

Masters and Slaves

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – Paul commands submission of slaves to masters as examples of true faith
2. aim – to cause us to work as an example of a proper Christian worldview and ethic
3. passage – Ephesians 6:5-9

b. outline

1. The World of Slaves (Ephesians 6:5a)
2. The Work of Slaves (Ephesians 6:5b-8)
3. The Worth of Slaves (Ephesians 6:9)

c. opening

1. the **context** of this passage within Ephesians
 - a. Paul is using various human relationships common to believers to illustrate what he means by the concept of “*mutual submission*” in **5:21**
 - b. this mutual submission is a part of what it means to be “*filled with the Spirit*” in **5:18**, which is the result of using the time wisely (**see 5:15**), and not be caught up in the debauchery starting in **5:1**
 - c. **IOW**: Paul is explaining how we are to *walk in love* (the theme of **Ephesians 4-6**) – instead of being filled with sin, we are to be filled with the Spirit, mutually submitting ourselves to one another in our various roles, as we do in marriage or in the household between parents and children
 1. (**now**) masters and slaves are used by Paul as another example of this mutual submission that characterizes the entire body of Christ (the *economic* relationship)
2. the **concern** of the use of “*bondservant*” in this passage (**an issue worth the time**)
 - a. *doulos* = lit. a slave; someone serving *under the will* (or mastery) of another
 1. it is a word used **x126** in the N.T. – it has a **strong descriptive** value
 2. Paul introduces himself with the word in **Romans, Philippians, and Titus**
 - b. but, because this word has such *negative* connotations in American culture, some translations (**e.g.** ESV) “*mask*” it by using lesser terms like “servant” or “bondservant” based on context
 1. **i.e.** the alternative terms represent a more “servant-like” position, even as one “bonded”
 2. true, the ESV does use the term “*slave*” when the translators feel that the term applies, but to “lessen” the term in certain places (because of its connection with 18th-19th C. chattel slavery) leaves the impression that some forms of “slavery” can be considered less than others
 - c. **IMO**: to lessen the term “slave” in the Christian lexicon, because of its non-PC nature, is to *diminish* the value of the gospel itself (**i.e.** this word is *essential* to understanding the gospel)
 1. it is to diminish the relationship that human beings have with sin (at the opening of the gospel)
 - a. to preach that humans are sinful (up to a point) or are simply “missing the mark” or “failing to reach their potential” over against the *absolute sway* sin holds over mankind (**John 8:34**)
“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”
 1. because of the Curse, human beings are *enslaved* by sin; owned by its power; they must “obey” their nature as fallen and rebellious
 - b. **the message of the gospel is only truly freeing if it understands this enslavement**
 2. it is to diminish the relationship that believers have with Christ (at the heart of the gospel)
 - a. to preach that believers simply “ask Jesus into their heart” or “pray the prayer” over against the *absolute commitment* that faith in Christ demands (**Mark 8:34-35**)
“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”
 1. in faith, the believer is “owned” by Christ, and now lives under an absolute allegiance to him, obeying his commands and doing in his will *in all things*
 - b. **the message of the gospel is only truly saving if it understands this enslavement**

I. The World of Slaves (Ephesians 6:5a)

Content

a. the form of slavery in the First Century

1. slavery was a *very common* reality in the days of Jesus and Paul – some estimate that >60% of the population of the empire was enslaved in one form or another

- a. thus, it is *highly likely* that the church at Ephesus was made up of many who were slaves
- b. **note:** even in the antebellum American South, Baptist churches often had slaves in full membership alongside their owners, some even serving in leadership capacities
2. however, slavery in the Roman Empire was much more *nuanced* than it was in 18th-19th C. America
 - a. **category #1:** *involuntary* slavery – conquered peoples, criminals, and others deemed fit to be enslaved for a judicial or economic purpose (e.g. Ben-Hur)
 - b. **category #2:** *voluntary* slavery – the willing choice by a person to “put” themselves under the mastery of another, primarily for the purpose of paying off a financial debt or obligation (e.g. the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant; **Matthew 18:23-35**)

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.”

