

INTRODUCTION

Slavery in the first century world was accepted as the norm within society; most people could not imagine what life was like without slavery. It seems that those who were slaves within the church at Ephesus were struggling with the whole aspect of being free in Christ and yet being slaves to an earthly master. This probably led to them serving their masters grudgingly and therefore it brought dishonour to their new found faith and of course ultimately to Christ. Paul writes this passage as a corrective for them in this vital area. In doing so, he addresses two simple points: Serving a non-Christian master, and serving a Christian master.

Slavery was in fact a vital social component of the Greco-Roman world in the first century. Slaves were the employees who did the work for their wealthy masters. It was a widespread scheme of employment. In fact, the entire economic structure of the Roman Empire depended on it. To understand slavery believers today must strip away their preconceived notions of it. Those notions are drawn largely from the racial slavery, which bears only some resemblance to slavery in the first-century Roman Empire.

In the Ancient Near East, much of the seasonal work in the fields and part-time project work was done by hired day labourers. Permanently employed domestic slaves often served, as managers, cooks, and teachers, becoming a part of the household, almost like family. Slaves were acquired in several different ways. If we survey the Old Testament we see that many were acquired as a result of war (Num. 31:7-35; Deut. 20:10-14). Slaves could also be purchased (Ex. 21:7; Lev. 25:44-46). Some people sold themselves into slavery (Lev. 25:39ff. Deut. 15:12-17), others were sold to pay debts (2 Kings 4:1; Neh. 5:1-8).

Slaves could be received as gifts (Gen. 29:24), or even inherited (Lev. 25:46). Still others were born to slaves and remained in that role.

The system was not perfect, but it was workable. Most of the abuses came from the evil hearts of men, not from the institution itself. Such abuses can be found in every system of employment, whether slavery, communism, or capitalism.

The Old Testament never forbade slavery, but carefully guarded the rights of slaves. Jewish slaves could not be held for more than six years (Ex. 21:2), unless they voluntarily chose to remain (Ex. 21:5-6). Those who came into slavery with a wife and children could take them when they left. Those given a wife by their master, however, could not take her until her time was up.

That was necessary to protect the rights of the Masters. Slaves who were abused by their masters were to be set free (Ex. 21:26—27). Their religious rights, such as enjoying the Sabbath rest, were also protected (Ex. 20:10). Slaves also enjoyed civil rights. The murder of a slave brought punishment (Ex. 21:20). Foreign slaves seeking asylum in Israel were to be protected (Deut. 23:15—16). Slaves had economic rights, including the right to own other slaves (2 Sam. 9:9—10). The nation of Israel even had state slaves, similar to civil service employees (Josh. 16:10; Judg. 1:28; Ezra 8:20).

Jewish slaves in New Testament times were similarly protected. They were to be treated as equal to the eldest son in a family so protected were they that an old Jewish saying went, "Whoever buys a Jewish slave buys himself a master." Gentile slaves were not always so well treated, but on the whole were better off than day labourers. Slaves had their food, clothing, and housing provided, along with a small wage and security. Subtracting the costs of food, clothing and housing from a day labourer's wages often left him worse off than a slave.

Slavery was thus a workable, if not ideal, system. As in the Old, the New Testament nowhere calls for its abolition. By the New Testament era, slavery was waning in the Roman Empire, though there were still an enormous number of slaves. For Jesus and the apostles to call for slavery's abolition would have been to promote unemployment and social chaos. Further, the saving message of the gospel would have been swallowed up in the call for social reform. Eventually, the influence of Christianity helped bring an end to abusive forms of slavery in the Roman Empire.

1. SERVING A NON-CHRISTIAN MASTER

The phrase 'under the yoke' need not designate an abusive relationship (cf. Matt. 11:28—30). It was a colloquial expression of submissive service under the authority of someone else. The word "slaves" is the plural form of the familiar New Testament word 'doulos' which designates a person in submission to another person. It has no inherent negative connotation in fact, the word, in both its noun and verb forms, is used about 150 times in the New Testament. It speaks of a believer's slavery to his Lord (Rom. 1:1), to non-Christians (1 Cor. 9:19), and to other believers (Gal. 5:13).

The slave's Master had authority over his slave? The word master is from a word from which our English word "despot" derives. Unlike the English word, however, the Greek term does not carry the connotation of harsh, cruel, and abusive. It merely refers to someone with absolute, unrestricted authority and was even used of our Lord Jesus Christ (Jude 4). In Greek culture the word slaves and masters went together. And today our equivalent would be employer and employees, although the Master and slaves relationship was much stronger as the Master had complete authority and the slave had none. Nevertheless the slave was employed. Clearly, these Masters in verse 1 are non-Christian as indicated by the qualifying remark in verse 2, "and let those who have believers as their masters." This verse applies to most Christians who work for non-Christians. The Christian has a bond of duty in such cases.

Believers were to consider these non-Christian masters as worthy of all full respect. Believers are to have respect and a correct assessment of the authority of their employers, regardless of how they feel about them.

