

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

(LESSON ONE HUNDRED AND TWO)

“AS UNTO CHRIST”

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.

In verse **5** of our text, Paul writes, “*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.*”

The **New English translation** renders the verse as follows:

“Slaves, obey your human masters with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ.”

In our recent Lessons, we have made the point that in **Ephesians 5:21**, Paul gives to his readers one of the practical results of the Holy Spirit's filling of a believer. He writes, "*Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.*" When a believer is filled with the Holy Spirit, he or she will manifest an attitude of humility and submission to their fellow believers. Every member of the Body of Christ, should be willing, "in the fear of God," or "out of reverence for Christ," that is, with a conscious regard for God's clearly revealed will, to recognize the rights, needs, and wishes of every other member. By so doing, believers will be able to present a united front to the world, demonstrate the blessing of true Christian fellowship, and glorify God. Our submission to the Holy Spirit, and to each other, provides compelling evidence that we are indeed "filled with the Spirit."

We have also emphasized that in **Ephesians 5:21**, Paul transitions to an extensive discussion of human relationships—a discussion that continues through to verse **9** of chapter **6**. The **general** principle of **mutual submission** is not only the result of the filling of the Spirit, but it is also the foundation of the more **specific** principles of authority and submission as they relate to husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves. In verses **5-9** of chapter **6**, Paul deals with these principles in respect of the relationship of believing slaves and their masters.

Before we attempt to examine the text, it is important for us to remember that whenever we encounter an **imperative**, or a command in the epistles, it is always based on an **indicative**—something that is true of the believer as a result of his or her exalted position in Christ. Whatever God commands believers to do is always based upon what He has done, what He is doing, or what He is going to do for them. **Philippians 2:12-13** furnishes us with a good example of this principle. The **New English Translation** renders the verses as follows:

*12 So then, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence but even more in my absence, continue working out your salvation with awe and reverence (**imperative**),*

*13 for the one bringing forth in you both the desire and the effort—for the sake of his good pleasure—is God (**indicative**).*

In this example, we see that the **imperative**, or the command to the Philippian believers to work out their salvation, is based on the **indicative** reality that God is the One who is at work in them, supplying both the desire and the effort to obey the command! The use of the word “*for*” at the beginning of verse **13** indicates dependence or causality. In other words, it would be an exercise in futility for believers to endeavour to obey the command to work out their salvation if God was not the One providing the inner motivation and effort!

The same is true of the commands in our text. The only way that the believing slaves in Ephesus could obey the commands outlined in verses **5-7** is by being “*filled with the Spirit*.” And it was entirely possible for them to be so filled, because they had received the Holy Spirit at the very moment of their conversion. At the moment of their regeneration, these slaves had put off the “Old Man” and put on the “New Man” in a **positional** sense. But for the rest of their earthly lives it would be necessary for them, as is the case for all believers, to put off the “Old Man” and put on the “New Man” in a **practical** sense daily.

The Greek word translated “*servants*” in verse **5**, is **doulos**: (**doo’-los**), which describes a person who is bound to another in servitude. In the Greek culture, the word **doulos** usually referred to the involuntary, permanent service of a slave. By Roman times, slavery was so extensive that in the early Christian period, one out of every two people was a slave! **Marvin Vincent** states that in many of the cities of Asia Minor slaves outnumbered free persons! Practically all work was done by slaves. This was so pervasive that even doctors, teachers and secretaries of the Roman emperors were slaves! From at least **3000 BC** captives in war were the primary source of slaves. Although some masters were

kind to their slaves, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule. In **Ephesians 6:5-8**, Paul is addressing believing slaves who were working, for the most part, for unbelieving masters.

The noted Biblical Greek New Testament scholar of the mid-twentieth century, **Kenneth Samuel Wuest**, writes that the word **doulos**, "Designated one who was born into his condition of slavery, one bound to his master as his slave, one who was in a permanent relationship to his master, which relationship could only be broken by death, one whose will was swallowed up in the will of his master, one who served his master even to the extent that he disregarded his own interests... It is the word taken over into the New Testament to designate a sinner as a slave (**Romans 6:17**). It is also used to speak of a believer as a bonds slave of the Lord Jesus (**Romans 1:1**). However, in this latter case the servility and abjectness are not included in the meaning of the word, but the fact that the Bible writers used it to describe the Christian, shows that they desired to retain its connotation of humbleness on the part of the slave. As bonds slaves of the Lord Jesus, we are to ever remember that we must serve Him in all humility of mind."

