

# **THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS**

## **(LESSON ONE HUNDRED AND SEVEN)**

### ***“DON’T ABUSE YOUR AUTHORITY MASTERS”***

#### **EPHESIANS 6:5-9**

*5 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;*

*6 Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;*

*7 With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men:*

*8 Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free.*

*9 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.*

Last week, we commenced our study with the following observations: “In **Ephesians** chapter **5** and verse **21**, the Apostle Paul commences an extensive discussion of relationships that continues through to verse **9** of chapter **6**. The general principle is that of **mutual submission**. He writes, “*And submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (**New English Translation**). We have stated that the principle of **mutual submission** is not only one of the practical results of the filling

of the Spirit but is also the foundation of the more specific principles of authority and submission as it relates to husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves.”

In our last 5 Lessons, we have examined the relations between believing slaves of the first-century and their masters, which parallels the employee-employer relationship in our day. As in the relations between wives and husbands, and children and parents, the principle Paul is emphasizing is that of authority and submission as a manifestation of one who is filled with, and therefore controlled by, the Holy Spirit.

In this Lesson, we will consider the relations between believing masters of the first-century and their slaves, and we will look at the parallels between that situation and the employer-employee relationship of modern times.

In verse 9 Paul writes, *“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.”* Persons who read this verse two thousand years after it was written, may not recognize how revolutionary Paul’s exhortation was in the context of the first-century Greco-Roman world. Under Roman law the slave was not regarded as a person but as a thing. There was no such thing as a code of working conditions. Slaves could be placed on the “the auction block,” and sold as items of property to the highest bidder. The brand of their owners might be burned into their foreheads, and they might bear the scars of judicial torture. When slaves became too old or otherwise infirm to carry out their tasks, they could be thrown out to die. They did not even have the right to marry, and if children were born to them, the children would belong to their masters, just as the lambs of the flock belonged to the shepherd. All the rights belonged to the master and all the duties to the slave. The first century Roman philosopher Seneca for example said “all slaves were enemies.” And Aristotle described slaves as being simply tools with a soul in them.

Commenting on this verse, **Warren Wiersbe** made the following remarks: "The Christian faith does not bring about harmony by erasing social or cultural distinctions. Servants are still servants when they trust Christ, and masters are still masters. Rather, the Christian faith brings harmony by working in the heart. Christ gives us a new motivation, not a new organization. Both servant and master are serving the Lord and seeking to please Him, and in this way they are able to work together to the glory of God."

Paul writes, "*And, ye masters, do the same things unto them.*" It is important for us to understand that the slave-owners to whom Paul addressed these words were believers, for God would have had no exhortations to give to unsaved slave-owners regarding their attitude and behaviour to their slaves. The words, "*do the same things,*" do not mean that the masters were to render service to the slaves as the slaves did to them, but that they were to treat them with the same Christian principles and consideration that the slaves were to demonstrate to them.

The phrase is in the **present imperative** in the Greek, indicating that Paul is issuing a command to Spirit-filled masters to **continually** act toward their slaves on the basis of godly principles, not social privilege. The masters were to act toward their slaves in the same Christ-like manner in which the slaves were urged to act toward them. If an employer expects his or her workers to do their best for him or her, he or she must do his or her best for them as well. Paul is saying in effect to the believing masters, "This is a two-way street. You have obligations and responsibilities too."

In verses **5-7**, Paul addressed believing slaves as follows:

*5 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**;*

*6 Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;*

*7 With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men.*

In all three verses Paul urges the believing slaves to obey and serve their masters as they obeyed and served the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, in verse **9**, Paul tells believing masters that they must serve the Lord from their heart if they expect their slaves to do the same. They must not exploit them, but treat them with the same care and concern with which they treat Him!

The Australian New Testament scholar, **Peter Thomas O'Brien**, makes the following comments: "In order to deal with their slaves, owners were known to threaten beatings, sexual harassment, or selling male slaves away from the households with the result that they would be parted forever from their loved ones. Paul's cryptic exhortation is outrageous. It does not mean, however, that masters are to serve their slaves. Nor does it refer simply to their doing good, as in verse **8**. More likely it points to their attitudes and actions, which, like those of slaves, are to be governed by their relationship to their heavenly Lord...In the immediate context, slaves have already been instructed to show respect, sincerity of heart, and goodwill; now masters are urged to treat them in a similar manner."

**John Phillips**, in his commentary, "*Exploring Ephesians*," makes an interesting observation: "The employer expects a fair day's work; he must give a fair day's pay. The employer wants the employee to be diligent and promote the best interests of the company; the employer must be diligent and promote the welfare of the employee. Trade unions would never have been formed if **Ephesians 6:5-9** had been the cornerstone of all employee-management relations."

Paul says, "*And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening*:" The word "*forbearing*" is the translation of a Greek word

which means, “to send back, relax, give up, or leave.” Paul is urging believing masters to abandon or give up the use of threats in dealing with their slaves.

The Greek word translated “*threatening*” is **apeilé: (ap-i-lay’)** which means “a threatening or threat.” The word has the definite article, referring to the well-known habit of masters threatening their slaves. Paul is exhorting masters to not only refrain from inflicting unjust and cruel punishment to their slaves, but to stop resorting to threats as well. In forbidding threatening, Paul is naturally including every other form of excessive treatment.

