

Submit to One Another, Part 4

“On Your Job”

Ephesians 5:21; 6:5-9

Can one man preach to another if he has never walked a mile in his shoes? What did Paul know of the hardships of ancient slavery that qualified him to teach: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters ...” Why did he not simply condemn slavery rather than just command Christian slaves to be really good slaves? That’s an easy lecture to give if one is an educated, trilingual former Pharisee who, by the way, also enjoyed the privileges of Roman citizenship. What could he know about hardship?

Paul never called anyone to any greater degree of “hanging in there” than he himself was willing to model. Ephesians is one of four letters called “prison epistles,” so called because Paul was in jail when he wrote them. Paul fully understood unfair circumstances. From jail, he wrote Colossians to address a heresy. He wrote Philippians from jail to encourage a church to be joyful and not distressed over his incarceration. From jail, he wrote Ephesians as a universal treatise for all of us about the eternal purposes of God for His Son and for His people, the church. The point is, Paul was in the throes of his own unfair circumstance when he wrote: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters ...”

This passage is not as easily applicable as are the preceding words on husbands, wives, fathers and children. There is much cultural distance we must bridge. Slavery in America is an unpleasant chapter in our history. It troubles some that Paul does not condemn slavery, for the very notion of the institution repulses us. However, abolishing slavery was not Paul’s agenda. He accepted slavery as a reality of his world and, whatever circumstance any Christian was in, Paul challenged each one to be the most loyal servant of Jesus he could be. We may not understand why Paul did not blast slavery, but we can easily understand a call to loyalty to Christ in any and every circumstance.

Christianity works wherever reverence for Christ governs human relationships. That’s easy to appreciate when we look at marriage. Jesus makes beautiful again something that was created beautiful in the first place. The restorative power of Christ is easy to appreciate when we talk about bridging the generation gap. Jesus restores nurture and affirmation to something that was created as nurturing and affirming. Slavery is different. God did not divinely ordain slavery. And, while many slaves and masters had a good relationship in that service was exchanged for adequate care, the plight of most ancient slaves was perilous. Still, without taking it upon himself to abolish slavery, Paul taught both Christian slaves and Christian masters how to recognize their oneness in Christ.

I. How Does a Christian Slave Express Submission to His Master? (5-7)

A. A Slave Must Obey His Master as He Would Obey Christ verse 5

⁵Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.

A “free the slaves” campaign would have actually undermined the spread of the Gospel in the ancient world. The Christian ethic certainly brought about the demise of slavery, but that demise would first require a significant expansion of the Christian ethic. There were about 60 million slaves in the world then, about one-third of the world’s population and over one-half of the population of the empire. Slaves were very responsive to the gospel, just as the poor and afflicted always have been. Paul judged that the best solution to the hardship of slavery was obedient service.

The early church was often ridiculed for attracting slaves and riff-raff. This lesson seems largely lost on the American church. Much church growth today comes from the demographic deliberateness of new works, but is that feasible for existing churches? Some churches are simply committing themselves to evangelize where they are and as a result, the same barriers of race, generation and class that so divided the ancient world are being bridged once again. That's the "Ephesian" miracle of the church – communities of faith that are cross-racial, cross-generational and cross-status - where people we used to look at as mission projects elsewhere are assimilated into the local body.

Masters were to be obeyed with "respect and fear." Paul used these same words elsewhere to describe the "fear and trembling" in which we approach God. This is not the terror of a capricious despot so much as a responsible yearning to give someone in authority over us his rightful due. We desire not to disappoint the one we serve or make mistakes in that service. A godly slave must serve his earthly master with "sincerity." The desire to please one's earthly superiors must be real, because the pursuit of excellence in one's life vocation is an expression of gratitude to the Lord.

B. A Slave Must Obey His Master Thoroughly verses 6, 7

⁶Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men ...

