

Ephesians: *The Emancipating Power of the Gospel*  
Ephesians 6:5-9

Here at Colonial we are slowly making our way through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and last Sunday we concluded our work on Ephesians 5:22-33 where Paul applies the Christian principle of "mutual submission" to both wives and husbands. Our next thought unit should be Ephesians 6:1-4 where Paul applies the principle of "mutual submission" to children and parents, but I am going to save that teaching for next Sunday because our Student Ministry is scheduled to be in the service with us next Sunday, and it seems most appropriate to cover that text when our students are present. For those of you who are new to Colonial, our Student Ministry (particularly at the Overland Park campus) regularly offers a student-specific offering for the first three weeks of the month at the 10:30 hour but then they attend the whole-church worship service on the fourth Sunday. Consequently, we will jump to Ephesians 6:5-9 this morning where the Apostle Paul applies the Christian principle of mutual submission to slaves and masters within the early church. Please stand for the reading of God's Word:

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

My message this morning will fall under four subheadings: 1) Slavery in the First Century; 2) Implications of the Gospel for Christian Slaves; 3) Implications of the Gospel for Christian Masters; and 4) The Emancipating Power of the Gospel.

### **I. Slavery in the First Century**

OK...before we even get started, let me make a disclaimer First of all, I hate slavery with every ounce of my being, and I am certain that God does as well. I sat through several hours of training last Thursday regarding how to recognize and then seek to liberate those who are being trafficked as human slaves right here in the Kansas City metro. What I learned made me sick to my stomach. Slavery in the first century, slavery 150 years ago in America, and slavery now...all of it is a horrific evil. There is no justification for a person to "own" another person, thus rendering a human life made in the image of God as nothing more than "property." That said, this particular scripture was twisted to "justify" slavery in America for many years, and that is tragic. I will show you that the Apostle Paul is not attempting to justify slavery at all, but simply teaching the early church how to live out the implications of the gospel in their first century reality. I do hope that amidst the emotions that this subject generates, we will all patiently listen and seek to understand Paul's comments within the first century context BEFORE attempting to make this text speak to our current moment. To that end, let us now hop in the time machine and travel back to the first century Roman Empire.

NT scholar Clinton Arnold provides a deep-dive into the distinctive features of Roman-era slavery in his commentary on Ephesians. He begins by writing: The institution of slavery was an accepted and deeply established part of Roman society. Before the Roman era, slavery was practiced in

Greece and throughout the ancient Near East from the earliest times. In fact, slavery was a part of Judaism in every period of its history. Even the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—owned slaves.

Scour every ancient document in existence, and you will have a very difficult time identifying even one ancient city, culture, or nation that did NOT depend on slaves as part of their socio-economic reality. The Old Testament, along with other ancient records, bears witness that the practice of slavery was a foregone conclusion in the ancient world, even though we find no theological support for the practice of slavery anywhere in the Old or New Testaments. What we do find in the Bible is counter-cultural instruction for fair treatment of slaves as opposed to the ruthless practices of pagan cultures, and this is particularly true in our text for this morning.

Now, when it comes to first century Rome, Dr. Keith Bradley, a noted historian of antiquity, estimates that over one third of the population in first century Rome consisted of slaves. Think about that for a minute: 1 out of every 3 people was a slave in the city of Rome. NT scholar William Barclay quotes an estimate of some 60,000,000 million slaves in the first century Roman Empire. He goes on to write: In Paul's day a kind of terrible idleness had fallen on the citizens of Rome...it was beneath the dignity of a Roman citizen to work. Practically all work was done by slaves. Even doctors and teachers, even the closest friends of the Emperors, their secretaries who dealt with letters and appeals and finance, were slaves.

Now, there were some distinct features of slavery in the Roman world that significantly differ from the Afro-American slave trade in America's history. First of all, racial factors played no role. Arnold writes: Roman-era slavery had nothing to do with race or a particular people group. Roman slaves were of virtually every race of people in the Mediterranean region and involved people from every country.

Whereas the American slaves were almost exclusively those captured and sold by professional slave traders, the vast majority of slaves in the Roman Empire were prisoners of war (as was the case in most countries in the ancient world). It was understood in the ancient world that if you went to war and you lost, your people would become slaves to the conquering nation. Since the Romans conquered just about the entire civilized world, they literally had slaves from everywhere. Now, there were other means by which people became slaves as well. The abandonment of unwanted children (especially girls) was common in the first century, and often those abandoned children would be brought in and raised up to be household servants (in the best case) or forced into hard labor and/or prostitution. Some people actually sold themselves into slavery/servanthood in order to pay off debts (often referred to as bondservants), and yet still others (though a small minority) were captured and sold by professional slave traders (this may have been particularly true when it came to providing gladiators and victims for the Roman games in the Colosseum).

