

Ephesians #61 – The Way of Life #11 – Slaves and Masters (1)

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Ephesians - GIW

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We find our text today in the fifth verse of chapter 6, Paul's letter to the Ephesians where he says,

5 Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh,

So we come today to yet another great section of this part of God's holy word where the apostle is working out the great principle stated there in chapter 5, verse 21, we are to submit to one another in the fear of God, or as he says several times in the passage, we are to submit to one another in the Lord. Well, that means that a primary characteristic of genuine Christian faith is submission. You cannot really be a Christian without being in submission to God the Father and to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son. It was Jesus himself who said, "You are My disciples if you keep My commandments," and John the beloved apostle said, "This is the love of God that we keep His commandments."

There are people who think that they can be in submission to Jesus Christ and God the Father and yet not in submission to duly constituted authorities in human life, and that also is not true, for it is a part of our submission to Jesus Christ that we be in submission to one another according to his holy word in the affairs of life. For example in the civil sphere, the powers that be are ordained of God and anyone who is not in submission to those powers is at war with God. And in the spirit of the family, any children who are not in submission to their parents, they are at war not only with their parents but with God who said, "Children, obey your parents." And within the bonds of marriage, any wife who is not in submission to her husband is at war also with the Lord, for it is the Lord who said, "Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord."

You'll notice now in this whole section too that the apostle deals with it after the order of creation itself, and that's a very significant fact. He begins with the institution of marriage and talks first about husbands and wives and what God requires of each of them, and he requires just as much of husbands as he does of wives since husbands in submission to Christ are to love their wives as the church, and he requires that each of them should understand their role in terms of submission to Christ and therefore in due measure to one another. Then having done that, he goes on to the family, the parents and the children and

the relationship between them, and he has a word to speak to the children, and then he also has a word to speak to the parents, especially the fathers.

So we want to notice that he deals with these various spheres of life according to the order in which they are opened up to us in the Bible itself, and indeed in our own experience in life and I think that reminds us of the fact that marriage and the family is basic to everything else. The strength of a nation really does rest upon the quality of the families in it, and the reason why we are seeing such a tragic breakdown in society today is because of the prior breakdown of the Christian nuclear family, for it is out of that that all other respect for authority and the maintenance of that authority throughout all of the spheres of life does come. But now today we come to the third aspect here and that is the relationship between the master and the slave, and I have to say that the proper translation of that word is not "servants" but "slaves." The word "servants" may help to relate it to our own time and culture but strictly speaking the term that appears first in verse 5 in the Greek New Testament is the unvarnished word "slave." So the Apostle Paul is really saying here, "Slaves, you are to be obedient to your masters according to the flesh," and we've already seen from Leviticus 25 that the Bible makes a very big distinction between a slave and a servant. A slave is someone who is in bondage to another person for life and has no option to obtain his freedom by his own action. It's entirely up to the master whether he is to be allowed to have that freedom, and so in a very real sense, no Israelite was ever allowed to make a slave of his brother Israelite; that's what that law was all about. At the very most, he could hire himself out as a long-term indentured servant with the provision that always when the year of Jubilee came in Israel, every Israelite servant was to be liberated and set free so that he was not in the ultimate sense really a slave of another person, but the same law of Moses said that an Israelite could buy and have as a permanent slave one who was not an Israelite person.

So with this clearly in mind, we turn to our text remembering that Paul was not in Israel, he was in the Roman Empire, he was in Asia Minor and writing to the people in Ephesus, and he says to those people who were members of the church but also slaves to some Roman master, he says to them, "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters," and that brings us face-to-face with the big problem in much of visible church today which is the way in which you interpret the holy Scriptures. Now I want to illustrate this by referring to a personal experience. Some years ago when I was laboring in New Zealand, the moderator of the big Reformed churches in the Netherlands came to visit our synod and we were already in conflict with them then over their attitude toward the Bible. We could already see that they were undermining the absolute authority of the Scripture and here was the moderator of this impressive church sitting there and I'll never forget when he turned to me and said words to this effect, "If you were speaking to someone who was a slave today, I wonder what you'd tell them," and right away without any hesitation, I said, "I would tell them be obedient to your master."