The best application non-slaves like us can make with this text is to our work ethic. Verse 6 is literally translated, "*Obey them not by way of eye-service as men-pleasers.*" This can mean two things. The text brings out the first. Don't just work hard when the boss is watching. The boss caught Sam staring out the window and asked him, "Why aren't you working?" Sam confessed, "Because I didn't see you coming." But an equally binding interpretation of verse 6 is that our work must be the best quality we can produce and not just what a cursory glance can approve. God is not honored by the work ethic of "That'll do!" - satisfaction with a job that is just good enough to pass.

Paul does not attack slavery, but that is not to say that he defends it. On the contrary, he told slaves, "... if you can gain your freedom, do so" (1 Corinthians 7:21). But, rather than call them to revolt, Paul tells Christian slaves to be the best Christian slaves they can be. There is never anything inherently wrong with wanting to improve one's work situation or station in life, but the most effective way to improve these things is to work hard and to work well. The most common reason any slave was ever freed in the Roman Empire was his loyal service to a master.

Of too many employees these days it can be said, "You can always count on him for an honest day's work, that is, if you give him a week to finish it." A slave's bad disposition or poor work ethic only brought punishment. Today, a dour employee with a chip on his shoulder or a lazy one is an unlikely candidate for advancement. A love of work captures the boss' attention. Work is noble. It is not a consequence of the Fall. It was God's vocation for Adam in Eden before sin entered the world. God is honored when we do the work we find ourselves in as though it is the most important work in the world, because we see it as the work God has provided us. Again, that does not mean one should not try to improve oneself, but the best way to do that is to work well.

We are ambassadors for Christ in every circumstance. The best way a worker can represent Christ in the workplace is to be the best worker he can be. We cannot relate to slavery no matter what we think of the boss. Still, unless it is within your power to change a bad situation, accept it as God's will until you can change it and represent Him well. Resenting the unchangeable is as futile as fighting God. In a sense, it's the same thing. If you cannot alter a circumstance, then, glorify God in that circumstance, for Christianity is not about escaping circumstances, but conquering them.

II. How Does a Christian Master Express Submission to His Master? (9a)

⁹And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them ...

A. In Christ, Masters Had a Reciprocal Responsibility to their Slaves

What Paul introduced into the world in this regard was staggeringly new. In the eyes of law, a slave was a tool. The only difference between a slave and an ox was that one talked and the other weighed more. If a slave ran away, the best he could hope for was to be beaten and to receive a brand on his forehead. Masters killed slaves for petty provocations, but according to one Roman writer: "Whatever a master does to a slave, undeservedly, in anger, willingly, unwillingly, in forgetfulness, after careful thought, knowingly, unknowingly, is judgment, justice and law" (cited by Barclay).

Not everyone should manage others. Allegedly, these are quotes attributed to real bosses:

- "Teamwork is a lot of people doing what I say."
- "I know that communication is a problem, but I will not discuss it with the employees."
- "We will continue having these meetings daily, until I find out why no work is getting done!"
- "I didn't say it was your fault. I said I was going to blame it on you."

"Do not threaten them." Here, the *NIV* seems so intent on simplifying the translation that it may not cover all the bases. The original says only "forbear or lighten up on threatening." Paul was not forbidding a master from dropping the hammer on an absolutely rebellious slave anymore than he was forbidding a parent from punishing a rebellious son. Paul's point was that the strong arm should always be the last resort, not the first and only resort. The ancient institution of slavery was driven by the threats and coercion of the master. For Christian masters, Paul insisted that it must be driven by the grace, compassion and patience of Jesus, and all the more so when a slave is a brother in Christ.

B. Jesus Established a New Standard for Wielding Authority

When Jesus taught leadership training, He taught it this way:

²⁵Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." - Matthew 20:25-28

The business world has learned a few lessons from Jesus on “servant leadership,” but it basically boils down to treating people nice to get more out of them. That’s good sense, but I suspect that often, the prime incentive is productivity and not necessarily truly serving others. Some of it just boils down to “Rah-Rah rhetoric” that employees eventually just get immune to. (CARTOON)

Jesus certainly did not live and die just to demonstrate management skills. Treating people well is a wise, biblical way of getting more out of them, but Solomon wrote on that long before Jesus showed up. Our salvation was Jesus’ purpose, and others were His passion. One principle emerges from this passage on slaves and masters that should click for all of us. People primarily concerned with the needs and rights of self do not understand the nature of the Kingdom and therefore, can never really grasp it.

