

Jason Upchurch - Ephesians 6:5-9 - Slaves Obey, Masters Stop Threatening

This morning we return to Ephesians and the issue of slavery. If you missed the last sermon on slavery, I encourage you to go listen to that because it really lays the foundation for our understanding of how the Bible treats the passage.

I'm not going to re preach that sermon here, so if you want more background please do listen to that sermon.

When we flip in our Bibles from Malachi 4 - the last book of the OT - to Matthew 1 some 400 years have past. Israel is no longer a sovereign country with Babylon or Media-Persia as it's benefactor. It's no longer rebuilding the ruins of a destroyed empire struggling to be faithful.

When the NT opens, Israel is now a conquered people who have endured centuries of bloodshed at the hands of the Greeks and Romans who refuse to give them their sovereignty. Israel's position geographically was too important for Rome to not control the land. It was strategically valuable and so Rome ruled.

And part of Rome - and basically every society before and after - was the presence of slavery. Slavery was rampant in the Roman Empire - estimates are that up to 1/3 of the empire was enslaved.

As most historians point out: Roman slaves could find ways to free themselves, they were often skilled in various trades and educated, and could become citizens of Rome. They were often given a fair amount of freedom and autonomy while they worked for their master.

Slaves could be slaves as a result of punishment, indebtedness, capture during a military campaign or other reasons. Some were simply born into slavery, and sometimes kids who would otherwise be abandoned or killed would become slaves in a household.

Slavery was complicated. As Christians we have a knee jerk reaction to slavery as simply bad, but I think that fails to take into account of all the cultural situations that existed at the time.

Now, what do we do with this passage as 21st century Christians? Usually the passages on slavery are used one of 2 ways.

The first way is to tell people who work for an employer to be a better worker or a better boss. We see this passage and go immediately to one simple application. Either you are an employee or an employer, just like there were slaves and masters. And then we apply this passage to that one exact scenario.

I think that's too narrow and misses the entire context of the passage.

The second way this passage is often handled is for people to give their opinion on the evils of slavery, contrasting the differences between chattel slavery and Roman slavery. And basically it's a history lesson with zero application.

I don't want to do that either.

So what do we do with a passage that doesn't really seem to apply to us anymore? We do what we do with every passage like that: we look for the underlying principle.

Let me give you a couple of examples.

Prov 20:4: The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing.

Most of us don't plow for our livelihood. So how do we apply this if we're not farmers? We look at the principle. What's the principle? It's probably something like: lazy people failure to prepare.

Deut 22:1: you shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep going astray and ignore them. You shall take them back to your brother.

I think most of us don't have oxen or sheep. So do we just ignore this? Or do we apply it only to other animals? No. The idea is if something bad is happening to your brother - your neighbor - you help them.

So when we look at passages, we want to understand the simple command but we're also thinking about the principle behind the command.

The 9th commandment is: you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. No lying. But Christians over the millennia have also understood that that commandment includes a duty to tell the truth. Sure, we don't lie but we are also people committed to tell the truth.

I think you get the idea. How do we apply that here when there are no slaves and there are no masters? I think we step back a little and ask what is the bigger principle? And I think the bigger principle is the attitude of people under authority and the attitude of people with authority.

Whatever else we can say about slaves, they are under authority. And whatever else we can say about masters is that they have authority. So how do they behave.

The Bible nowhere seeks to eliminate slavery or eliminate masters. There's a whole book written to a slave owner - Philemon. And Paul could have told him to simply free all of his slaves, including Onesimus. But he didn't. He told him how to treat his slaves, as one who has legitimate authority over them.

So I think stepping back, the issue is our attitude if we're under authority and our attitude if we have authority. So is it wrong to apply this to employees and employers? No. I just think that's way too narrow. I think these attitudes would have been applied to legitimate slaves and legitimate masters who were Christians.

Christian slaves were to be the best slaves. Christian masters were to be the best masters. So we're going to approach this as those under authority and those with authority - slaves and masters. I mean if these principles apply to slaves - the hardest possible situation to be in, they should apply to us too, correct? And if these principles apply to masters, then they should apply to anyone who has less authority.

So we'll look at slaves, then masters. With each we'll look at the command, then the description of the command, then the theology.