Well, I can tell you that Dr. Hofflan(ph), for that was his name, was utterly astounded. He could not believe his ears. He couldn't imagine that there could be anybody anywhere in the 20th century who would say a thing like that because he believes that it is now universally agreed that slavery is inherently evil and that slavery is inherently a sinful

thing to be involved in. Well, brothers and sisters, if that is true, if slavery is inherently wicked and it is a sin to be involved in it in any way, shape or manner, you can't avoid the great question, "Well, then, why didn't Jesus Christ condemn it outright? And why didn't the Apostle Paul, the inspired author of the book of Ephesians, why didn't he condemn it outright?" So right there we were face-to-face with the burning issue of today which is the authority of the Bible, God's holy word, not merely in the society but in the church of Jesus Christ itself, and I can say to you that if you once break with the teaching of Jesus Christ and the apostles of Jesus Christ, you have really broken once-and-for-all with the Scriptures, and there is no end to what you will give up in the process.

Now Dr. Hofflan had hoped that I would say something like this, "Well, I'd tell him to take off and liberate himself from that slavery in which he is involved because slavery is evil." And if I had said that, the next thing that Dr. Hofflan would have said is this, "Well, then, if Jesus and Paul were men of the times in which they lived when it came to slavery, why couldn't they also have been men of the times in which they lived when it comes to women and their place in the church? And why couldn't they have been wrong also in their attitude toward homosexual behavior," for those were the two burning issues between our two churches. And so he wasn't very pleased with the fact that I didn't take the bait and swallow it when he put it out there. I emphasize again, then, the fact that neither Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, nor Paul, the inspired apostle who wrote all these letters in the New Testament, neither one of them ever said slavery is inherently evil, and not once did they say that slaves, therefore, had a moral and intrinsic right to rise up in rebellion. To the contrary, they told them to be in submission and yet that does not mean, and here's the other side of the coin, it does not mean that the Bible says we must have slavery. It doesn't mean that at all, or that it is necessarily the will of God that this kind of bondage must continue.

Now the reason for that is that there is a big difference in the Bible itself between these two institutions and I want to try to point out what that big difference is. Those of you who have been with us Sunday evenings as we've gone through the book of beginnings, the book of Genesis, you know very well that marriage was instituted by God at the creation and that it was in place before man ever sinned against God. It was here, it was a divinely instituted thing for human life before there was any sin or corruption in the world, and you'll notice that Paul quite often makes use of that fact in his argument in the New Testament.

Take a look, for example, at 1 Timothy 2 where he is dealing with the problem of woman's position in the church. Verse 11, "Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. Because Adam was formed first, then Eve." And so on. He goes right back to creation, the foundation of the marriage institution as it came from God and was imposed upon man before there was any sin in the world. He says, "You can't change that. That's the way God made things. You can't change that." Creation order rules out or excludes the headship of the woman. But does he say anything life that with regard to slavery? I've never found it anywhere in the Bible. I've never heard Paul, the apostle, argue that slavery must continue ad infinitum all the way through time and space because

it was instituted by God at creation, because you and I very well know it was not instituted by God at creation. It is something that came in to human life after the fall of man and because of all the complications that flow from that fact, and you know also that there are many things that have come into the world that would have had no place in the world for any of us if it were not for the fall of man into sin, and while some of these things are a necessity, that's not at all the same as saying that they are divinely created ordinances.

Take, for example, such a thing as the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. While we were down near Rapid City, we went to the Air Force base there and saw the B-1 Bomber come in, and that's an awesome thing and the power, the military power and might of our nation is an awesome thing. The power of the sword is a terrible thing and this is instituted by God. The Bible says so. The powers that be are deigned of God and the sword has been given to the civil magistrate as a terror against evil works, and there was no need for that in a world that wasn't fallen, and had there been no fall of man into sin, there would have been no need for any Army, Navy or Air Force. Suppose, then, just for argument sake that the leaven of righteousness and the power of the Gospel of Christ spread over all the world to the point that we didn't need for every nation to have an Air Force and an Army and a Navy, would that violate Scripture? It certainly would not because that day is coming, the great day in which the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea and men will beat their armaments into plows again.

