

EPHESIANS

LIVING (THE) GOSPEL

Week Commencing 10 June 2018

Notes for next Sunday's sermon on Ephesians 6:5-9 "Slaves-masters"

Week 11: SLAVES-MASTERS

Slavery was universal in the ancient world. A high percentage of the population were slaves – perhaps as many as 60 million in the Roman Empire. They constituted the work force and included not only domestic servants and manual labourers but educated people as well, such as doctors, teachers and administrators. Slaves could be inherited or purchased; or acquired in settlement of a bad debt. Prisoners of war commonly became slaves. Nobody queried or challenged the arrangement, rather, it was accepted unquestioningly. Of course, well over a century since slavery was abolished by law in many western countries, it is hard to conceive how one person could think they own another. Yet, of course, there are many places in the world where slavery is still the norm. Cruelty towards slaves was widespread with accounts of terrible atrocities such as slaves being whipped, mutilated, imprisoned in chains, having teeth knocked out, eyes gouged out and thrown to wild beasts or crucified. Into this context Paul speaks. It is remarkable that he should address himself to slaves at all and the fact that he does so, indicates that they were accepted as members of the Christian community and regarded by Paul as actual responsible people!

DAY 1: Read Ephesians 6:5-9

If children are to obey their parents, slaves are to obey their *earthly masters*. Behind their masters, they must learn to discern the figure of their master in heaven, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ. In each of the four verses addressed to slaves, Jesus Christ is mentioned. They are to be obedient *as to Christ*, to behave *as servants* (literally, 'slaves') *of Christ* (v6), to render service *as if you [] serving the Lord, not people* (v7), knowing that they will receive a reward *from the Lord* (v8). The Christ-centredness of this instruction is very striking. The slaves' perspective has changed. His horizons have broadened. He has been liberated from the slavery of 'men-pleasing' into the freedom of serving Christ. His mundane tasks have been absorbed into a higher preoccupation, namely *the will of God* (v6) and the good pleasure of Christ.

Exactly the same principle can be applied by contemporary Christians to their work and employment. Our great need is the clear-sightedness to see Jesus Christ and to set him before us. It is possible for teachers to educate children, doctors to treat patients and nurses to care for them, solicitors to help clients, shop assistants to serve customers, accountants to audit books and secretaries to send emails and arrange schedules as if in each case, they were serving Jesus Christ. The same can surely be said for the factory worker, miner, cleaner, and garbage collector etc. All Christians must work as if serving the Lord, not people.

DAY 2: Read Ephesians 6:5-9

Once Christian slaves were clear in their minds that their primary responsibility was to serve the Lord Jesus, their service to their earthly masters would become exemplary. First, they would be respectful, obeying them with *respect and fear* which implies not a cringing servility before a human master but rather a reverent acknowledgement of the Lord Jesus whose authority the master represents. Next, they would obey with *sincerity of heart* – without hypocrisy or ulterior motives. Third, they would be conscientious, *not only to win their favour when their eye is on you* but as *slaves of Christ* who is of course, watching all the time and is never deceived by shoddy work. Fourth, they would service *wholeheartedly* because they were doing the will of God. Their heart and soul would be in it! All this because they know that their Lord is also their judge and that no good work, whoever does it (*slave or free*) is ever left unrewarded by God.

DAY 3: Read Ephesians 6:5-9

Although the duties of the Christian slaves are spelled out in some detail, Christian slave-owners are given only three principles, all of which have far-reaching implications against the background of the first century AD. First, *treat your slaves in the same way*. That is, if you hope to receive respect, show it; and if you hope to receive service, give it. It is an application of the golden rule. In the way that masters hope their slaves will behave towards them, they must behave towards their slaves.

Second, they were not to threaten their slaves. As parents were not to provoke their children, masters were not to threaten their slaves. That is, they are not to misuse their position of authority by issuing threats of punishment. Punishment was accepted in the Empire as the only way to keep slaves under control, and Christianity does not deny that in some circumstances, some form of discipline is required and appropriate. But threats are a weapon which the powerful wield over the powerless. And a relationship based on threat, Paul forbids.

Third, the reason for these requirements is they *know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him*. Slave-owners were used to being flattered and fawned upon, but they should not expect such discriminatory favouritism from the Lord Jesus. Thus, all three principles were designed to lessen the cultural and social gap between the slave and slave-owner. Instead of regarding his relationship with his slaves as that of proprietor to chattels, or of superior to inferiors, he was to develop a relationship in which he gave them the same treatment as he hoped to receive, renounce the unfair weapon of threats and recall that master and slave together, share the same heavenly master and impartial judge.

These same principles can surely be carried over to the workplace of the 21st century!

DAY 4

We finish this week with some reflection on slavery. The new relationship which Jesus Christ made possible between slave and slave-owners, was something new and beautiful. Yet, it has seemed to many critics, an inadequate Christian response to an unmitigated evil. Did the gospel offer no more radical solution to slavery than an adjustment of personal relationships? Why didn't Paul command the owners to set their slaves free? Why isn't slavery condemned outright for the horribly inhuman thing it was?

Some observations:

- Whilst slavery is not condemned in the New Testament, it is not condoned. Why is it not condemned?
- Christians were at first an insignificant group in the empire. Their religion was unlawful. They were politically powerless. Slavery was an indispensable part of the fabric of Roman society. It would have been impossible to dispense with, without the complete disintegration of society. Even if Christians had liberated their slaves, they would have condemned them to unemployment and poverty. Ancient society was as dependent on slavery as modern society is on machinery.
- People didn't see slavery as a social and economic evil. It was simply part of life. And in the Roman system, slaves were actually regularly freed and often set up in a trade or profession.
- The legal status of slaves was beginning to improve in the 1st century and along with it, the treatment of slaves. They began to be granted legal rights enjoyed by free people, including the right to marry and have a family and the right to own property. In AD 20, a decree ordered that slave criminals were to be tried in the same way as free men. In AD 50, Claudius decreed that sick slaves who were deserted by their masters should be free if they recovered. Domitian in AD90 forbade the mutilation of slaves.
- And yet of course, slavery became a thing of great shame in later European and American colonies! The best Christian minds recognized this. John Calvin, the middle of the 16th Century, attributed slavery to original sin and 'totally against all the order of nature'.
- It was the gospel itself which began to undermine the institution – even in the 1st century. It was Christians who, in the end, were behind the push which outlawed slavery!

References: The message of Ephesians, John Stott