didn’t matter. If you were a butcher or a baker or a candlestick maker, your only value to the sacred was your money. Give money so that sacred people can do sacred things. The Reformers said: “No!! All work is sacred and all Christians are priests unto the

Lord!” Luther is famous for saying: “God is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid”¹ meaning that even the lowly milkmaid is doing the work of God, for God, if it is done in Christ. When the milkmaid milks her cow she is providing strength and nourishment to people that God loves. They receive the milk from her hand but they give thanks to God over it because they see behind her hand the smiling Providence of God. The Reformers got this idea from the Apostle Paul. When Paul tells servants to do their jobs with sincerity he is telling them to understand how their honest labour serves and honours the Lord. Servants, employees, do your work as worship and service unto God.

Serving our masters as we would Christ, or as unto Christ or as in verse 6, “as the will of God” is then described using 6 different modifiers, we’ll go through them each in turn.

i. **With fear and trembling (v.5)**

The first one is the phrase translated in verse 5 as “with fear and trembling” an expression which basically means “with all appropriate respect”. This is a wonderful reminder that Scripture must interpret Scripture and that in order to live a righteous Christian life we have to wrestle with the whole counsel of God. We can’t just take one verse that appeals to us and charge off willy nilly to live however we want; we have to look at all of what the Scriptures say on a topic and with the Holy Spirit’s help, figure out how they go together. Suppose that Onesimus, or some other slave sitting in church that day had once heard the Apostle Paul say something like this:

²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, **there is neither slave nor free**, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:28-29. ESV)

If that was all he had heard Paul say, or all he chose to remember of what Paul said then he might think to himself: “Now that I am a Christian, I am no longer a slave! That means I don’t have to do what my master says. I don’t have to work in the vineyard today, I can have a nice long nap and then perhaps help myself to the master’s cupboard and have a nice little feast, after all, I like him, am heir to the promises of Abraham!” He might think that, in fact, I’m not sure we could say that his assumption about that is really all that far off base. When you hear of the glorious freedoms of the Gospel it is very easy to assume that God wants all social hierarchy destroyed,

¹ In his exposition of Psalm 147.

the playing field completely levelled and all human differentiation obliterated. People thought that way when they first heard the Gospel in Paul's day and they think that way today. It is thinking like that that makes people say that if you are a Christian, then there is no male or female in any respect – men are not the head of the household nor are they elders in the church – the Gospel makes such divisions anachronistic. There should be no rich or poor either – everyone should have exactly the same amount of money in the church – all distinctions should disappear under the power of the Gospel. That almost sounds true, doesn't it? Almost. Except that Paul also said this:

²¹Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. ²²For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. ²³You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. ²⁴**So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.** (1 Corinthians 7:21-24. ESV)

Here Paul is saying that the Gospel isn't really about social reorganization – it is about heart regeneration! The Gospel is about setting people free from the slavery of sin – whether that results in occupational promotion or not isn't really the point. The focus of the Gospel is ETERNAL LIBERATION and temporal circumstances therefore become little other than a context for personal growth and Gospel witness. Now, Onesimus needed to hear that. And we need to hear that too. The Gospel is not revolutionary – it is transformational and subversive. More on that later. Secondly, servants must obey their masters as unto the Lord:

ii. With sincerity

We'll be much quicker here; the Greek word under consideration is the word *haploteti* which means “in sincerity” or perhaps “with liberality”. Do it like you mean it, Paul says, don't just do it to get it done. Do it as an act of generous worship unto the Lord. Go the extra mile knowing that your labour serves the will of God and displays his work in you. Thirdly, servants must obey their masters as they would the Lord:

iii. Not in order to be seen by men

We see that in verse 6 where Paul says:

⁶not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ (ESV)

Slaves in the Roman world were notoriously lazy, which is one of the reasons that the institution was eventually replaced in most advanced countries by a form of capitalism where workers are rewarded for hard labour. People tend to work harder when they have a share in the outcome. Regardless, it is not hard to imagine a group of slaves in a vineyard working feverishly when the master comes by to inspect them only to then slow to a crawl as soon as he's walked away. Paul tells Christian slaves: "Don't you do that. You're not working for that guy, ultimately you are working for Jesus and he sees you all the time." Christian servants and employees work hard regardless of who sees you. Fourthly, servants must obey their masters as they would the Lord:

iv. Doing the will of God with all your heart

Paul says that in verse 6b:

doing the will of God from the heart (ESV)

In the Greek it actually says "from the soul" but that expression makes no sense in English and it means about the same as our "from the heart". Paul is telling servants to believe in their hearts that their honest labours are the will of God and serve the will of God. John Calvin, another of the Great Reformers commented on verse 6 saying:

Do not suppose that by the judgment of men you were thrown into slavery. It is God who has laid upon you this burden, who has placed you in the power of your masters. He who conscientiously endeavours to render what he owes his master, performs his duty not to man only, but to God.²

The Reformers taught, believing in the Sovereignty of God as they did, that God puts us where he wants us to serve ends related to his glory and our good. If you are in a menial job with a nasty, foul smelling boss, God put you there. Believe that in your soul! He is not terribly interested in your pay cheque or in your career prospects, he is primarily interested in causing you to trust solely in him and he is primarily interested in developing your character and he thought this particular context would suit those ends very well. So serve there, respectfully, sincerely, liberally AS THOUGH IT WERE GOD'S WILL FOR YOU TO BE THERE – because, in fact, it

² John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I&II Thess., I&II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 330.

is. Maybe the hardships of this job are exactly what is required to teach you whatever it is God thinks you need to learn. Learn it and let him promote you out of it, if that should be his will, in a time that suits his purpose.

Fifthly, servants should obey their masters as unto the Lord:

v. With good will and kindness

We see that in verse 7:

⁷rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man (ESV)

The Greek phrase here is *met eunoias* which means “with goodwill” or “with kindness”. This is a command to not harbour class hostility. It is very common and even broadly acceptable in our culture for the poor to despise the rich; for the 99% to hate the 1%. The Bible forbids this entirely. There are challenges associated with being rich and challenges associated with being poor and each will need grace to hold faith in either situation and that is neither here nor there. You should have pity on one another and cherish goodwill toward all regardless of class or station.

Lastly, Paul says that servants should obey their masters as unto the Lord:

vi. With an eye on their Ultimate Performance Evaluation

Verse 8 says:

⁸knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or free. (ESV)

Ultimately we will all stand before God and give an account for the deeds done in the body, whether good or bad. Let's be very clear on that because Evangelicals tend to get very sloppy here. Evangelicals love to declare: “There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!” (Romans 8:1). Hallelujah! That is true, there is no condemnation for those who

are in Christ and we rejoice in that truth. However, that does not mean that there is no JUDGMENT. The Bible says that there is:

¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Corinthians 5:10. ESV)

Christians face the prospect of judgment too; we do not face the prospect of condemnation to hell if we are in Christ but we do have to answer for deeds done in the body. The milk maid will have to give an account for her milking just as surely as the pastor will give an account for his preaching. That is the performance evaluation that we must be focused on as we go to work each day.

Secondly then, in terms of the commands given to masters Paul says:

To Masters:

⁹Masters, 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 6:9. ESV)

Grammatically it appears that Paul is here giving one command with two related motivations. The command is simply this:

1. Stop your threatening

The Greek could as easily be rendered “leave off menacing” or “abandon threats and menace”. Roman masters could be very harsh in their tactics to control and motivate their slaves. Peter O’Brian, citing T. Wiedmann says:

In order to deal with their slaves, owners were known to threaten beatings, sexual harassment, or selling male slaves away from the households with the result that they would be parted forever from their loved ones.³

Paul says that Christian masters must abandon all such violent and dehumanizing means by which to secure the obedience of their servants. Now, as I mentioned, we will talk at the end briefly about how to defend the Bible’s position on slavery to outsiders but right here in this

³ Peter O’Brian citing T. Wiedmann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 27.

passage we see that the job of destroying the institution of slavery is largely accomplished in this single verse. If masters abandon all such dehumanizing and violent means – if you take the menace out of being a slave master – what is left? Essentially, all that is left is indentured service. If in addition to that you have to sit in church beside your labourers and worship before God as equal and lowly supplicants the institution is further and inevitably eroded from within, as indeed proved to be the case. Christian masters are exhorted to manage their servants without recourse to violence, menace or threatening behaviour; that changes everything! Two motivations are provided:

- i. Because God is your master and he sees all your deeds
- ii. Because God will not show favouritism in judgment on the basis of social class

Christian masters are exhorted to remember that one day they too will stand before their Master and give an account and part of that account will deal in detail with how they have treated those who are subordinate to them. Christian bosses in this room, remember that while you conduct performance evaluations in the present dispensation, at the Final Judgment it is God who sits in judgment over you and he will ask questions like:

Did you extend every benefit you could reasonably afford?

Did you treat Christian employees as brothers and sisters in Christ or did you look down on them?

Did you pay the wages you owed in a timely and compassionate fashion?

Did you provide a safe and enjoyable work environment for those entrusted to your care?