So in the Bible there are a lot of things that have come after the creation of man that are subject to change. In biblical times, for example, the kings ruled over the nations but for a long time the nation of Israel didn't have a king. Was that wrong? Was that bad? Peter says, "Fear God and honor the king." Does that mean that it was wrong for Israel not to have a king? To the contrary, you may remember that when the tribes began to demand of Samuel that he anoint a king, Samuel grieved and went to God in prayer and he said, "The people have rejected me." "No," the Lord God said, "it isn't you they've rejected it's Me," because God was their only king up to that time and yet the Lord says, "We're going to have to give in to their hardness of heart and give them a king." And so Samuel anointed Saul.

So they were for a long time without a king and then they had a king. Well, the particular form of civil government was never revealed in the Bible. God doesn't say anywhere in the Bible, "In order to have a government that I approve of, you have to have a king." No, he doesn't say that. He doesn't say it's wrong to live under a Parliamentary democracy and right to live under an absolute monarchy. He doesn't say that, but whenever God talks about the family, he says it has to be this way because that's the way it was at creation. Now whenever he talks about the relationship between parents and children, he goes back to creation ordinance founding to discuss it.

So the great difference here is the difference between what God says about his own divine institution on the one hand, and what God says about his divine regulation of things that have come since the fall of man, and one of those was the institution of slavery. God didn't institute it, but he did regulate it like he regulates a lot of other things

that are an unhappy result of the fall of man, military forces being one of them, and the point is that when we, in God's providence, are brought into a status of bondage, then we are required by divine regulation to submit ourselves to our masters and that's not out-of-date at all, even though Dr. Hofflan thought it was, it is not out-of-date at all. It applies today as much as it ever did in the history of the world, and I ought to know because for 2 ½ years I was in bondage. The second World War, I was drafted. They didn't say, "Would you like to serve in the Armed Forces of the USA?" They said, "Report. If you don't, the law will be after you." I reported. They took away my freedom. The most humiliating thing was the first day, they stripped me naked and I had to walk around naked all day being examined by everybody under the sun. What a disgusting performance but I had no choice, no choice whatsoever. For 2 ½ years, I was told when to get up in the morning, I was told how much water I could use when I took a shower because they had a shortage, and I was warned that if I went AWOL, a-w-o-l, I would be put to hard labor, and I was even subject to the death penalty if I did certain things that my masters didn't want me to do. I was held in bondage for 2 ½ years and that happens today and it will happen again in the history of the world.

Now my master wasn't one man, it was the command structure of the US Army but believe-you-me, it's bondage. You're not your own master and what does God say to somebody who was drafted into the Army in 1989, if there is such a person? Well, it says, "Slave, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart as unto Christ."

Well, believe me, as soon as I was able to get my freedom again and get out of that Army, I was happy to do it. I'll never forget the day when I walked out of there with my discharge paper. I felt like I was walking on air. The first thing I did was go to a Chinese restaurant and have some chop suey. It just happened to be what I wanted to do and nobody was going to tell me that day what I was going to do. And the Bible also says even in biblical times to a slave, you can find it in 1 Corinthians 7, if you have an opportunity to get your freedom, take it, and Paul in writing to slave owner in one of the shortest letters of the New Testament, hints at the same thing, but do you know that he never says any word in the Bible, "Lady, if you're married to a guy that's hard for you to be married to, you're a Christian and he's an unbeliever, you love Christ, he doesn't care two hoots about the kingdom of God, well, walk away from it. Liberate yourself." He never says that. No, he says, "You're not to do that because marriage is a divine institution and what God has joined together, man is not allowed to put asunder." It doesn't say that with regard to slavery, he says that with regard to marriage, though. So while I walked out of that Army camp in 1946, I remained just as much under the yoke of marriage as I was the day before, and nowhere in the word of God is there any liberty granted to throw off that yoke because that is something that God himself has imposed upon us from creation. The other is merely providential and under God's regulation, the other is divine institution and it comes to us from creation.