1) Slaves - Those under authority. Read 5-8

So who here is under some kind of authority? Basically all of us. All of us answer in some way to someone else. It's probably not as bad as slavery, but many of these principles are the same. And listen, this is an argument from the greater to the lesser: If slaves are called to live by these principles then so are we.

If anyone might have a reason to not obey or obey outwardly, it would be those who are owned by someone else. But God doesn't give them an exemption. He says "You are under authority and you need to conduct yourself as one who represents the Kingdom."

These principles are true for everyone under authority. Children who are under their parents authority, wives who are under their husband's authority, those who are under the authority of a magistrate, or a boss or all kinds of situations.

So what's the command? Obey. It's pretty simple. If you're under authority then your obligation is to obey. Do what the person with authority in your life says to do.

There's limits, of course. We've seen those. If they command you to sin, if they prevent you from obeying, or if your obedience would lead to some greater harm - then you can refuse.

One of my favorite kinds of videos is when normal people get approached by police officers who try to overexert their authority. And the person pushes back. The cops demand ID or demand that they stop filming or demand that information. And the person pushes back and says "You don't have that authority." The videos stress most people out because there's conflict. But the reality is, except for Jesus, all authority has limits.

But the general principle for Christians under authority is obedience - obey.

Then Paul lists what that obedience looks like. He describes it. **Read 5**

A) With fear and trembling. Does that mean we literally need to shake when someone with authority over us tells us to do something? No, I don't think so. That phrase is used throughout the Bible in various ways, but usually it means giving the person the respect due their office.

For God, people would be overcome by sheer terror and panic at the awesome glory of God. For a king, people would bow down on the ground. For elders of the city, they would speak reverently.

The idea is, you afford the person the respect due their position.

I remember being at a city council meeting and our city attorney was asked a question by the mayor. And the attorney addressed the mayor as "Your Honor." And I thought, that's odd because that's what you'd call a judge. Well, it turns out the mayor is the presiding elected officer and it is entirely appropriate to call him that. Just like it would be inappropriate to call a judge by his first name during a trial. You show the person appropriate honor.

Children, you show your parents the appropriate honor because of their role in your life. Wives you show your husbands honor. When I'm talking to a deputy I refer to them as "deputy" - it's a way to acknowledge their appropriate authority.

Slaves were to acknowledge their master's appropriate authority - that's what fear and trembling means.

B) Slaves were also to obey their masters with sincere heart. This is important because it's the matter of what's going on inside. And again, if slaves are called to this, then everyone under any kind of authority is called to this as well. Obeying sincerely from the heart.

This isn't outward obedience but inward hatred of the person.

This isn't obeying to manipulate to get what you want.

This isn't obeying but slandering the person behind their back.

This isn't obeying to butter the person up to earn favors.

This is genuine obedience - inside and out - as a believer who is upholding the proper authority structures of society.

And again, we don't like the idea of slavery. Man stealing specifically was a crime punishable by death in the OT. But slavery in general wasn't always man-stealing and the Bible never seeks to end it. Christians are called to earn their freedom if possible and never subject themselves to slavery.

But if there is a slave who becomes a Christian, how would God want them to behave in that situation? By being the best slave possible, obeying genuinely. Notice **Vs. 6** touches on this as well. **Read 6**

Doing the will of God from the heart. There it is: heartfelt obedience. Isn't that what God wants from us in every area of life? Whether mowing the lawn, paying the bills, washing dishes, working on the car, building houses, writing code, administering files God wants heartfelt obedience.

And here's the kicker with slavery: think about what Paul says really carefully. **Read 6**

Doing the will of God from the heart. What's he saying? He's saying that the work of slaves for their masters is what? The will of God. This is actually what God wants them to do.

I want us to soak that in for a second.

The reason God wants slaves to do their work with sincerity and a pure heart is because the work they are doing is the will of God.

Calvin: "It's as if [Paul] had said, "Do not suppose that by the judgment of men you were thrown into slavery. It is God who has laid upon you this burden, who has placed you in the power of your masters. He...performs his duty not to man only, but to God." (Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians (p. 330).

