

Ephesians: What's God Saying to You? What are You Going to Do About It?

Ricardo Campos, Pastor Grace Chapel, Orange, CA October 18, 2020

I. Introduction

The Bible seems to condone slavery. Why did God regulate slavery instead of abolishing it? If He's a God of love, who cares about people so much that He would give up His only Son to save them, why would He put up with such a horrible human practice as slavery? And what do the commands He gives masters and slaves have to do with us today?

II. Ephesians: What is God Saying to You and What are You Going to Do About It?

Chapter 6

All Christians are personally interconnected; we are all part of Christ's Body, 1:22-23; 2:5-6; 4:11-16, in a way that obligates us to each other, 4:1-16, 25. We're obligated to not hold grudges, to not bad-mouth, to not be mean, to not show bitterness and rage toward each other. Instead we're obligated to encourage, to be kind, and to forgive one another, 4:25-32. In a word, God obligates all of us to love and sacrifice for each other, 5:1-2. But all of this is impossible unless we give God control of our lives, unless we let Him control our emotions, our thoughts, our words, our actions, 5:18. If we give Him control of our lives, then we will be willing to submit to each other, to lay down our lives for one another, 5:21, wives for husbands, husbands for wives, children for parents, parents for children, slaves for masters and masters for slaves. Why does this include slavery and how do we apply this today?

6:5, imagine you're a first century slave during the Roman Empire (with every evil that was part of that institution), you've just become a Christian, and now the apostle Paul is telling you to obey your master, "**with fear and trembling**," i.e., you're supposed to be afraid of failing to obey your master the way you'd be afraid to disrespect someone who has complete authority over you. Not only that, but he's telling you to obey "**in sincerity of heart**," i.e., you're supposed to sincerely care about the work you do for your master. Not only that, but you're supposed to obey your master "**as to Christ**," i.e., as you would obey Jesus Christ Himself!!

If you were a first century Roman slave and a newly minted Christian, how would you respond? If you had a Christian master, what would you say? Perhaps you'd say, "I thought Christianity was supposed to bring me equality; aren't we all one in Christ, 4:1-6? Why do I have to keep serving him, especially with fear, and sincerity, and as if I was serving Christ Himself?! That's not right!" Or what if you had a non-Christian master, what would you think? Perhaps, "Wait a minute! I thought becoming a Christian was supposed to bring me freedom. God doesn't see a difference between masters and slaves, 6:8-9. Why doesn't He do something about my slavery?! Why does He want me to keep serving in slavery!" And God is not finished with telling slaves how they're supposed to obey their masters.

6:6, God continues speaking to slaves: He doesn't want them obeying their masters "**with eyeservice, as men-pleasers**," i.e., He doesn't want them working hard for their masters only when their master's watching them, to give their master the impression that they're really hard workers, but the moment he leaves, they goof off or go back to their laziness. Not only that, they're to obey "**as bondservants of Christ**," i.e., they're supposed to obey as if they were slaves of Christ, as if He's their Master and their obedience is to Him! Not only that, they're supposed to see their obedience as "**doing the will of God**" not the will of their master. And once again, God addresses their inner attitude: they must do the will of God "**from the heart**," i.e., with their entire being (the original says "from the soul"). God wants slaves to obey with their heart, mind, body, and soul; He wants them to care personally and deeply about their work and their master. And there's more...

6:7, for a third time God addresses their inner attitude. He wants slaves to obey their masters "**with goodwill**," i.e., with a zeal and desire to want to serve their master. A Christian slave might be saying to himself right about now, "I not only have to be a slave; I have to *want* to be a slave!" And to this seemingly impossible request, God adds "**as to the Lord, and not to men**," i.e., slaves have to want to zealously serve their masters as they would want to serve Christ Himself not some mere man.

Can you see why some Christian slaves might be livid with God as they hear this? Perhaps you're livid with God right now as you read this portion of the New Testament. Are you wondering why God didn't just abolish slavery altogether? Are you saying to yourself, "I thought God was a God of love? How could He perpetuate slavery like this?"

Did God Condone Slavery? People say, "Why didn't God condemn slavery, why didn't He tell Christians to abolish it?" First, Christians weren't part of the ruling class, not until Roman Emperor Constantine. Second, what would have happened had Christians passed a law that said, "No more slavery"? Would everyone practicing slavery all of a sudden stop? No. Why not? Ever notice that speeding laws don't stop people from speeding? Why not? Because every one of us is sinful; we all have a sinful nature that hates God and His rules (Romans 8:7). So if Christians had the power to pass laws against slavery, they wouldn't have worked. However, it was indeed Christianity that abolished slavery in the Western world, which had an impact on the rest of the world (not that all slavery is gone today; it still exists in the world but not to the extent it once did).