 1. note that the parable assumes the human condition before God as *slavery* (see above)
 - c. it is *likely* that the church at Ephesus contained *both types* of slaves in its midst (**IOW:** the term “bondservant” as a translation *overlooks* this reality – “slave” works better here!)
 1. so, Paul’s imperatives in **vv. 5-8** apply equally to *both categories*
 2. **i.e.** regardless of the *conditions* of your enslavement, your responsibility as a slave is to *submit* to your master as a testimony to your submission to Christ *and* as an example to the church
 3. **elephant:** why doesn’t Paul simply instruct masters in the church to free their slaves?
 - a. given that slavery (even voluntary) is a violation of the dignity of human life within the *Imago Dei*
 - b. note also that Paul does not instruct Philemon to release Onesimus, his brother in Christ
 - c. and, although Paul will instruct slaves to seek their freedom if possible in **1 Corinthians 7:21**, he counsels each to remain in their current position with God and be content within it
 - d. **answer:** there is scant evidence in the N.T. that the gospel was intended to be a message of either social justice (from the left) or cultural change (from the right)
 1. instead, the gospel deals with the *far greater* issues of sin and redemption, leaving the change of society and the condition of the human race to the *effect* of the gospel upon individuals
 2. **IOW:** Paul’s instructions here (and elsewhere) go to the heart of what it means to be a Christian *regardless of the conditions of the individual or the culture around that individual*
 3. interestingly, it is the *Christian* worldview that eventually topples slavery as an institution
- b. **the form of “slavery” in the Twenty-First Century**
 1. although there is still much slavery in the world, *our* culture has abolished *chattel* or *financial* slavery
 - a. **so, how do we understand these verses to apply to us?**
 2. “*earthly masters*” (or “*masters according to the flesh*”) = other human beings who have direct control over aspects of your life, particularly from a work or financial perspective; **i.e.** employers (or creditors)
 - a. so, Paul’s words apply to us as we fall under the mastery of those for whom we work
 - b. or, a picture of the **Protestant Work Ethic**, whereby the redeemed *demonstrate* the redemption of work itself, which is a part of the *original purpose* for which we were created (dominion)
 - c. **principle: believers submit to their employers and do their jobs (or be employers) in such a way that, through it, they demonstrate their utter allegiance to and dependency on Christ**
 1. **stay-at-home moms**, self-employed: the master is *theoretical* (you), but the ethic is the same

II. The Work of Slaves (Ephesians 6:5b-8)

Content

a. the imperative (v. 5b)

1. “*obey*” = heed; take the command; do what is commanded; meta.: open the door
 - a. the essence of Paul’s advice is to do what is demanded, even if it is difficult, painful, unpleasant, wearisome, grinding, exhausting, or seemingly without reward (**IOW: do your job!**)
 - b. **note:** Paul is not suggesting *unquestioning* obedience even to some immoral action
 1. **i.e.** he is not suggesting that this “obedience” gives masters the license to demand that you disobey God in order to obey them
 2. he *is* commanding that our allegiance to our employer (in terms of valid work) should be with the utmost *vigor*, putting in the effort that is required *in every way*

b. the qualifications of the imperative (vv. 5c-8)

1. “*with fear and trembling*” (v. 5c) = with a sense of recognizing that *failure* can have consequences
2. “*with a sincere heart*” (v. 5d) = with a true desire to do the job from an *inward* commitment
3. not with “*eye-service*” or as “*people-pleasers*” (v. 6a) = not only when someone is watching
4. doing it as the will of God “*from the heart*” (v. 6b) = as an extension of a larger work for God
5. “*with a good will*” (v. 7) = desiring that the work produces a good outcome, for you and others

6. receiving the reward “*from the Lord*” (v. 8) = looking to the Lord for *true* advancement and reward
 - a. not every job is truly rewarding in itself, but the Christian recognizes that although hard work *may not* be rewarded *in this life* (or in this job), the Lord will “repay” him in the end for his commitment
- c. **the application of the imperative (repeat above)**

III. The Worth of Slaves (Ephesians 6:9)

Content

a. the imperative (v. 9a)

1. “*do the same to them*” = *reciprocate* the commitment and energy; reward in a fashion *commiserate* with the effort given; as a master, demonstrate the love of Christ as master over you
 - a. stop “*threatening*” = avoid using *punishment* as a means to motivate; instead, *encourage* greater commitment and effort through means that are *positive* and *uplifting*

b. the qualifications of the imperative (v. 9b)

1. knowing the “*impartiality*” of the Lord Jesus = recognizing that *both* the master *and* the slave will answer to Christ for their effort, and that Christ will not grant the master a “better” place because of his position as a master (**i.e.** Christ will hold the master to a *higher* standard)
2. **Paul is commanding masters and slaves in the church to submit to those above them as a demonstration of their utter commitment to Christ in all things**
 - a. note the **mutual submission** on display here:
 1. the Christian employee submits to his employer to demonstrate his fidelity to the Master
 2. the Christian employer “submits” to his employees by honoring their work and treating them faithfully as a demonstration of his own submission to Christ
 3. this is a beautiful *example* of what mutual submission in the body of Christ looks like