This is a correct vision of the sovereignty of God in every area of life. If God made someone a slave, then their work is **not** meaningless, it's not in vain, it's not worldly. It's the will of God who has placed them there on purpose for his glory and who wants heart felt obedience.

And again, if that's true with slaves, it's true with us too. There have been times in my life where I'm asking myself "what am I doing here?" "Why does God have me here?" Does what I'm doing matter, how is this important to the Kingdom? You ever felt like that?

Maybe moms you're wondering how changing diapers and washing laundry is doing anything for the Kingdom. Maybe there's something more you could be doing. Your labor is not in vain, it's the will of God.

Maybe guys you're stuck in a job, frustrated, not sure if this is the long term deal for you. Are you just spinning your wheels, wasting time not getting anywhere financially? You're doing the will of God - do it from the heart.

We could talk about any situation where you're under authority and you're wondering if what you're doing is eternally meaningful. It is. God has placed you in the position you're in, on purpose, and he expects you to be faithful with your situation. To obey from the heart to to please men but to please Christ.

C) The attitude of service is as to Jesus. Look how emphatic Paul is that the service slaves are rendering to their masters is actually service to Jesus. **Read 5-7**

As you would Christ
As slaves of Christ
doing the will of God
Rendering service as to the Lord

Slave life was a hard life. Even in the best scenario with the best master it was hard. God says work like you would work for me. Because you are working for God.

This is the mentality that slaves are to have. I think this is probably why pastors often simply apply this passage to workers. Because that's the one area of life that maybe most approximates the rub that's going on here.

I remember working for a guy who had a lot of money. He owned houses, buildings, companies. And I was making like \$18/hour feeling like I was on the treadmill. I didn't have any resources or knowledge to start my own thing so I just felt stuck in life. What was I doing? How is does this matter in the grand scheme of things?

Obviously it wasn't slavery. But it just felt like there should be more and I was wasting time, creating a ton of value for some other guy who was paying me a fraction of what I created.

So it's not a 1:1 connection, but that's probably why that's the application so many people make.

Now, on the one hand, if you can better yourself and climb the ladder or make some more money or start your own thing - go do it. Build your business, level up. Nothing wrong with that. I just read a book by David Bahnsen called Full Time and it's a theology of work rooted in being made in the image of God. And it's a breath of fresh air because he makes the biblical case that Christians should strive for excellence in every area and that it's good to be rewarded for that excellence. That's a good thing.

But listen: if that's not you right now, that's okay. Because you know who you're really working for? The Lord Christ. That's the same mentality that slaves are to have.

So the command is to obey.
The attitude is with appropriate fear, with sincere hearts and as for Jesus.

Here's the theological truth. **Read 8**

What's the hope that the slave has? What drives him to do hard work? It's an eschatological promise. That one day when you stand before the Lord who placed you in the exact situation you were in, you will be rewarded for your good service.

This is the Christian's ultimate motivation to work hard and work sincerely: that one day we will stand before the Lord Jesus in judgement. And that often has a scary connotation - and it should cause us to have some reflection. But it's a judgement of reward.

And every good deed you do, every good work, will be repaid.

Psa. 62:12: God will render to a man according to his work.

Job 34:11: For according to the work of a man he will repay him, and according to his ways he will make it befall him.

That's what Paul is saying here. What could possibly motivate a man or woman born into slavery? No hope, no earthly gain, no possession, owned by someone else? What motivates them is the exact same thing that motivates you and me: you will receive back from the Lord for the good you do.

Which means slaves in their service can do good work. And free people in their service can do good work. Kids can, wives can, husbands can, students, all of us.

Hebrews 6:10: God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people.

God doesn't forget how you've served him. Maybe you have forgotten the things you've done. God doesn't forget.

I was talking to someone a while back about how they had blessed me. And they had forgotten about it. They didn't remember. But it meant a lot to me and I remembered it.

We often forget what we've done. And because our memories fade we forget what others have done. God never forgets. He sees all our good deeds and will reward them appropriately.

2) Alright, let's talk about masters. What's the command, what's the attitude, and what's the theological truth.

Read 9

So Paul turns his attention to masters. Literally, it's the word lords in Greek. Those in authority, those who own the slaves.

Remember, this is the household code. Many homes in the Roman world would have had slaves. So, if you think about it, much of this section could have been written to a husband and father who was also a slave owner.