First, it's wrong to compare the race-based, violent, brutal, lifetime slavery of the Caribbean and the American South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with that of the Roman Empire; they were not the same. Yes, the slavery in the Roman Empire was bad: many slaves were abused in every way imaginable by inhumane masters and mistresses. Slaves couldn't make demands or negotiate salary. Aristotle saw slaves as property, as one's chattel and as tools to be used by their master; therefore, in Aristotle's mind there was no friendship or injustice between master and slave. Slaves of Greek owners once freed had to sign a contract requiring them to make payments and provide certain services to their previous owners and there were penalties for failing to do so. Slaves of Roman owners also continued to have specific obligations to their former masters after freedom. There were undoubtedly far too many cases of cruelty, brutality, and injustice. Their treatment depended to a great degree on the owner, some of whom were very cruel, e.g., Emperor Augustus had the legs of a slave broken for taking a bribe to betray the contents of a letter. Caligula had the hands of a slave cut off for stealing a piece of silver and hung them around his neck with a placard stating the reasons for his punishment. And these cruelties weren't exclusive to emperors; slave owners of all walks of life also committed injustices against their slaves.

But as bad as first century Greco-Roman slavery was, it was not as bad as the slavery we're familiar with: slavery in the Roman Empire was not based on race or kidnapping; most became slaves due to war or debt and it was not for life. The majority of slaves were only slaves until 30 years of age. Slaves didn't constitute a different social or economic class; their status, lifestyle, economic opportunities, even their education were tied to the status of their masters. Thus, slaves didn't see themselves as a group suffering a common plight who had to fight for abolition, so no slave rebellion had as its goal the abolition of slavery as such. Many slaves were valued, respected, and trusted family members. Many people sold themselves into slavery in order to climb socially, get particular jobs open only to slaves, enjoy a better standard of living than they had as free persons; thus, being a slave had a certain amount of personal and social security. Roman law considered them persons. Slaves of Greek owners could go to court against their master, own property (even other slaves), could get other employment in addition to their slave duties. Domestic and urban slaves could expect freedom as a reward after 10-20 years of hard work. It was also in the owner's interest to free them since their labor was cheaper if they were freemen. In general, slaves were treated reasonably well, if only because their masters knew that this was the way to get the best out of them. An owner's treatment was frequently similar to the treatment of his children; a master who was considerate to his children would likely be considerate to his slaves. Many slaves in the Greco-Roman world enjoyed more favorable living conditions than many free laborers. Slaves could become highly trained and educated, some became tutors who taught morals and manners to the sons of their owners, some professors of higher education, others physicians, some philosophers, e.g., second century Greek Stoic philosopher and teacher Epictetus. Slaves could eventually become free and hence become Roman citizens

Second, God never condoned slavery; He did regulate it, but it was never meant to be demoralizing or cruel, which is why He demanded certain ethical behavior from masters and slaves:

Exodus 21:1-11: a fellow Jew could only serve as a debt-slave for 6 years; on the seventh year, he had to be set free. But if they loved their master, they could choose to stay. If the master married a female slave and was later displeased with her, he could not mistreat her by selling her to foreigners. If the master married her to his son, the son could not mistreat her either: he owed her food, clothing, and conjugal rights, i.e., he had to treat her as his wife.

Leviticus 25:39-55: a fellow Jew who sold him/herself as a debt-slave could not be treated severely as a slave but had to be treated as a hired servant because Israel was not to emulate the harsh slavery of Egypt. This is why a Jew was urged to help his fellow Jew out of debt-slavery if he/she sold him/herself to a foreigner. And though Jews could buy foreign slaves and treat them as property, they could not mistreat them, cf. Deuteronomy 21:10-14.

Deuteronomy 15:12-18: when you freed a fellow Jew who was a debt-slave, you had to give them enough to start life over so that they wouldn't become a slave again. But if they loved their master due to their prosperous new life, then they could remain a slave by choice.