III. How Is Such Strange and Mutual Submission Possible? (5:21; 6:7, 8, 9b)

A. Reverence for Christ Compels All Believers to Live for One Another chapter 5:21

Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ.

We have been defining submission as “arranging oneself in such a position as to benefit another” as well as the “realization that we are not in relationships with others for personal benefit only, but also for their benefit.” A charitable attitude towards others is good, but God calls us to much more. He calls us to live on behalf of others. That kind of selflessness galls the flesh. That is as it should be.

B. Obedient Christian Slaves Work for Heavenly Rewards verses 7, 8

⁷Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, ⁸because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

Paul offered no guarantees that a slave’s obedience would ever be rewarded in this life. Temporal reward is never the reason any believer serves God. Christianity is a faith which is riveted to the unseen and to the eternal. God rewards in His time. We are to remain faithful until the end.

C. Wise Christian Masters Acknowledge the Watchful Eye of One Heavenly Master verse 9b

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.

Today, threats and coercion still abound. Slavery is gone, but money and power still talk. If any man uses money, position, power, or any other kind of leverage to serve himself at the expense of or with disregard for others, he is a coward in God's eyes. One day God will tell him about it. Paul’s advice for masters (and for anyone in authority over others) was this: “If you want to bully, coerce, high-hand, pull rank or in any other fashion forcefully exert your will, remember, you too have a Master in heaven.” In heaven, the distinctions that separate slaves and masters, bosses and employees or rulers and subjects will matter only as they pertain to our respective responsibilities and opportunities.

To John Barrier, it wasn't the 60 cents, but the principle. Barrier walked into his bank to cash a \$100 check, but when he presented his parking ticket for validation, he was refused. Validation was only given for transactions involving a deposit. Barrier felt his dirty construction clothes contributed to his treatment. He contacted bank headquarters to complain. When no one returned his call, he started emptying his account - \$1 million at a time. Barrier reflected, "If you have \$100 in a bank or \$1 million, I think they owe you the courtesy of stamping your parking ticket."

There is no favoritism with our heavenly Master. Literally, God does not "lift up His face" in order to judge us. The idea is that a human judge might look at the facts, but when he looks up and sees who he's dealing with, he may give the defendant a pass or he may drop the hammer on him. Human judgments are wrought with inequity and favoritism. God's are not. In Jesus, God is restoring to all men and women the same dignity of knowing we are His children. He fully expects us to see one another in the same light, always dealing with others with fairness, impartiality and justice.

Conclusion

I mentioned earlier that Paul wrote four letters called prison epistles, but I only mentioned Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians. The fourth was Philemon, a letter that sprung from a situation concerning a runaway slave and his master. Paul led Philemon to Christ. Philemon owned a slave named Onesimus who had run away and, most likely, had stolen something in the process. If Onesimus was located, Philemon had the right to impose on him any penalty he desired. He could brand Onesimus on the forehead to prevent him from running away again. He could kill him.

In the meantime, the runaway slave met Paul in Rome and he too became a Christian. If there was ever an opportunity for Paul to lash out against the institution of slavery, this was it, but Paul felt obligated to send Onesimus back to Philemon. The letter of Philemon was written to pave the way back for Onesimus. Paul had the influence to persuade Philemon to free Onesimus, but the apostle had something better in mind. He had confidence in the genuineness of both men, so in a brief letter, Paul pressed for a reunion between the two that would rock that ancient world and severe culture.

¹²I am sending him - who is my very heart - back to you. ¹³I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good - ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. - Philemon 12-16

It was not inconceivable to Paul that even a master and his slave could love one another deeply out of reverence for Christ. A slave's well-being could be of the utmost concern to a righteous master. Serving the master well could be a chief priority to a godly slave. It was not Paul's calling to upturn the social structures of his day. Paul's job was to introduce Jesus into the existing institutions of the day so that Christ could reveal His miracle of reconciliation through His body on earth, His church.

⁹And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment - to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. - Ephesians 1:9, 10