Make sure you are prepared to answer those questions because you will be held to account by a God who appears to have a very soft spot for the poor and the lowly. Remember as well that your wealth or status will not impress the Lord on that day. He gave those things to you in trust and they did not make you who you are, HE MADE YOU WHO YOU ARE. We will all stand naked and equal before God on the last day. On that day, there will be no bosses and no servants, no rich and no poor, no noble and no common – we will stand together as creatures giving account to our Creator. Remember that and treat others accordingly.

Discussing This Issue With Outsiders

As I mentioned off the top, normally the job of the preacher is to read the text, explain the text and apply the text but today we have to add an extra step. There are probably a dozen or so texts in the Bible that are frequently trotted out by skeptics and critics of Christianity and this text is chief among them. 30 years ago you only needed to know the stuff I'm about to tell you if you wanted to witness to college professors and people with a Master's degree; but now because of social media and the internet, everybody who wants to reject Christianity knows at least a little bit about these texts. So, if you ever want to share the Gospel with regular people at Tim Hortons you need to be able to defend the Bible's record on slavery. To do that you will first need to know a little bit about slavery in the ancient world.

Slavery In The Ancient World:

Most of us tend to hear the word “slavery” through the lens of North American racial slavery practiced in the 19th century. But slavery in the ancient world had nothing to do with race or colour. It usually had to do with economics or social justice. The ancient world did not have bankruptcy protection. If you borrowed money to start a shipping business and then you lost your ship and your cargo in a storm and you couldn't pay back your creditors, you had no recourse but to sell yourself into indentured slavery. You would go to the person you borrowed from and negotiate – or the courts would appoint – a certain term of indentured labour. At the end of it, you could go free, or better yet if a relative came into some cash, he could buy you out early. We see that in the Bible with the concept of the kinsman redeemer. The redeemer was the one who bought you out of slavery.

Slavery also was used as a substitute for long term imprisonment. Ancient empires had dungeons, not long term residential prison facilities. Sub-capital crimes were often dealt with by the imposition of term slavery. In our culture if you commit rape you might go to jail for ten years, in that culture if you commit rape you might be sold into slavery for the rest of your life. If you stole property you might be sold into slavery for 10 years.

Slavery in the ancient world could also be the result of military conflict. When the Romans went to war they often took enemy combatants and collaborators as prisoners. Sometimes, when peace

was brokered those slaves were released, sometimes they were not. Most North Americans would be shocked to discover that the vast majority of slaves in the Roman world were white and they became slaves because they went bankrupt, lost a war, or committed a felony.

Secondly, we need to say a quick word about the attitude of the Bible towards slavery as an institution.

The Attitude of The Bible Toward Slavery:

The attitude of the Old Testament towards slavery was pretty straightforward. The OT moderated slavery, limited slavery and outlawed enslaving fellow Jews. In fact kidnapping a fellow Jew to make him a slave was punishable by death according to Deuteronomy 24:7. In the Old Testament you had to be kind to your slave and in most cases, you couldn't keep him for more than 6 years; in the 7th year he had to be set free, unless he chose to remain with you in perpetuity. That was remarkably progressive in the ancient world.

In the New Testament we see the slave trade itself condemned as sinful; in a passage clumping despicable practices together that were “not in accordance with sound doctrine or the Gospel. Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:

⁹understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. (1 Timothy 1:8-10. ESV)

Here Paul is pretty clear, the practice of making slaves of fellow human beings is completely incompatible with the Gospel and with sound doctrine. However, as critics will point out, saying that making slaves is sinful is not the same as saying: “We should set all slaves free” – shouldn’t Paul or better yet Jesus have said that?

This is where you have to explain to people what the Gospel is and what it means to do. Jesus did not come to take the world by force. He said that time and time again. People wanted to make the world the kingdom of God by force and Jesus rejected that approach.

¹⁵Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. (John 6:15. ESV)

Jesus was not out to overturn human society by force, he was out to remake human beings through the Gospel. The kingdom of God is not about revolution it is about transformation. It does not attack the fallen world it subverts it. In addition to what we've read in Ephesians consider what Paul says to Philemon concerning his slave Onesimus, that he is to treat him:

¹⁶no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. ¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. (Philemon 1:16-17. ESV)

For crying out loud if you have to treat your slaves as brothers and more than that as you would treat the Apostle Paul himself, then there is pretty much no point in having slaves at all!! That of course, is pretty much the idea. The Bible doesn't seek to make slavery illegal, it seeks to change the hearts of slave owners and slaves themselves such that the institution dies a natural death, as indeed it has everywhere the Gospel has taken hold.

The Scriptures are not just true, they are effective at everything they mean to do. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.