

Slaves and Masters, or Us and Them

Ephesians 6:5-9

As we have moved through the latter half of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we have uncovered some things that sooner or later have made most of us uncomfortable at times. For example, we talked about the difference that Christ should make in our lives, and when we look closely at ourselves, we realize that in some areas there is still a lot of work to be done. And we've heard the sermons, and we've nodded in agreement, but the actual work of taking off the old self and putting on the new has not been as easy as all that.

And in the weeks since we began exploring this amazing passage of Scripture, we may have found ourselves doing the exact opposite of what the Word of God says we're to be doing. Paul tells us to "*put off falsehood*" (4:25), to "*not let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs*" (4:29). We've read that we are to deal with unresolved anger and bitterness, (4:26-27), that we are not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God (4:30), that we are to be kind and compassionate to one another, and that the way Christ has forgiven us is to be the standard for the way we forgive others (4:32). On top of that, we find that we are to imitate God in the way we love each other, and that we are to make wise use of our time (5:1, 15-17).

We read that we are to be constantly filled with the Spirit, that we are to sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord, and that we are to give thanks to God the Father for everything (5:18-20). Wives are to submit to their husbands, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies, children are to obey and honor their parents, and fathers are to see to the proper nurture and discipline of their children (5:22-6:4).

Yet in spite of hearing what God says about these subjects, we have found ourselves engaged in conversations and gossip which certainly do not qualify as helpful by any stretch of the imagination. We have allowed anger and bitterness to take up residence in our hearts. The Holy Spirit is grieved by our thoughts, attitudes and actions. We have been kind and compassionate only some of the time, forgiving some and not others, and forgetting to love others the way God loves us in Christ. We have not always been filled with the Spirit, and we are not always thankful, are we? Wives do not always submit, husbands do not always love, children do not always obey or honor, and fathers sometimes exasperate their children.

During such failures as those, and we've all had them, the Holy Spirit of God picks up those Scriptures and plunges them into our hearts as a dagger. "*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*" (Hebrews 4:16). Most of the time, when the Holy Spirit thrusts the doubled-edged sword into our hearts, He does so

without anesthesia. It hurts! It's painful! We have been convicted, again and again and again. If we were to take just this relatively small book of Scripture we've been exploring, our own failures to live up to it would be enough to demonstrate to us the truth of the verse that "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23).

So now we come to the passage in Ephesians 6 about slaves and masters, and we all collectively breathe a sigh of relief. After all, none of us are slaves, and none of us are slave owners, right? Perhaps this passage at least will let us off the hook, and we can sit back and relax this morning. We can say to ourselves, "Well, that certainly doesn't apply to me! I'm just going to put in my time at church, and walk out of here at the end of the sermon and go on back to my life."

Not so fast. This same Word of God says about itself, "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*" (2 Timothy 3:16). So if this is the Word of God—and it is—and if all of it is God-breathed, meaning that it originated with God Himself—and it is—it has something to say to us. So we're going to look at this passage as if God Himself was speaking to us today—and He is.

As is true of most of God's Word, there is a specific application, and a broader application. Let's look at them.

1 There is a specific application of the principles

By that we mean that Paul was addressing something which was very relevant to his first readers. Remember that the Romans were in power at this time, and the Roman and Greek culture dominated society. The Romans considered menial labor and common tasks beneath them, so in order for them to survive, they had to have someone else do those things for them. Even taking care of their own children was considered too lowly for them to do themselves. So when the Roman army conquered a particular area or country, they brought back slaves. It has been estimated that at the time Paul wrote this, there were as many as 60 million slaves throughout the Roman Empire.

And with slaves, there had to be masters. Paul did not address the issue of whether or not slavery was wrong. He wasn't condoning slavery; he merely accepted it as a fact of their society. But we need to understand this. If you are an employer in any sense of the word, even if you just hire someone to babysit, mow your lawn or change the oil in your car, you are to treat those people with respect and dignity.

But as we've already said, there are no slaves or masters here today, not in the sense the words are used in Ephesians 6. So we look at that and think, okay, that applies to how employees and employers relate to one another. As an employee, I must do my very best all the time. It means

that if I am going to be obedient to Scripture, I've got to be the same when my boss is watching and when he's not watching. As an employer, I must treat my employees with respect all the time, refusing to use threatening as a tactic to control them to get them to do what I want done. Ephesians 6:9 says, *"Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him."* That means that when we all stand before God, God is not going to care whether or not I'm the boss.