Thus, God had disdain for slavery because of His people Israel and their harsh slavery in Egypt. And when He regulated slavery, He demanded proper treatment by the master and due diligence by the slave. God is of the same mind in the New Testament: God expected Philemon to treat Onesimus, his slave, as a brother (Philemon 16) even though Onesimus had robbed him and ran away. God also expected Philemon to free Onesimus once Paul sent him back (Philemon 8-21). What God says in Ephesians also supports this: He wants masters and slaves to treat each other with love and respect, to die for one another, 5:1-2

Third, Christianity was the reason slavery was abolished. Every society in every culture in every century throughout all of human history had slavery in one form or another. So where did the world get the idea that slavery was wrong? Secular historians know where the world got the idea: Christians. Christianity was responsible for the abolition of slavery, especially in England and it spread to the rest of the world. But how can this be since God regulated slavery in both the Old and New Testament Scriptures? How did Christianity have this effect on slavery? It had this effect because God's regulation of slavery guaranteed its demise. What did God's regulation say to masters and slaves? First, God told masters and slaves that they were equal; there are no masters and slaves in God's eyes (Galatians 3:28; 1 Timothy 6:2; Philemon 16). They are both to see themselves as slaves of Christ (1 Corinthians 7:22). They are both members of God's family (Ephesians 5-6). The Lord in essence told both masters and slaves to treat each other like brothers, not master and servant. He told them to love and care for one another. He told masters to look at their slaves like people, not tools or property, to treat them with dignity and honor. And He told slaves to honor and respect their masters, to care deeply for them and the work they did for them. There's no way that slavery can survive in this environment where the two parties involved love and care for each other. It would lead masters to do what Philemon undoubtedly did, free their slaves.

6:8, the Lord here gives slaves an incredible incentive to obey their masters. He in essence guarantees them a proper reward for obeying their masters. Not all masters in the Roman Empire were bad, but some were, some may not have rewarded their slaves properly for services rendered. Jesus tells slaves that none of this matters because He will reward them whether or not their human master did. And He lets slaves know that their status as slaves, though it may have gotten in the way of proper treatment from their masters or society or whomever, will not play a role in His reward of them. He will reward them based on their obedience to His command to obey, not their status as freemen or slave.

6:9, you may be wondering why there are four verses addressed to slaves but only one to masters. One verse is all God needs to fully address a master's duty. In this single verse, the Lord pulls masters up short and lets them know with no uncertain terms what they must do. they must "**do the same things to them,**" i.e., in the same way that Jesus calls slaves to put their entire being into obeying their master, to care deeply and personally about the master and the work they do for them, masters must have the same deep and personal care and concern for their slaves and He gives them an example of what they're not supposed to continue doing, "**threatening.**" If masters were used to getting results through threats that engendered fear in their slaves, they were no longer allowed to do this. This is not care and concern for a slave, but abuse.

And Jesus tells them exactly why masters must do this, "**knowing that your own Master also is in heaven,**" i.e., human masters have a Master too who is watching from heaven. He sees whether or not they show proper treatment or mistreatment of their slaves and He will reward them accordingly. And this Master will show "**no partiality,**" i.e., as Jesus told slaves that their status won't hurt them when He judges them, a master's status won't help him. The Lord will reward that master according to his deeds not his status.

How Ephesians 6:5-9 apply to us today? For the most part, the world is not living under slavery. So what God says here to masters and slaves doesn't apply to us in that sense. But it does apply to anyone who's involved in a similar relationship where you have one in authority and another under that authority, e.g., employer/employee. What Christianity does at its core is change the way you see everything in your life. Jesus came along and said to first century Greco-Roman slaves, "Now that you're part of Me, now that I've given you a new life, how are you going to see your master?" And He said to masters, "Now that I've rescued you from hell and given you eternal life and you're now brothers with the slaves you own, how are you supposed to treat them?"

You see, Jesus wants you to see everyone in authority over you with respect. He wants you to look at your boss in a new way. When you go to work Monday morning, how will you look at your job? Will you now care about your work and your boss, will you give it your all or will you still slack off and not care? If you're a boss, will you treat your employees fairly? Will you do what is right by them or will you short them?

Jesus entered your life to give you brand new eyes, eyes that see crystal clearly. The way you used to see your boss is no longer the way you're going to see him/her. The way you used to see your employees is no longer the way you're going to see them now. And when we look at each other this way, when wives die for their husbands and husbands for wives, when children die for their parents and parents for their children, and when slaves die for their masters and masters for slaves, then those relationships will be awesome. Thus, your work life doesn't have to suck; you don't have to hate Mondays. You can actually look forward to work on Monday when you see your Monday, your boss, your employees the way Jesus tells you to see them.

III. Conclusion

Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.