Brothers and sisters, what a glorious paradox this is! Slaves that have been set free from sin, and into the liberty of "slavery" to the perfect Master, Jesus Christ! As we noted earlier, Paul is speaking to believing, Spirit-filled slaves, and as such, they were not only the slaves of their **human** masters but they were now slaves of their **Divine** Master. As slaves of Christ they were to be totally surrendered to His will, which in context called for a continual willingness to be filled with, and therefore controlled by, the Holy Spirit in order to carry out the command to be obedient.

Expositor's Greek Testament supplies the following helpful comments:

"Many questions would inevitably arise with regard to the duties of masters and servants in a state of society in which slavery prevailed and had the sanction of ancient and undisputed use. Especially would this be the case when Christian slaves (of whom there were many) had a heathen master, and when the Christian master had heathen slaves. Hence the considerable place given in the New Testament to this relation and the application of Christian principles....Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament slavery is accepted as an existing institution, which is neither formally condemned nor formally approved. There is nothing to prompt revolutionary action, or to encourage repudiation of the position. Onesimus, the Christian convert, is sent back by Paul to his master, and the institution is left to be undermined and removed by the gradual operation of the great Christian principles of the equality of men in the sight of God, and a common Christian brotherhood, the spiritual freedom of the Christian man, and the Lordship of Christ to which every other lordship is subordinate."

Brothers and sisters, the first-century master-slave relationship clearly parallels the employer-employee relationship in our day. As in the relationships 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.

Paul exhorts believing slaves to be obedient to their masters "*according to the flesh,*" or their human masters. The phrase, "*according to the flesh,*" serves to identify the believing slaves' earthly masters and serves to distinguish these earthly masters from their heavenly Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word "*obedient*" is a translation of the Greek word **hupakouó**: (**hoop-ak-oo'-o**) which literally means, "under the hearing," or "to listen under." The idea is of listening with attentiveness and then responding positively to what is heard. The sense is that one listens with a readiness

to carry out what has been requested or commanded. It implies an **inward attitude** of respect and honour, as well as the **external act** of obedience. The word pictures the one hearing as being under the authority of someone else.

The Greek word **hupakouó** is in the **present imperative** in the Greek. Paul is issuing a command to slaves to obey their masters as a lifestyle. He is saying, “Be constantly obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh.” But how can a slave, or any person for that matter, submit to another person habitually? In the context of **Ephesians 5:18-6:9**, he or she must be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to allow for this supernatural submission from the heart.

Brothers and sisters, the truth is that the Christian life is not a **difficult** life to live. It is an **impossible** life to live unless the believer is continually being filled with the Holy Spirit, or continually allowing the Word of God to dwell richly in him or her!

William Barclay observes that when Paul writes to believing slaves, “He does not tell them to rebel; he tells them to be Christians where they are. **The great message of Christianity to every man is that it is where God has set us that we must live out the Christian life.** The circumstances may be all against us, but that only makes the challenge greater. **Christianity does not offer us escape from circumstances; it offers us conquest of circumstances.**”

In **1 Corinthians 7:20-24**, we read the following:

20 Let each one remain in that situation in life in which he was called.

21 Were you called as a slave? Do not worry about it. But if indeed you are able to be free, make the most of the opportunity.

22 For the one who was called in the Lord as a slave is the Lord’s freedman. In the same way, the one who was called as a free person is Christ’s slave.

23 You were bought with a price. Do not become slaves of men.

24 In whatever situation someone was called, brothers and sisters, let him remain in it with God.

(New English Translation)

Warren Wiesrbe writes that, "Nowhere in the New Testament is slavery per se attacked or condemned, though the overall thrust of the Gospel is against it. Paul's ministry was not to overthrow the Roman government or any of its institutions, but to preach the Gospel and win the lost to Christ. Certainly the results of his evangelism ultimately led to the overthrow of the Roman Empire, but that was not Paul's main motive. Just as the preaching of **Wesley** and **Whitefield** resulted in the abolition of slavery and child labor, the elevation of women, and the care of the needy, so Paul's ministry contributed to the death of slavery and the encouragement of freedom. However, he was careful not to confuse the social system with the spiritual order in the church."

Sometimes I wonder if we as professing Christians understand the full implications of our Lord's statement to Pontius Pilate in **John 18:36**:
"My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my servants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here"
(New English Translation).