Now I hope you can see from that the relevant application for us today and one of the most important in terms of the churches of the world today is this: the biblical way of dealing with these great problems, these great social issues, is not at all what we see in

our generation, and I'm not referring merely to society but also to much of the church. If you read the literature of the World Council of Churches or for that matter, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, so-called, and I predict from now on pretty much the Reformed Ecumenical Council as well, you will find that they talk all the time about the need for the changing of the evil structures of society. That's why the favorite target throughout the world of the church as well as the media of the world is the South African structure of apartheid, and they are saying what we really need to bring heaven on earth in South Africa is to change the evil structure of that society.

Well, I've been down there and I don't like apartheid either but I am sure that the Bible takes a different approach. In Jesus' day there were a lot of people who thought that the cause of everything wrong was the fact that they were ruled by Rome; that they were under the dominion of Caesar. The zealots couldn't wait to throw off the yoke of Roman rule and they had a lot of influence in that day, and that's why they came to Jesus one day and they said, "What about it? Shall we pay tribute to Caesar?" That was the burning question in that day and it really said, in effect, "Our trouble today is the fact that we are in a status of bondage to Rome. That's our problem." And Jesus Christ gave that famous answer, "Well," he said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God." And he himself paid tax. He refused, in other words, to make this the great issue. He saw, in other words, that the real problem was much deeper than the structures of society. There are structures in every society that we might question and we might want to change, but Christ saw that the only real hope in the Roman Empire in the first century was changing the hearts of people who are in the system, as we say, and in the structure, and when they begin to act like new people even within that structure, then you're going to see everything change.

That's exactly what did happen in the Roman Empire. For the first time in anybody's memory, you found these Christians who were slaves were totally different. They didn't just watch the boss to see when he could see them and work hard then and then loaf the rest of the time, and they noticed that Christian masters, they didn't go around beating the slaves all the time, and they found to their astonishment that there were Christian households where the slaves and masters loved and respected one another, and sometimes the master would turn over his estate, even, to his slave because he trusted him and knew he was a godly and honorable man, much like Abraham and his servant or slave. And the more the world saw people like that in the old system, the more the old system began to creak and groan and began to give way to something better, and it was because they saw the power of the Gospel working in the hearts of people.

If there's any lesson that we ought to have learned in our generation in the last 50 years, or at least in the 20th century, it's certainly this: the changing the structures, overthrowing the system does not guarantee any improvement whatsoever. All over Eastern Europe today there are people saying that loud and clear. What did the Bolshevik Revolution really do for the people of Russia? Well, it forged their chains twice as thick as they were before. There hasn't been any improvement and there never will be improvement by the method of revolution, throwing off the system with no change in the people who run the system, and we need to remember that as God's people. That's why we have to be careful

that we are not carried away with a wrong idea of reconstruction today. I think we can all see that our society very much needs reconstruction, we need to get back to biblical law, we had a lot of it at one time and we've lost a lot of it in our social order, but we're not going to have anything like what Christ came to give the world if we don't first have real revival and reformation in the churches of God, so that right in the system like it is right now, God's people are changed and are so noticeably changed that the whole world can't help but see it, for as Jesus Christ once said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation but comes like the working of leaven in a bushel of meal, it comes like a tiny seed that is hidden that grows up to be the greatest of all."

So if you'd like to see the blessing of God resting upon our nation again, don't think there isn't anything you can do. I'm looking at some people right now who could do a lot, they could begin by being in submission to Jesus Christ and to duly constituted authority so that the whole of life right in the system we already have is radically changed just like it was in ancient Ephesus when slaves began to be obedient to their masters. May God so grant it. Amen.