

Sunday, June 21, 2026

Servants And Masters

This is the fifteenth in a series of sermons through the book of Ephesians. Beginning in chapter 4, Paul has been fleshing out what it looks like to be holy and to walk in good works - concepts that he had introduced earlier in the epistle. “He hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.” (Eph 1:4) “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” (Eph 2:10). Souls who were once dead in trespasses and sins, but have now been quickened (i.e., made alive) together with Christ, are expected to be holy and live in a certain way. “Like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:4). This is why Paul “beseech[es] you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.” (Eph 4:1). One of the ways that the flesh deceives us is by being satisfied with vague, general notions of “pleasing God” or “serving God.” But Paul isn’t content to leave it general. He gets very specific. This “walk” includes being filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18), which itself includes “submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” (Eph 5:21). He proceeds to give a detailed account of how submission is to play out in three crucial relationships: wife/husband, child/parent and servant/master. Today’s sermon will cover this final example of submission.

Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free. And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him. (Ephesians 6:5-9)

Let me make it clear up front that this is talking about slavery. I can’t whitewash that and pretend that it’s talking about something else. This means that the church of Ephesus had members who were slaves and members who were slave-masters. And not just slaves – but disobedient slaves who needed to be corrected. And not just masters – but masters who had been threatening their slaves and needed to be corrected. If that reality causes you to recoil and question “how could this be an authentic church? How could these people possibly be real Christians?” then I would ask you to consider what standard you’re using to make that judgment. But I also am not blind to the fact that we have a history in this country of race-based slavery, with all the sad fallout from that. So, before going over these exhortations that Paul makes to servants and masters, I’d like to say a few words about the institution of slavery.

The Institution Of Slavery

It is a fact that slavery has existed in one form or another for most of human history. Including today. It's estimated that there are around 50 million people who are enslaved today. That is the reality of this fallen world. In this country, when it comes to the topic of slavery, people tend to look at other cultures and times with an air of moral superiority and contempt. But before we congratulate ourselves for being so enlightened, let us consider that many of us benefit every day from slave labor. There is a pretty good chance that the clothes you wear, the food you eat, and the electronics you use and play with, have been touched somewhere along the supply chain by slave labor. So let us not look down our noses.

When it comes to the Bible, scripture neither explicitly commends nor explicitly condemns slavery. Rather, it regulates it. It is more concerned with the relationship between the slave and master than it is with the institution itself. We see that pattern repeated here in the Ephesians passage. Paul wrote this epistle during the Roman Empire, which functioned as a slave economy. It is estimated that in major cities like Ephesus, slaves were up to 30% of the population. Ephesus itself operated as a major hub in the empire's slave trade, with archaeological remains testifying to that fact. Where did these slaves come from? Key sources included being born into slavery, prisoners of war, people in extreme poverty who thought debt bondage was preferable to starving to death, foundlings (often unwanted infants, who had been abandoned to die of exposure), and illegal kidnapping (condemned by Paul in 1 Tim 1:10 – “menstealers”). Many slaves eventually attained freedom, and some were even able to do this using money they made while they were slaves. Some slaves were highly skilled, working as doctors, teachers, accountants, etc., and were able to continue on as successful Roman citizens after gaining their freedom. In some cases, public slaves were even allowed to own their own slaves. But don't fall into the trap of romanticizing this and saying that this was so much more humane than American slavery – there are important differences between the two, but Roman slavery could be extremely cruel. These people were bought and sold as pieces of property, they were often treated brutally (beaten, raped, maimed), families were torn apart, etc.

The question is, “Why did Paul not condemn slavery in this passage?” This is a valid question. And I hope you ask these types of questions when you read the scripture. But I hope you ask with the right spirit. We all know that there are contentious types of people who don't actually want an answer – they only want to mock or argue or put on display for everyone how intellectual they think they are. For this group of people, it's often a convenient excuse to justify their rebellion against God and salve their guilty consciences. If it wasn't slavery, it would be something else. At the foundation is this: “the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.” (Rom 8:7).

But just asking the question doesn't make you an enemy of God. Nor does it mean that you're looking for a fight or to upset the apple cart. There are sincere souls who are looking for answers and clarity because this topic (or similar) causes them distress. Often, in fact, when children come of age, they are challenged by other people, other ideas, other philosophies, other ways of living, the culture they find themselves in, etc. They may have doubts, or what you might even call a "crisis of faith." My advice to you is to be like Daniel. Daniel was a teenager, torn from his family and sent to the University of Babylon to learn all about Chaldean culture and religion and systems of thought. So far from destroying Daniel's faith, though, it became the anvil upon which his faith was forged.