A correct assessment will find one's employer worthy of full respect or honour. Along with widows (5:3) and elders (5:17), employers are to receive honour. This means that Christians must respect their masters or in our case employers and serve them dutifully. Even those employers who are harsh and unfair are to be honoured because of their role as superiors in the work place. (1 Peter 2:18—20)

The reason masters are to be shown respect is so that the name of God and our teaching (doctrine) may not be slandered (spoken against). Believers' attitudes and behaviour in their daily relations at work affect how people perceive God and the teaching of the church; the latter no doubt a reference particularly to the gospel. Those who fail to honour their employers will cause God and Christian truth to be spoken against. Our employers would question what kind of a God we serve, What sort of God would encourage them to laziness, insubordination, or even hostility. They would also question the gospel's power to transform a life. R. C. H. Lenski writes,

"If a Christian slave dishonoured his master in any way by disobedience, by acting disrespectfully, by speaking shamefully of his master, the worst consequence would not be the beating he would receive but the curses he would cause his master to hurl at this miserable slave's God, his religion, and the teaching he had embraced: Instead of bringing honour to the true God and the gospel of his high and holy Name, as every Christian should be anxious to do, this slave would bring about the very opposite, to the devil's delight." (*The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy to Titus, and to Philemon*)

This was a real problem in the first century slave culture; it was a recurring issue that needed to be confronted by Paul so he repeats these instructions in his letter to Titus (Titus 2:9-10). The connection between godly living and evangelism is evident. Christians have a divinely commanded responsibility to live out their faith in the work place. Having a proper attitude of submission and respect, and performing quality work, are necessary basics to proclaiming a believable gospel.

2. SERVING A CHRISTIAN MASTER (v 2)

The temptation for those with Christian masters was to expect special privileges because of their equality in Christ. It was certainly not uncommon for a mature believer to be employed by an immature one, or even for an elder of the church to work for one who was not in church leadership.

This could lead to conflict if the employee did not follow God's design for them in the work place. Galatians 3:28 says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." That verse, however, does not eliminate racial, social, or sexual distinctions. Jews and Greeks, slaves and free men, and men and women retain their distinctiveness despite their spiritual equality. The same is true for slaves and masters. That verse provides no license for those who have believers as their masters to fail to respect them. Those who are leaders in the church are to be followed by all in the church (Heb. 13:17), but that does not carry over to the work place.

Christians who work for other Christians must not be disrespectful to them because they are brothers in Christ. The word translated "less respect" literally means, "to think down." Believers are not to fail to appreciate the authority of their Christian employers by treating them as equals within the work place. A submissive working attitude and behaviour must be maintained. Because the believing employers are brothers and in our world they could be sisters does not justify assuming special privileges. Nor is it right to presume on our spiritual relationship with our Christian employer by being insubordinate, or giving less than an honest day's work.

Those with Christian employers should serve them even better we are told, because those who benefit from our work are believers.

Those with unbelieving masters are to do their very best in serving them. How much more should those with believing masters serve them? In that case, those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved, brothers in Christ. Believers are to "do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10). The Christian slave will work hard and will show full respect to his master because his master is his brother and is someone who is dear to him.

3. APPLICATIONARY PRINCIPLES

There are two other passages in the Pauline writings that I want to refer too as we deal with some practical applications that will be helpful to us whether we serve Christian or non Christian employers. Turn with me to Eph. 6:5-8 and Col.3: 22-25

Notice the following points:

a) First, believers are to serve their employers obediently (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22). They must dutifully, submissively respond to their employer's requests.

b) Second, believers are to serve their employers whole-heartedly (Col. 3:22). They are to carry out whatever tasks are assigned to them, unless so doing would violate God's law (cf. Acts 5:29).

c) Third, believers are to serve their employers respectfully (Eph. 6:5). They must respect those God has placed in authority over them.

d) Fourth, believers are to serve their employers eagerly, in “sincerity of heart” (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22). They should serve voluntarily, not grudgingly.

e) Fifth, believers are to serve their employers as they would serve Christ (Eph. 6:5; cf. Col. 3:23). They must do their jobs to the best of their ability.

f) Sixth, believers are to serve their employers diligently, not just when their eye is on you. They must not put on a show for the boss by working hard only when he is watching. (Eph. 6:6; Col. 3:22).

g) Seventh, believers are to serve their employers humbly, and not just to win their favour. (Col. 3:23).

h) Eighth, believers are to serve their employers spiritually, “doing the will of God from your heart” (Eph. 6:6). All work is worship to God it is sacred and performed ultimately for the glory of God.

One final application that is suitable for us all even those who are no longer employed. We are told in the Scriptures that we are slaves to Christ therefore we can rightly apply these verses to our relationship to Him. Just as slaves were to show respect to their Masters so we should do likewise to Jesus.

All the points of application I made earlier in relation to our employees can easily be modified to apply to our relationship with Christ (give examples). The reason why we should show honour to Christ is the same reason why we should honour our earthly masters. So that as people observe the way we live for God they will not be able to slander God’s name or the His teaching.

Amen