Unlike the American slave trade, by the middle of the first century, many slaves in the Roman empire could reasonably expect to be released by the time they were 30 years old. In fact, in the early first century, so many slaves were freed (estimated at 500,000) that Caesar Augustus declared 30 years old to be the minimum age for emancipation and then limited how many slaves could be freed each year so as not to deplete the Roman workforce.

Again, unlike the African slave trade, many slaves in the Roman-era worked in a variety of specialized and responsible positions. This was likely a common practice for many generations, for we read in Genesis that when Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, he proved to be shrewd and responsible and was thus placed over Potiphar's household affairs, then placed over the prison management, and finally placed in a high position of responsibility reporting directly to Pharaoh himself. We see the same practice exercised by the Babylonians when King Nebuchadnezzar entrusts Daniel (a prisoner of war/slave) to serve as a governor.

Now, that said, we should in no way rationalize that slavery in the ancient world was a cushy arrangement...it wasn't. Slaves were thought of as property; they were not viewed as humans. In the agricultural world, slaves were seen as cattle who could talk. Roman law entrusted complete sovereignty over the slave to the master to do with his slave as he wished. Dr. Bradley writes:

The bare record of fact shows that Roman slaves, like those in the Americas, were bought and sold like animals, were punished indiscriminately and violated sexually; they were compelled to labor as their masters dictated, they were allowed no legal existence, and they were goaded into compliance through cajolery and intimidation. They were the ultimate victims of exploitation.

Even Aristotle, one of the greatest thinkers of his day, writes, "...a slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave." Slaves were often discarded to starve to death if they got too old or sick, and history tells many stories of slaves being dismembered, tortured, or even crucified for silly reasons like accidentally killing the emperor's pet quail or breaking some dishes. The Roman writer Juvenal tells of a master "who delights in the sound of cruel flogging thinking it sweeter than any siren's song...". This was the context in which Paul is writing in the first century, and we must keep that context in mind as we read his words here in Ephesians 6.

## **II. The Implications of the Gospel for Christian Slaves**

Paul begins by writing, "Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ..."

The first thing we must note is that the Greek word here in vs. 5 that the ESV gently translates as "bondservants" is the Greek word *doulos* which literally and contextually always means "servant or slave." I don't see any point in softening this term as though Paul is only addressing those who entered into voluntary servanthood to repay their debts. The word is slave, and I think it perfectly reasonable to assume that both slaves and masters were moved by the power of the Gospel to become followers of Jesus in the first century church. Is that awkward? Yes, but it's also remarkable! In a society where slaves were thought of as less-than-human and as speaking tools, Paul now addresses the Christian slave as one who has a soul, as one who is a sinner saved by grace, as one who now has an allegiance to Christ, and as one who is a part of the Body of Christ...just like the master who sits in the same room. As Paul has written in several of his letters, in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, Greek or barbarian, slave or free, male

or female<sup>1</sup>...for all are one in Christ Jesus. Slaves are part of “the one new man” which the cross of Jesus has made possible through the unmerited love and mercy of God. As Paul writes at the end of this passage, with Christ “there is no partiality.”

Now, that being said, Paul acknowledges that Christians are to live out their faith in different roles. Just as the wife and the husband are equal in Christ but must live out their faith in different roles, so the first century slave and the master must live out their faith in different roles. In the case of the husband and wife, Paul hails to God’s created order to justify the different roles as part of God’s design. However, notice that Paul will not appeal to God’s design or created order in this instance. Paul never justifies the roles of a human “slave” or a human “master” as though it was God’s plan or design for one human to own another human. Paul does, however, acknowledge that in the first century, the roles of ‘slave’ and ‘master’ are current realities that Christians occupy, and as such the Christian slave as well as the Christian master must now live out their roles differently. Both the slave and the master belong to Jesus, and so Paul spells out the implications of the Gospel as they relate to both.

In vs. 5 Paul writes that the Gospel first requires the slave to obey his earthly master with “fear and trembling.” This particular construction of “fear and trembling” is used on various occasions in the New Testament, including when Paul writes that the church is to “work out their salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12-13). The idea here is that Christian slaves are to obey their masters out of deep respect and fear, not so much for the man who is the master, but for the authority of the role, knowing that all authority belongs ultimately to God (Romans 13:1). Those of you who served in the military will likely remember a superior officer who was immoral, incompetent, or lacked honor...but you saluted him nonetheless, right? Why? Because the role was worthy of honor even if the man in the uniform was not. In the same way, Paul is teaching the Christian slave to honor the authority of the master with deep respect, and with a sincere heart, as he would Christ...irrespective of whether the man in the role of master is worthy of that respect. In so doing, Paul is teaching the Christian slave to always see himself as ultimately serving Jesus who is both his Master and the Authority behind his earthly master.