Paul indicates that believing masters have a better way to encourage obedience and service than threats. Very often the use of threats result in workers doing less instead of more, and this kind of negative motivation cannot be continued for long periods of time without leading to serious conflicts. Far more godly and persuasive is the positive motivation of **Colossians 4:1**. The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: “*Masters, treat your slaves with justice and fairness, because you know that you also have a master in heaven.*”

**Kenneth Wuest** explains that in this verse, Paul is not referring to an equality of condition. In other words, he is not saying that the slave has been elevated to the same **social** standing as his or her master. He is referring instead to the brotherly equality which grows out of the Christian relation. He is saying that salvation has elevated the believing slave to the same **spiritual** standing as his or her believing master, as outlined in **Galatians 3:26-29**. The **New English Translation** furnishes the following rendering:

*26 For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith.*

*27 For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

*28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

*29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise.*

Paul exhorted believing slave-owners to bear in mind that their believing slaves were their brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus!

The first basis on which Paul appeals to masters to stop threatening their slaves, is that they have the same Master and both are accountable to Him. Paul writes, “*knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him.*” In a spiritual sense, both believing slave-owners and their believing slaves were “fellow slaves” of the Lord Jesus Christ. As such these earthly masters would one day render an account to their heavenly Master at His judgment seat, including how they treated their slaves. By his use of the Greek word **oida** translated “*knowing*,” Paul indicates that the believing masters were well aware of this reality. The word means to see with the mind’s eye and signifies a clear mental perception. It describes one as having come to a perception or realization of something.

**Warren Wiersbe** has an excellent summary statement regarding this matter. “This is practicing the lordship of Christ. The wife submits to her own husband “*as unto the Lord*” (**Ephesians 5:22**), and the husband loves the wife “*as Christ also loved the church*” (**Ephesians 5:25**). Children obey their parents “*in the Lord*” (**Ephesians 6:1**), and parents raise their children “*in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*” (**Ephesians 6:4**). Servants are obedient “*as unto Christ*” (**Ephesians 6:5**), and masters treat their servants as their “*Master in heaven*” would have them do. Each person, in submission to the Lord, has no problems submitting to those over him. Jesus said the way to be a ruler is first to be a servant (**Matthew 25:21**). **The person who is not under authority has no right to exercise authority.**”

Paul reminds the believing slave-owners of God's absolute impartiality. He says, "*Neither is there respect of persons with him.*" This is his second basis for appealing to believing masters to treat their slaves well. The phrase, "*respect of persons*" is the translation of a Greek word which literally means, "to receive face." **Thayer's Greek Lexicon** defines the word as "the fault of one who when called on to requite or to give judgment has respect to the outward circumstances of men and not to their intrinsic merits, and so prefers, as the more worthy, one who is rich, highborn, or powerful, to another who is destitute of such gifts."

The word "partiality" is a good translation of the Greek word. The idea is that of looking to see who someone is before deciding how to treat them! In other words, one judges by appearance and on the basis of appearance one gives special favour and respect, or conversely refuses to give respect. It means to judge others purely on a superficial level, without consideration of the person's true merits, abilities, or character, and thereby demonstrate partiality or favoritism. In short, it means to make unjust distinctions between people by treating one person better than another.

The Lord to Whom both the slaves and the masters are accountable is completely impartial. He keeps accurate records, and we will be judged by the perfect standards of heaven. This is also a reminder that social standing has no relevance in heaven and it should therefore have none in the Church. In regard to the treatment of slaves, Spirit-filled masters should be impartial like their Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

God is not a respecter of persons. He does not play favorites. He will judge a master or a servant if he or she sins, or He Will reward a master or a servant if he or she honours His Word. A believing employer must never think that because he or she is in a position of authority that he or she treat his or her employees in even a slightly inferior manner as he or she would treat the Lord. Nor should a believing employer play favorites with those under his or her authority.

In chapter **2** and verses **1-9** of his general letter, **James** deals with the evil of partiality in the church. The **New English Translation** renders the passage as follows:

*1 My brothers and sisters, do not show prejudice if you possess faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.*

*2 For if someone comes into your assembly wearing a gold ring and fine clothing, and a poor person enters in filthy clothes,*

*3 do you pay attention to the one who is finely dressed and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and to the poor person, “You stand over there,” or “Sit on the floor”?*

*4 If so, have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil motives?*

*5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters! Did not God choose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him?*

*6 But you have dishonored the poor! Are not the rich oppressing you and dragging you into the courts?*

*7 Do they not blaspheme the good name of the one you belong to?*

*8 But if you fulfill the royal law as expressed in this scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.*

*9 But if you show prejudice, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as violators.*

The awareness that they had an impartial heavenly Master to Whom they would one day have to give an account in respect of the treatment of their fellow-believers who were slaves, would no doubt, have a restraining effect on believing slave-owners who had a tendency to abuse their power over their slaves. Paul says in effect to the believing



slave-owners, “The Master in heaven is your Judge and He is equally the judge of your slaves. You and your slaves are alike responsible to Him.”

**John Phillips** writes, “God is not impressed with a person’s position, but He is keenly interested in what the person does in that position. There will be abuses of position. Injustices will be done. But there is One who is watching. The Lord has His eye on what is happening, and He has His own way of squaring accounts-sometimes down here, certainly in heaven. The day is coming when He will right wrongs and review all lives. Master or slave, it will make no difference then.”

I would like to conclude this Lesson by reading **Galatians 5:13-26** from **The Message**:

*13 It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows.*

*14 For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That’s an act of true freedom.*

*15 If you bite and ravage each other, watch out — in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?*

*16 My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit. Then you won’t feed the compulsions of selfishness.*

*17 For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day.*

*18 Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?*

*19 It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness;*

*20 trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits;*

*21 the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on. This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.*

*22 But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard — things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments,*

*23 not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way.*

*24 Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good — crucified.*

*25 Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a*

*sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.*

*26 That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.*