If you're in this situation, I could say a lot of other things to try to help you, but sometimes it's good to get back to the very fundamental thing – Jesus asked, "Whom say ye that I am?" (Mt 16:15). Who do you say that He is? Jesus isn't a set of doctrines or ideas or stories – He is "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16) – He is "the one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Tim 2:5). Do you understand His character? He is good. He is righteous. He is just. He does not sin. He does not lie. I'm sure you've all experienced the grief and betrayal of when someone uncharitably attributes the worst possible motives and meaning to your words and then falsely accuses you. Don't do that with our Lord's words. Don't grieve Him. Don't be treacherous towards Him. Why would you do that to your Friend? Why would you leave your first love and accuse Him of injustice? Didn't He give Himself for your sins? (Gal 1:4). Don't you "remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel?" (2 Tim 2:8). And hasn't the Good Shepherd been carrying you as a lamb in His bosom, and has promised to carry you "even to hoar hairs?" (Isa 40:11, 46:4). You may have to exercise great patience and humility, but there are answers to all your questions. Jesus said, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." (Jn 7:17). Notice the order – first comes your desire to do His will, then comes the knowledge of the doctrine, whether it's God's doctrine or not. If you're hell-bent on imposing your own will and doing your own thing, there's not much I can help you with. If you're determined that the Lord Jesus Christ is not worthy of your allegiance and trust and obedience because He isn't the kind of "god" that you think He ought to be, there's not much I can help you with. But if you love God and your desire is to do His will, I can guarantee you that you will come to know and love His doctrine.

So, why didn't Paul condemn slavery in this passage? The answer generally given by commentators is something like this: "Paul's interest was not in social change or instigating a political revolution, but rather how we are to behave within already-existing social structures. In general, his conviction was that the most important thing was being reconciled to God, living a holy life, being like Christ, etc., as opposed to social conditions or personal circumstances. Remember that he wrote this epistle while imprisoned! Slavery was part of

the warp and woof of the Roman Empire, and his intent was to tell people how to properly behave within that reality. In much the same way, he wrote Romans 13 while under the reign of the tyrant Nero. He wasn't saying that Nero was a wonderful man, or that imperial Rome was righteous and just. Rather, he was teaching us how we're to live under a government that has been ordained by God. Wouldn't we expect there to be injustice in a sinful, fallen world? The question is not whether these situations and institutions exist, but what is our duty before God when they do? He tells them their duty in this passage, and interestingly, many believe that his admonitions here changed how slavery in the ancient world worked and ultimately resulted in its demise. He ended up destroying it from the inside out."

There is a lot of truth in that answer, but I think it leaves an important question unaddressed. It makes sense when we're talking about servants, because the message is, "God providentially put you in a position of servitude, so don't rebel. Rather, submit to the situation." But it does not make sense when we're talking about masters, because masters don't have to have servants. If a servant-master relationship was inherently evil, I'd expect Paul to do something similar as when he said, "Let him that stole steal no more," (Eph 4:28) and say, "Masters, release all your slaves." Please don't misunderstand me. I am not defending the atrocities that have accompanied slavery throughout history. I am simply saying that scripture does not treat every servant-master relationship as inherently sinful.

Consider, for example, the centurion who came to Jesus to heal his servant "who was dear unto him" (Lk 7:1-10). The story ends with Jesus saying, "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." Jesus praises his faith with no rebuke for him having a servant. There's no "Go and sin no more" here. Or consider the servant in Exodus 21. After six years of servitude, he was entitled to go out free. But "if the servant shall plainly say, I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free" (Ex 21:5), then God provided a way to make his servitude permanent. On the other hand, consider an example where God clearly condemned such a relationship: the Egyptian enslavement of Israel. My point is, scripture does not treat all servant-master relationships alike. The particular circumstances matter.

There is another observation that I think is very important: the Holy Spirit repeatedly uses the concept of servants and masters to teach us valuable and fundamental truths about our relationship to sin, our relationship to Christ and righteousness, obedience, humility, submission, freedom, service, the return of Christ, etc. This is not meant to prove that every servant-master relationship is good. But it does show that God has seen fit to use this concept to teach us. Here are some examples:

- Several of the parables of Christ involve servants and masters: the good seed and tares (Mt 13:24-30), the wedding supper (Mt 22:1-14), and many others.
- The "year of jubile" (Lev 25): land restoration, debt forgiveness, freedom for slaves.