Perhaps as the poet **William Wordsworth** wrote over two hundred years ago,

*"The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers....
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!"*

The believing slaves are urged to obey their earthly masters, "*with fear and trembling.*" The phrase expresses a desire to not come short of the

discharge of one's duty. The idea is not so much of a dread of the master himself, but of a genuine respect for his authority and consequently, a desire to leave no duty undone. We may say that the idea behind the phrase, "*with fear and trembling*" is of a passion to please. One commentator states that the phrase, "*with fear and trembling,*" "Does not describe a fearful, shaking attitude but in this context represents a sense of awe and reverence generated by the incredible truth that we are privileged to serve the King of kings and for a moment in time He has ordained that we serve as slaves of men."

Brothers and sisters, do we see how critically important it is for us to look at our world, our society, and all the circumstances that we have to deal with from the perspective of eternity and the sovereignty of God? Do we understand how vital it is for us to look at every situation that confronts us through the lens of the Word of God?

The application for those of us who are employees is that we be careful to avoid saying or doing anything that would cause our employers, whether they are saved or unsaved, to think or speak disparagingly of Jesus Christ, His Church, or His Gospel. Paul stresses this point in **1 Timothy 6:1-2**. The **New English Translation** renders the verses as follows:

1 Those who are under the yoke as slaves must regard their own masters as deserving of full respect. This will prevent the name of God and Christian teaching from being discredited.

2 But those who have believing masters must not show them less respect because they are brothers. Instead they are to serve all the more, because those who benefit from their service are believers and dearly loved. Teach them and exhort them about these things.

Paul urges the believing slaves to obey their earthly masters, not only "*with fear and trembling,*" but also "*in singleness of...heart, as unto Christ.*" The words "*in singleness of heart,*" qualify the spirit, or the

attitude in which the obedience of the believing slaves was to be rendered to their masters. Their obedience was not to be characterized by formality, pretence, or hypocrisy, but by sincerity, and an undivided heart.

The word “*singleness*” is the translation of a Greek word which means “singleness, simplicity, uprightness, mental honesty.” The sense is of whole-hearted service that is motivated by singleness of purpose so as to be open and aboveboard-service without guile, and without a hidden agenda. Of course the word “*heart*,” as it is used here, does not refer to the physical organ, but is used figuratively to refer to the seat and centre of human life. The heart is the centre of the personality, and it controls the intellect, emotions, and will. No outward obedience is of the slightest value to God unless it is the product of a heart that is surrendered to Him. The **English Standard Version** translates **Psalm 51:6** as follows: “*Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.*”

The importance of the phrase, “*as unto Christ.*” Cannot be overstated. The obedience of the believing slave is to be rendered to his or her earthly master as if his or her earthly master were the Lord Jesus Christ Himself! The believing slave is to labour for his earthly master, with the same attitude and service as if he or she were working for Christ! Beloved, we who are employees must do the same!

The Scottish theologian **John Eadie**, wrote the following: “The slave is ever tempted to appear to labour while yet he is loitering, to put on the seeming of obedience and obey with a double heart. The counsel of the apostle therefore is, that he should obey in singleness of aim, giving undivided effort and attention to the task in hand, for it was to be done as to Christ.”

Commenting on the phrase, “*as unto Christ,*” **William MacDonald** wrote the following in his, “***Believer’s Bible Commentary:***” “These words show that there should be no real distinction between the

secular and the sacred. All that we do should be for Him—with a view to pleasing and honoring Him and to attracting others to Him. The most menial and commonplace tasks in life are ennobled and dignified when they are done for the glory of God. Even washing dishes! That is why some Christian housewives have this motto over their kitchen sink: 'Divine service held here three times daily.'

We will conclude our Lesson this evening with the following excerpt from *“Our Daily Bread;”*

“Three men were hard at work on a large building project. Someone asked them, 'What are you doing?' 'I'm mixing mortar,' one said. The second man said, 'I'm helping put up this great stone wall.' But the third man replied, 'I'm building a cathedral to the glory of God.'

Those three men could just as well have been working on a car, in a factory, behind a counter, or on any legitimate product or service a man or woman might provide.

Most people work to earn a living, attain success, or amass wealth. Such reasons, however, must not be the Christian's primary motive for working. **Like the third man in our story, we need to see that what gives work eternal value is not the product or service of our labor but the process of laboring itself—doing the job faithfully to the glory of the Lord.**

God commands us to work because it is good. But work also gives believers the opportunity to represent Jesus Christ to unbelievers. By performing our God-given tasks to the best of our abilities, we bring honor and glory to His name. And we demonstrate to fellow employees the difference Christ can make in a life. Is our work just a job? Or are we doing it to the glory of God?”