Paul goes on to say, “...not by the way of eye-service, as people pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man.”

It is not theologically incorrect to say that every Christian is ultimately “a slave to Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Paul understood himself to be a slave or a servant of Christ (Romans 1:1) as did the Apostle Peter (2 Peter 1:1), and even Jesus Himself taught His disciples to see themselves as “unworthy slaves” in Luke 17. Now, again, I know that is language that triggers a lot of emotions, but I think we can all agree that Jesus purchased our souls with His own innocent blood when He suffered a cross that we all deserved, right? We belong to Christ. Now, I am

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11

<sup>2</sup> We are not only slaves of Christ...we are also sons and daughters of God. We’ll touch on that tension next week. Both metaphors are biblical and relevant to our experience. To be a slave is to understand that we have been purchased and belong to our Lord, even as we are bound by duty to serve Him as a just and righteous Master. To be a son is to know that we are deeply, unconditionally loved and adopted as part of God’s family. Both images are necessary to keep us from becoming 1) complacent if we only think of ourselves as children of God; and 2) fearful and works-oriented if we only think of ourselves as slaves. We are always both.

perfectly content to live my life as a slave to Christ. I 100% see Jesus as my Master and Lord, and I understand that my life belongs to Him and my duty is to serve Him above all others. This is very much what Paul is teaching the Christian slave in the first century. All Christians are servants of our Lord Jesus Christ, so whatever the slave is doing for his earthly master, he must always remember that he is ultimately serving the one and only Master, and therefore he is to serve as unto the Lord Himself. That means doing away with insincerity; that means not putting on a good face while people are watching and then being subversive when no one is looking. That means no more trying to impress people, but rather doing everything out of reverence for Christ and for His glory. Again, the Christian slave is to live out his role in this new way without regard for how the earthly master is treating him; just as a Christian wife is to submit to her Christian husband and a Christian husband is to sacrificially love his Christian wife without regard for reciprocation. Paul goes on to remind the Christian slave that, even though the earthly master may treat him poorly and fail to reward his good work, the slave should work diligently “knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or is free.”

As Christians we are most certainly servants, but we serve a just and generous Master, amen? Our Lord delights in rewarding those who work hard and do what is good and just. So, even when our good works go unnoticed and unappreciated on earth (which was most assuredly the case for first century slaves), the Christian knows that the One, True Master in heaven notices every good work and will reward His faithful servants.

Now, for those of us who live in a nation where slavery has been abolished, it is appropriate for us to take these principles written for slaves and apply the same principles to our jobs within the workplace. Most of us work in environments where we are under a boss or a manager of some kind. That boss or manager is in a place of authority, and as such Paul would have us respect that authority and serve wholeheartedly in our roles as unto the Lord. So, what does that look like in your life? What role or roles has God placed you in? How do you treat the person who is over you? How do you speak about that person when he/she is not around? Do you work hard as unto the Lord, or do you only work hard when there are people watching you? Are you more concerned about pleasing the expectations of people or pleasing God with your work? Do you go to work with good will and sincerity, or do you grumble, complain, and do as little as you can get away with? Are you willing to work hard and be obedient to your supervisor even when you see little reward or recognition? Are you willing to say “no” to your boss should he or she require you do something that is contrary to God’s will as clearly revealed in His Word? There is a lot here for us to think about when it comes to our work, but we should remember Paul’s teaching both here in Ephesians 6 as well as his words to the church in Corinth when he writes: “Whatever you do—do it all to the glory of God!”

Alright, let us look quickly now at Paul’s direction for Christian masters.

### **III. The Implications of the Gospel for Christian Masters**

Now, before we jump into this part of Paul's teaching, let's address the elephant in the room. Why did Paul not simply instruct Christian slave owners to set their slaves free? I will give you two practical reasons and a theological reason.

The first practical reason is that Paul did not receive that direction from the Lord. Let's face it: if Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit and a servant of the Risen Christ who was handpicked to be 'the Apostle Paul' as we read in the book of Acts, we must assume that if the Lord had ordered Paul to instruct all slave owners to release their slaves, Paul would have included that instruction in his letter to the church in Ephesus. So, the most simple and obvious answer is that we are reading what Paul received from the Lord which was first written and then heard within the context of the first century Roman world.

