

A New Slavery – Ephesians 6:5-9

September 15, 2024

We're going to talk about slavery this morning. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is transformative. I hope you've seen that in the Book of Ephesians—both positionally and practically. Paul continues to stress this.

Let me read Ephesians 6:5-9, a final exhortation to people in the local church:

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. 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."

Our passage takes us once again to the practical, transforming nature of the gospel: how we treat each other in the local church and others outside of it. To give you an overview of Ephesians, since this is the last section directed to a specific people group before the armor of God section, we see three changes that take place for the Christian:

- a change of position,
- a change of nature,
- and a change of relationship.

A Change of Position

As a believer, you are now in Christ. This is Paul's favorite phrase in all of his epistles. He says, "**in Christ**" more than any other phrase, even more than "justification by faith." You are now united with Him. Paul says we are seated in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3), blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Even though you're here in Texas, you're also in heaven. Your life is hidden with Christ, as Paul says in Colossians 3.

A Change in Nature

You were once dead in your sins and trespasses (Ephesians 2), but now you've been made alive in Christ. You've been born again and are a new creation. Even though you're still a sinner and going

through the sanctification process, Paul wants you to see yourself as a new creation in Christ. You've been given a new life, and with the aid of the Spirit, you can now do the will of God.

A Change in Relationship

Now that you are in Christ, your relationship with God has changed. You are no longer under His wrath, as Romans 1 describes. Now, through Christ's work on the cross, you are forgiven and reconciled to God. You have a new relationship with Him as His child, and this changes everything.

With these three changes—position, nature, and relationship—the question remains:

How then do we live? How do we conduct ourselves as new creations?

Paul has told us to put off the old self and put on the new, to be renewed in the spirit of our minds, to speak the truth in love, and to pursue reconciliation. There's a radical change, but now we are called to exert Spirit-empowered effort in our Christian Walk, working out our salvation with fear and trembling, as Paul says in Philippians 1:6.

In this section, Paul applies the gospel to our relationships, particularly the dynamics of authority and submission in the local church. We've seen this with marriage (husbands and wives) and with parents and children. Now we come to the relationship between masters and slaves—a dynamic that may feel foreign to us but was a real part of life in the first century.

Paul addresses six ways for us to learn from this passage, even though we may not have masters and slaves in our context. These principles apply to our relationships and how we live under authority.

1. Honor and obey your earthly masters

This is a common New Testament theme, isn't it? We can think of Peter in 1 Peter 2:13: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good." Peter says to be subject to every human institution. Or Paul in Romans 13:1: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."

Even though the government of Paul's day was corrupt, he taught that Christians should still submit to governing authorities. Similarly, Paul addresses slaves and masters here, reminding slaves to honor and obey their earthly masters with fear and trembling, as unto Christ.

2. Be a God-pleaser, not a people-pleaser

Paul says slaves should obey their masters not by way of eye-service as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. People-pleasing seeks to impress others when being watched, but God calls us to serve with integrity, knowing He sees everything.

3. Do God's will with a sincere heart

Paul says in Ephesians 6:6 to serve with a sincere heart as you would Christ, not by way of eye-service or as people-pleasers. This applies not only to slaves but to all of us who serve under authority. The temptation for slaves, especially those mistreated, would be to grow bitter, but Paul urges them to act with sincerity from the heart. This teaching echoes what Paul previously said in Ephesians 4:31, to put away bitterness and anger and instead live with a tender heart, forgiving one another.

Slaves were often severely mistreated, including physical abuse, sexual harassment, and threats to sell family members. Given this, Paul's exhortation to respect and obey their masters, even in these difficult circumstances, would have been radical. He reminds them that God is ultimately the one they are serving, not their earthly masters. Similarly, we are called to serve sincerely in whatever context we find ourselves.

Titus 2:9-10 reinforces this: "Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior." The Christian slave's life was to be a testimony, adorning the gospel.

4. Use authority as one under authority

Paul then turns to the masters in verse 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."

Masters were often in positions of unchecked power, able to abuse their authority without legal consequences. Paul calls on Christian masters to treat their slaves with kindness and respect, reminding them that they too are under the authority of a Master—Jesus Christ.

The principle here applies to anyone in a position of authority. Whether in the workplace, at home, or in any leadership role, we are not to abuse the power given to us. We must exercise our authority with the same grace and love that Christ shows us, knowing that we are all ultimately accountable to Him. We are all equal before the cross, and God shows no favoritism (Romans 2:11).

5. Conduct yourself as a slave of Christ

We are all slaves of Christ. Paul reminds masters and slaves alike in verse 9 that the ultimate Master in heaven, Jesus, shows no partiality. Whether you are in a position of authority or submission, you are a servant of Christ first.

In the first century, the term slave was not merely a metaphor. It was a reality of life. Yet, Paul uses this term to describe the relationship all Christians have with Christ. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:20, "You were bought with a price." This means we are owned by Christ. Being a slave to Christ is the greatest freedom, as it means we serve the perfect Master who loves and cares for us.

Paul and other apostles often referred to themselves as slaves of Christ. For example, in Philippians 1:1, Paul introduces himself and Timothy as "slaves of Christ Jesus." Similarly, in 2 Peter 1:1, Peter

calls himself "a slave and apostle of Jesus Christ." Even the highest leaders in the early church saw themselves as slaves to Christ, which is a model for all of us to follow.

6. Look to the divine reward

Finally, Paul encourages slaves—and all believers—to look to their ultimate reward from the Lord. In verse 8, he writes, "Knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free."

Earthly masters may not always reward or recognize good work. In fact, many slaves were mistreated despite their faithfulness. But Paul reminds them that their true reward comes from Christ. The divine reward awaiting believers will far surpass anything we can receive from earthly masters.

While the text doesn't specify what that reward is, we know from Scripture that God's rewards are greater than we can imagine. We serve a God who is just and impartial, and He will ensure that those who serve Him faithfully are richly rewarded in the age to come.

Closing Thoughts

These principles remind us of our identity in Christ. As believers, we are in Christ, we are new creations, and we are reconciled with God and one another. No matter our earthly position, we are all slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the perfect and gracious Master, and He promises to reward our faithfulness.

I'll close with Galatians 3:28:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."