- The Exodus from Egypt (Ex 1-18), and all the typology involved with that.
- What true freedom and liberty look like. Jesus said He was anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to “set at liberty them that are bruised.” (Lk 4:18). And this: “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.” (Jn 8:36).
- The apostles regularly refer to themselves as servants of Christ. For example, Paul opens his letter to the Romans with “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ.” (Rom 1:1).
- We’re all slaves to something. We’re either “servants of sin” (Jn 8:34, Rom 6:17) or “servants of righteousness” (Rom 6:18). And we can’t have two masters – “No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” (Lk 16:13).
- “Ye are not your own...For ye are bought with a price.” (1 Cor 6:19-20).

Perhaps most importantly, Jesus “took upon him the form of a servant.” (Phil 2:7). He played the part of the most menial slave when He washed the feet of His disciples on the night that He instituted the Lord’s Supper. (Jn 13). He is prophesied to be the servant of the Lord in that part of Isaiah commonly referred to as the “Servant Songs” (Isa 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12). Jesus also said, “Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mt 20:27-28). This all reaches its climax at the cross. Crucifixion was designed to be a most humiliating and public death, characteristically associated with slaves. So much so that Cicero described it as “*that punishment which is the peculiar penalty for slaves.*” This adds a new dimension to our Savior’s suffering on the cross. “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.” (Gal 3:13). This is the death that He willingly and obediently submitted to: “And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” (Phil 2:8). Remember at the very heart of things, it’s not what you think you need to do for God; it’s what Christ, as an obedient and faithful servant, has done for you.

So, when the scripture speaks of servants and masters, it is not merely describing an ancient social reality. It points us beyond that, with God using it repeatedly to teach us about sin and righteousness, bondage and liberty, humility and pride, slothfulness and diligence, selfishness and sacrifice, and ultimately about the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. With that all in our minds, this would be an appropriate time to take the Lord’s Supper.

Exhortation To Servants

Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers;

but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free. (Ephesians 6:5-8)

There is one command to servants here: “be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh.” A “master according to the flesh” is a human master who only has authority in this world, with no dominion over spiritual matters or your eternal soul. This is in direct contrast to your heavenly Master. Although the original context was specifically slaves and their masters, the principles apply to any form of a servant-master relationship (e.g., employee-employer and student-teacher relationships). And if this exhortation applies to a slave, how much more would it apply to a person who is in a more voluntary situation?

Like all obedience in this life, obedience to God always comes first. You must not obey a command that would cause you to be disobedient to God. But you better bend over backwards in trying to be faithfully obedient to your master. This obedience is not to be a grudging or passive-aggressive or undermining type of obedience. Rather, it is to be characterized by several things:

- ***With fear and trembling.*** This doesn’t mean cowering in the corner. This means humility and respect, giving honor to the master because of the position he/she holds. But most importantly, this is fear and trembling in the sight of God. Remember that ultimately, your submission must be “in the fear of God.” (Eph 5:21)
- ***In singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.*** Your obedience must be without guile, without ulterior motives. Giving undivided allegiance and attention. Just like your obedience to Christ ought to be. And, in fact, obeying in this way IS obedience to Christ.
- ***Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers.*** The image here is of the lazy worker who does the absolute minimum but suddenly appears very busy when the boss walks in the door. (“Work from home” creates a unique spiritual danger). They only do good work when somebody’s watching, because they’re only interested in the praises of men. Thomas Boston: “*Menpleasers, and those who please Christ, divide the whole world.*”
- ***As the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.*** “From the heart” means that you do it whole-heartedly with full devotion, because in obeying, you’re doing the will of God. This is what servants of Christ are supposed to do.
- ***With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men.*** It is to be done cheerfully, willingly, with your master’s best interests in mind. This is the opposite of harboring ill will or resentment, which many servants do. Ultimately, as you serve your master, you are serving Christ. This should transform how you view work.