The second practical reason is that any such ordinance would have likely brought about the swift annihilation of the Christians by the Roman government. The Christians were already the scapegoats of the Roman Empire, but what kept them from being annihilated was the fact that when Roman officers inspected the teachings of the Apostles and the Gospels, they regularly found instruction calling Christians to honor the civic authorities, and whenever possible, to live peaceably within the authority structures of their cities (Romans 13).

The theological reason for why Paul did not insist on abolition is this: given the unchallenged presence of slavery within the entire ancient world, Paul would have made the slavery issue the central focus of Christianity, thus pushing the proclamation of the Gospel to the periphery of Christianity. Paul understood that it was the role of the Messiah to 'set at liberty those who were oppressed,' and so Paul focused on bringing people into a transforming relationship with the Messiah...Jesus of Nazareth...because true liberty and emancipation are only possible in Christ. I'll circle back to that theme here in just a minute, but let's give Paul the benefit of the doubt here. He is empowering people in every role...be it family, the workplace, in government, wherever...to let the implications of the Gospel work themselves out in each particular role. As William Barclay writes: Christianity does not offer us escape from circumstances; it offers us conquest of circumstances.<sup>3</sup> So, what did the implications of the Gospel, and particularly the principle of mutual submission, look like for slave owners?

Paul writes in vs. 9, "Masters, 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." Paul gives three imperatives to Christian masters. First, Paul writes, "Do the *same* to them..." Did you hear that? Paul calls for mutuality between slaves and masters--that is RADICAL given the first century context! It is true that Paul does not seek to immediately abolish slavery or somehow eliminate the roles of slave and master, but here in Ephesians 6 Paul makes it clear that the implications of the Gospel require God-honoring mutuality within the roles of Christian slave and Christian master. That is to say, the Christian master is to be a man of sincere heart who works as a slave to Christ, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man. In that regard, he is no different than the Christian slave. Furthermore, the Christian master is "to do unto others as he would have done to him," just as with any Christian in any role. NT scholar John Stott writes: First, *do the same to them*. That is, if you hope to receive respect, show it; if you hope to

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, The Letters to the Galatians and the Ephesians; p 181.

receive service, give it. It is an application of the golden rule. However masters hope their slaves will behave towards them, they must behave towards their slaves in the same way. Paul admits no privileged superiority in the masters, as if they could themselves dispense with the very courtesies they expect to be shown.<sup>4</sup>

The law might tell the master that the slave is his property, but the Gospel tells the Christian master that the Christian slave is his brother. That is, of course, precisely the words that Paul uses when he writes to Philemon and encourages him to no longer see Onesimus as a slave, but to receive him as a beloved brother (Philemon vs. 16).

Look now to the second imperative for Christian masters: "...and stop your threatening..." Again, Stott says it well: Threats are a weapon which the powerful wield over the powerless. And a relationship based on threats is not a human relationship at all. So Paul forbade it.<sup>5</sup> Anybody who has been in a position of authority over other people can relate with the temptation to use threat as means of motivating people. Threats and punishment were the assumed means of controlling and motivating slaves in the first century, but Paul states in no uncertain terms: "Not so with you Christian masters." We must immediately call to mind the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 20:25-28: 25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Church, make no mistake: the teachings of Christianity are absolutely radical, counter-intuitive, and counter-cultural when it comes to roles of authority and leadership. We saw that counter-intuitive, counter-cultural influence in the roles of husbands and wives; we shall see it again when it comes to Christian parenting; and we definitely see it here in Paul's imperatives to Christian masters. Those in roles of authority are to be as those who serve...this is what mutual submission looks like in the role of a Christian master.

Finally, Paul orders the Christian masters to remember who the One True Master is. He is the One who is in heaven. He is the One who is Master of both the earthly slave and the earthly slave owner. And He is the One who shows no partiality to role or station. In other words, masters are accountable to God. Paul wants the Christian master to approach his responsibilities with the same fear and trembling that the Christian slave approaches his responsibilities. That fear of the Lord should lead to mutual submission, even between the Christian slave and the Christian master.

Now, again, we live in a time and place where there is no formal role of Christian master, but these principles continue to apply to all of us who occupy roles of authority over others. That includes all Senior Pastors, CEO's, presidents, vice-presidents, managers, assistant managers, teachers and school administrators...even some of you crazy people who enjoy serving on the Homeowners Association! Any role that holds authority over others should give careful attention to Paul's teaching here in Ephesians 6. If you are a Christian and you have authority over others, it is incumbent upon you to serve others as you hope to be served; to respect others as you hope to be respected; to demonstrate integrity if you hope to see integrity from those you

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<sup>4</sup> John Stott, *The Message of the Ephesians*, p 254.