Wives have one command, kids have one command, slaves have one command. The men potentially have 3 commands depending on their station in life. There's a lot of weight on their shoulders to lead their homes well in the gospel.

Again, I think this is appropriate to apply this out to anyone who has authority. Obviously it includes masters. God nowhere in the Bible says masters set your slaves free — unless it's the OT sabbath year or Jubilee. He

nowhere says it's immoral to have slaves. Nowhere are slave owners second class citizens or looked on with suspicion.

But this applies to anyone with authority. So what's the 1 command? Stop your threatening.

Those in authority shouldn't be known for threatening. What is a threat? A threat is when you declare that you intended to inflict pain or damage. You are intimidating someone by virtue of your role in their life.

This is the classic parent who counts to 3 to get their kid to do something. Everyone knows nothing will happen. You're losing credibility. I watch this happen all the time at McDonald's in the playland.

The boss threatening to fire someone. The mom threatening to turn this car around. For slave owners it was often a threat of beating or sale or whatever.

The bottom line with any threatening is that it's lazy and pugnacious and unbecoming of a Christian in God's Kingdom. Threats are usually given in anger and frustration, not in love and gentleness.

I say that threats are lazy because usually when we give threats we know we should just take the appropriate action of discipline but we don't want to. Because that's work, it's hard, we're tired and we think maybe we can just get away with a verbal grenade. It doesn't work. And even if it does work, it's not what the Lord wants.

Threatening those in your charge is sin just like failing to obey those in authority is a sin. God says don't do it. That's not how we operate in the Kingdom.

Actually the other times this word threaten is used it's always against Christians doing the Lord's work.

Acts 9:1: Saul - later known as Paul - was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

Acts 4:17: The religious leaders were threatening the apostles who had just healed a lame beggar to speak no more about Jesus. And later in the chapter they were praying for boldness despite the threats.

Threatening is what pagans do to Christians. It's not what Christians do to anyone.

And I'll be the first to admit that especially as a parent it's easy to fall into laziness and threaten kids. "I've told you 5 times to clean your room if I have to tell you one more time...blah blah blah."

You know what? That's on me. I should have just disciplined the first time there was disobedience before I was annoyed. I think every parent is guilty of that. Don't tell about all the punishment that you'll do one day when you get off your phone. No, go handle it like a godly man or woman: calmly, in control. Those in authority have the ability to discipline. So do it well.

And what's interesting, is that if anyone on the planet would seem to have the ability to threaten another person it would be a master. They literally own the slave. You'd think someone who owns another person could do whatever they want to them, right? God says no. Absolutely not. Christians are to treat every person in their charge well.

Now, just to be clear, I think it's fine to explain consequences to someone ahead of time. Masters could tell slaves they need to do this thing, and if it's not done here are the consequences. That's different. There is a place for us to simply explain cause and effect.

But there's an attitude difference and laziness difference we need to be honest about.

So the command is stop threaten. Here's the manner - it'll be fast. **Read 9**

What's the manner? Do the same to them. NIV says treat your slaves the same way. We know that doesn't mean obey the slaves. It must be referring to all the attitudes the slaves are to have toward masters.

Masters were to respect their slaves. Humans, made in the image of God. Paul says to Philemon to treat his slave Onesimus like he would treat Paul.

They are to exercise their authority with sincerity, not being sneaky or underhanded.

They are to treat their slaves knowing there's a judgement and that these people who are in their charge will be the means by which the Lord judges them on the final day.

So the same exact Christian sentiment slaves are called to have, masters are called to have as well. And we're all called to these things.

What's the theological truth? **Read 9**

The theological truth is that we're all slaves to Jesus. Maybe we're the master - the one in authority - in a human way, but we better remember that we have a Master in heaven who is watching absolutely every move we make. And he doesn't show favorites.

He wants us to exercise our authority in the same manner that he exercises his authority. If have any kind of authority in life at all - father, husband, big sister, employer, I doubt master but you get the idea - you need to exercise that authority like Jesus who is your master. You are the embodiment of his lordship in their lives.

How does our master treat us? With kindness, grace, boldness, clarity...and he expects us to show that same type of authority to those in our charge.

Pray