One thing I want to make sure everyone notices from this is that the manner of your obedience is to be very heavily tied to the Lord Jesus Christ – “as unto Christ,” “as the servants

of Christ,” “doing the will of God,” “as to the Lord.” If you look at your employment as a nuisance that gets in the way of you being able to “serve God,” you are looking at things backwards. Your employment IS part of the way that you serve God. He gave it to you to do to glorify Him. This is one of the “good works” that God has ordained you to walk in (Eph 2:10). You are there as His child, representing Him, so don’t do anything that would bring Him shame. Paul touches on this in 1 Timothy 6:1 – “Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed.” Yes, when you as employees dishonor your bosses (or you as students dishonor your teachers), whether by contempt, laziness, shoddy work, disrespect, unreliability, etc., you are opening the door for people to blaspheme the name of God and His doctrine.

The passage ends with a reason for obedience: “Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free.” The idea is that God sees what you do, and He’s interested in the state of your heart when you do it. No good thing that you do is going to escape God’s notice, and it will be rewarded. God doesn’t look at your station in life – He looks at why you’re doing what you’re doing. Good workers who show up and diligently do their work as to the Lord, but never receive any praise or acknowledgment for it, should understand that God sees them. He’s watching, even the most menial and tedious tasks. This is a great motivator! No good deed is ever done in vain.

“Yeah, but my boss is really mean, belittling, overbearing, unreasonable, incompetent, etc. And he’s an enemy of God.” I’m sorry you work for an unpleasant boss but look through your boss and see the Lord Jesus Christ who has put you there and rules over that situation. “Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward.” (1 Pe 2:18). Further, today’s passage doesn’t sit in isolation. Verses 5:1-2 tell us to be “followers (imitators) of God, as dear children” and to “walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us.” Paul is still describing what it looks like to follow God and walk in love. Including loving your enemy boss, so you may be a child of your heavenly Father, because He loves His enemies (Mt 5:45, Lk 6:35-36). You don’t love your enemy by gossip, slander, rebellion, revenge, sabotage or deceit. You love him by obeying God and rendering obedience to him. With that said, this doesn’t mean it’s a sin to take lawful steps to try to change your situation. Even for slaves, Paul said: “Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather.” (1 Cor 7:21). But until God changes your current situation, be content and take care that you follow this exhortation to servants.

Exhortation To Masters

And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him. (Ephesians 6:9)

Masters are told to “do the same things unto them.” The reference is to the previous verse – “whatsoever good thing any man doeth.” And the idea is that you’re called to do good to your servants in the same manner that they’re called to do good to you. You are to exercise your authority in the same manner that they are to exercise their submission. With fear and trembling. In singleness of heart, as unto Christ. Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers. As the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men. Each of these characteristics has a corresponding application to the role of a master. Ultimately, this means that the way that a master treats a servant ought to flow from a heart that sincerely loves and fears God, and desires to please and obey God, as opposed to behaving selfishly or to impress other men.

The one added qualification is “forbearing threatening.” These masters had been threatening their servants, and Paul is telling them to stop. The idea is to not abuse your authority. You must not create an environment where the servant (the employee, the student, etc.) serves under the constant fear of some unjust, unreasonable, disproportionate or harsh response. Treat them like fellow humans, not beasts. If you want them to serve willingly, then treat them as Christ treats His own servants. The reason given is “knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him.” Don’t forget that there’s One above you who has authority over you, and He’s told you how He expects you to behave. He is not impressed or swayed by your position of being a “master.” He doesn’t care about any of that – He cares about what’s going on in your heart. Calvin puts it well: *“the cause of the meanest man will not be a whit less regarded by him than that of the loftiest monarch.”*

This brings us to the end of a rather lengthy section on submission. This and the last two sermons I’ve done on the topic have been quite difficult to deliver, and I assume difficult for most of you to hear. I hope I’ve made clear that the three relationships – wife/husband, child/parent, servant/master – are closely tied to our relationship with Christ and our service to Him. When you forget that, these things can quickly turn into idols or meaningless time sinks, and you may get into a situation where, like Samson, the Lord has departed from you and you don’t even realize it (Jdg 16:20). These relationships (or similar ones, where the same principles apply) will be where most of us spend most of our waking hours in this life - most of our time, most of our effort, most of our thought processes. These are the areas of life where you are most liable to feel tension, strain, stress. They are where your true colors will come out. They are where discontentment often plants deep roots and spreads quickly, like some noxious weed. Thus, these relationships are fertile ground for Satan’s devices to flourish. This is one reason, I believe, why Paul immediately launches into instructions on “spiritual warfare” in the next section which, Lord willing, I will get into next time.

“Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.” (Ephesians 6:24)