<sup>5</sup> John R. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, p 254.

lead; and to model the work ethic and the sincerity you hope to see from your people. You should assume no superiority or special treatment because of your role.

Christian leaders and those in authority should resist the use of threat as a means of motivating the ones they lead—that style of leadership will misrepresent the Gospel and the One True Master that we all serve. Finally, the Christian whose role includes authority over others must remember that we are accountable to God for the way we treat those we have been entrusted to lead. That is very much the case for pastors and teachers, that is no less the case for CEO's, middle managers, and small business owners.

Those who occupy roles of God's delegated authority are due respect and honor for their roles, but they are also those who are doubly accountable for their own work as well as the way they treat those under their authority. In the ancient world, that was usually the husband, the father, and the master of the house.

Paul holds all three roles to a very high standard of accountability and counter-intuitive service on behalf of those they lead. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture, there are many women who now occupy the role of head of household and the role of leader/authority in the workplace. We should assume these principles apply regardless of gender when it comes to leadership roles.

OK, let me quickly conclude with my fourth and final subheading...

#### **IV. The Emancipating Power of the Gospel**

I suspect there are many here today, and many throughout the modern world, who hold Christianity in contempt because the Bible does not directly condemn slavery in a way that is explicit and satisfying to our modern minds. At the same time, I suspect you are frustrated with me because I do not often preach against Communism, or atheism, or abortion, or racism, or illegal immigration, or same-sex marriage, or gender transition procedures, or any other number of issues that may be troubling you.

Church, I feel very strongly about all of these issues as a man and as a Christian, but there is a reason that I do not often attack issues from the pulpit; and that is because these very issues are attached to souls that Jesus died to redeem. When we elevate issues and make them the central theme of Christianity, those who are perishing interpret our angst as directed towards them, and they do not hear the hope and the invitation of the Gospel. In fact, they immediately feel uninvited and condemned by the very group of people who will then say, "There is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" Romans 8:1.

Paul models the Way of Jesus in what we read here in Ephesians 6. The Gospel meets people where they are, in the roles that they currently occupy, and no matter the role, people are invited into a transforming relationship with Jesus. Once people come to know Jesus, they are immediately welcome and part of the Body of Christ. Regardless of their role or station, every believer is part of "the one new man." This is the great mystery of the Gospel, and it is profound precisely because the Gospel is extended to all people everywhere all the time in every role. But once people come to know Jesus and they are part of the family of God, it is absolutely assumed that, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they will begin to live out their role in a radically



different, counter-intuitive way...so much so, that sometimes those roles are utterly transformed or even, over time, abolished.

That very tendency can be observed when it comes to the institution of slavery. Slavery was eventually abolished by Christians, but slavery never became the central issue of Christianity. The abolition of slavery was the direct result of the Gospel working out its implications in the lives of more and more people who held various roles: people like William Wilberforce who occupied a seat in the British parliament; people like John Newton who once captained a slave ship but realized that the implications of the Gospel demanded him to become an abolitionist and a pastor who then later penned the great hymn, *Amazing Grace*; and people like Abraham Lincoln who occupied multiple offices in the United States government including the office of the President, where the Gospel implications finally led him to pen the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The emancipating power of the Gospel works itself out in the hearts and minds of those who come to know Jesus. Which means...if we want to see fewer abortions, we need more Holy Spirit filled men and women. If we want to see less divorce and fewer kids abandoned to the foster care system, we need more Christian couples who live out the implications of the Gospel in their marriages and in their parenting. If we want to see an end to human trafficking, we need more men to submit to the Lordship of Christ and to live out the implications of the Gospel in the way they treat women and vulnerable children.

The proclamation of the Gospel is the central message and offering of the Christian church. The power of the Gospel is the hope of the world as the love and mercy of Jesus changes human hearts. We gain nothing when we make the Gospel a peripheral issue and centralize a social issue. That is not to say that these heartbreaking social issues are unimportant...God forbid, that is not at all true. Rather, the social issues are SO important because the issues are crushing people Jesus died to save...therefore we must more and more commit ourselves to both proclaim the Gospel and to faithfully live out the implications of the Gospel in all the roles that we find ourselves as the Lord's Church, amen?

The local church is the hope of the world...and this is our time to let our light so shine before our hurting culture that they will see our good works...they will see the implications of the Gospel shine forth in our mutual submission and our counter-intuitive servant leadership such that they will be drawn to the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. Church, be the light of Christ...in your marriage, in your family, in the workplace, in all the roles that you occupy...always and everywhere, amen?

Let us pray.