2 There is a wider application of the principles

I must learn that whatever I do, I must do it as unto the Lord.

"Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does..." (Ephesians 6:7-8). Does that apply only to slaves or employees? No! Because that same verse goes on to say, *"You know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, **whether he is slave or free.**"*

The parallel passage in Colossians 3 reads like this (listen carefully!):

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." (Colossians 3:23-24)

So while the immediate application of these verses has to do with slaves and masters, or employees and employers, it also means that regardless of which side of that fence I find myself on, I must do everything as if I were serving Christ! I must do everything as if Christ Himself were standing right there in the flesh, watching me. If I am balancing the checkbook, I must have the attitude that this is the checkbook of Christ, and I should do a very good job. If I am ironing clothes or washing the dishes, I must do it "as unto the Lord," as if the Lord Himself were going to wear those clothes or eat from those plates. Do you see how this applies to everything? If I am plowing a field, or mowing the lawn, or selling a car, or pushing paper, or working on a computer, or reading a book, or studying for a test, or going out on a date, or repairing the car, or even sharpening a pencil, I should do it as though Christ Himself were going to be driving that car or using that pencil, or watching me as I go out on that date, or noticing where I go on the Internet, or the television shows I watch or the books I read.

Adopting this attitude for living eliminates any half-hearted, half-way efforts at just getting by. It means that I do **everything** as if I were doing it for the Lord Christ Himself! Boy, that would change a lot of things, wouldn't it? The longer you and I do anything we find faster ways to do them, shortcuts to just get by, things that will "get the job done," so to speak, but no one else will notice.

But understand this, folks: that is not the will of God for you!

How do I know this? Because God's Word says so!

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might." Ecclesiastes 9:10

"Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." Romans 12:11

What about the words for the masters/employers? We might think, well, I don't have any employees so how can this apply to me? Read Ephesians 6:9 again:

"And masters, treat your slaves in the same way." What way is that? Even though the words do not appear in our text for today, the ideas are there—**respect—dignity—value.**

It means that we must learn to treat others with respect and dignity and value, regardless of where we may encounter them. It means that we treat others with respect, even if we don't like them, or agree with everything they do or believe. It means that we are respectful not only of their feelings, but of their worth before God as human beings. It means that we are friendly in the name of Christ, that we do not snub them because they are different or because we've listened to gossip about them. It means that we are kind to the strangers on the highway, or in the checkout line, or over the telephone.

Remember the words back in Ephesians 4:32: *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."* Those words aren't just about being kind and compassionate to the people we already like! They're not about just being kind and compassionate to people who are just like us! They're about being kind and compassionate even to those that society might consider to be beneath us, as a slave would be beneath a master, or an employee would be beneath an employer. And if you consider someone else to be beneath you on society's ladder, the Scripture still says that you are to treat them with respect and dignity, recognizing that they have worth before God.

Look at Ephesians 6:9 once again. *"Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him."* So the wider application of this verse is that even if I am not a slave owner or an employer of other people, I still have to acknowledge that there is no favoritism with God, that I am no better than anyone else, and that God does not look at me and see me as being superior to anyone else.

Even if I was the CEO of a major corporation, I am no better than the person on the lowest rung of the company ladder. I may have a more responsible position, and I may have more authority in the eyes of other people, but my worth before God is no greater than his. So according to Scripture, I cannot use my authority and position to threaten someone else. I cannot throw my

weight around and still be obedient to Scripture. As Jesus told Pilate, we would have no authority were it not given to us from above. When I understand that, when the truth of it sinks in, I come to the realization that my behavior and attitudes towards others has to change. It has to reflect what I say I believe.

Paul told us back in Ephesians 5:18 to be continually filled with the Spirit. The Spirit-filled employee does his best toward his boss even when the boss is not looking. The Spirit-filled employer does his best toward his employees because he knows that he is not superior to them, and that being in that responsible position means that one day he must give an account of himself to Almighty God.

We need to understand this and take this very seriously. The ways that we behave when we are dealing with others is a direct reflection on our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. It affects my testimony when I am rude to someone else. It affects my testimony when I walk past someone without speaking to them. It affects my testimony when I deliberately cut someone off in traffic, or am impatient in the checkout line. It affects my testimony when I do something half-heartedly, thinking no one else will notice.

It is time for each of us to begin to take the Word of God seriously. Don't you agree?