



# THE GOSPEL TRANSFORMS

THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS

## EPHESIANS 6:5-9

### The Gospel-Centered Servants and Masters

Pastor Anthony Ferguson

The book of Ephesians is divided nicely into two sections. Ephesians 1-3 is an amazing description of our God and what he does for us in the gospel. Paul, then, in Ephesians 4-6, explains how this reality ought to transform us. A life that revolves around the gospel will fall progressively more in line with the exhortations of Ephesians 4-6 because the gospel transforms us.

Knowing this context is vitally important, church family, because it has the power to keep us encouraged amid commandments that can be discouraging. We are encouraged by this structure – Ephesians 1-3 is a description of the gospel, and Ephesians 4-6 discusses the implications – because the form indicates that it is the gospel that transforms us to desire to obey God, nothing else.



Church family, Paul, has discussed how wives and husbands and how children and parents should relate to one another. Now, he discusses a third relationship prevalent during Paul's day: bondservants and masters. The power to obey God is only possible because of the gospel – let's keep that in mind.

The main idea of today's sermon is that Christian servants must relate to their masters from a sincere heart, while Christian masters must treat their servants with dignity. Although we live in a country where slavery has rightfully been abolished for a century and a half, there are several important implications today.

Let's investigate this text and these implications together.

## SLAVES/SERVANTS (EPHESIANS 6:5-8)

“*5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, 6 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.*

Paul begins this section by addressing bondservants/slaves. Now, we must take special care here so that we interpret this passage correctly. One interpretative land-mine that we can easily step on here is a failure to understand the historical context. In other words, if we are going to understand Ephesians 6:5-8, we must understand the institution of slavery in the first century AD, and not import our idea of slavery in America into Ephesians. It is not the same!

What was Slavery in the Roman Era? The slavery that Paul is addressing in this passage is very different than the slavery we experienced in this country. Here are some of the differences:

First, slavery in the Roman Era was a very broad economic institution. Slaves served as cooks, bakers, business agents, teachers, business accountants, and physicians. There are instances where slaves held the same economic and social status as their masters. Some estimate that there were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire, and these slaves served in various sectors of the economy. To put it another way, roughly 35% of the population were slaves. The master/servant relationship was, thus, a significant aspect of economic life in this Era. American slavery was very different. There was little ability for a slave to advance oneself economically. The institution itself was very restrictive economically.



Second, the way someone became a slave was very different. In America, slaves were kidnapped mainly from west Africa. They sold into a perpetual life of slavery for generations. Slavery in Rome was different. People became slaves for a variety of reasons. Some even became slaves for the sake of economic advancement. It is even reported that a foreign king's son once sold himself as a slave to avoid paying taxes. Moreover, many slaves had clauses in their contracts to buy their freedom at a later date.

Third, slavery in the Roman Era was not racial. Slaves looked the same as their masters. Slavery in America was racial. Those who supported racism believed that a group of people – Africans – who were more suited to servitude because of their skin color. This slavery is not the slavery of Paul's day.

Thus, the slaves that Paul addresses are a group of people who have a very different financial and social situation than slaves in America had.

Why doesn't Paul call for the Slavery of the Roman Era to be Abolished? Let's remember that slavery in the Roman Era is, in many ways, unlike the slavery experienced in America. Nonetheless, it is still an excellent question to ask: why doesn't Paul call for that form of slavery to be abolished?



First, we know that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:21 that if a slave can become free, they should avail themselves of the opportunity. Freedom is better than slavery. Second, Paul says in Philemon 8 that he could command Philemon to do what is required or fitting. Onesimus was a slave who ran away from his master, Philemon. Philemon is a faithful Christian, as Philemon 4-7 indicates. Onesimus has come to know the Lord while in prison with Paul and has helped him. Paul desires for Onesimus to continue with him but will not because he is a runaway slave. Therefore, he appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus free, no longer as a slave, because it fits Philemon's faith. Thus, when applied to the kind of slavery in the Roman Era, the gospel aims toward freedom for slaves.

Second, we must notice something very significant in Ephesians 6:5-9. In these verses, Paul does not compel every Christian master in Ephesus and the surrounding churches to release his/her slaves; yet, in Philemon, Paul compels an individual to release a specific slave, Onesimus. The answer to this paradox is quite convicting to us today. Here is my thought, and you should know that a sermon by Allister Begg on this passage helped shaped my thinking.

Paul does not call for abolishing slavery in the Roman Era because his ministry is not political and of this



world; instead, Paul's ministry aims at another world – the kingdom to come. Thus, he does not take on his day's political issues for that would distract from his mission of preaching Christ. Notice that Paul does not push a political agenda when Paul gets an audience with his day's political leaders. Instead, he preaches Christ. In short, the political issue of ending slavery in the Roman Era, although a good cause, is not Paul's ultimate mission.

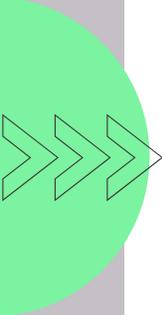
The same is true of Jesus' ministry. Notice that Jesus does not focus his minister on the political issues of the day. The rulers who ruled Jerusalem were quite hostile to Jews before and during the earthly ministry of Jesus. These hostilities include a lack of ethics, such as brutality and religious hostility. Some of the religious hostilities include Pilate bringing military banners into the Holy City bearing Caesar's image, stealing Temple funds to make an aqueduct, and making coins with Roman religious symbols that were to be used by Jews. These were hostile and unjust actions, but Jesus does not address them. Most of us know little about them. Why? Because the focus of Jesus' ministry was not politics, it was the gospel.

Church family, it is so easy to get confused. I see this all of the time. I see well-intended Christians who think their mission is political. We have to have the



right laws and leaders, and although this is important, this is not our focus. Our focus must remain the gospel! Here is a startling point, church family, and I say this with humility. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had a history of unjust treatment by their leaders. The Jews had been treated unjustly, and the religious leaders rooted the ultimate solution in politics. That is why they expected the Messiah to come as a conquering king. He would literally defeat Rome. Do you see, church family? The religious leaders were treated unjustly; they then rooted their salvation in politics; the outcome was they crucified Jesus.

Church family, this is an election year and an important one, but whoever gets elected and whatever political agenda is advanced, our mission remains the same. Our mission is to extend God's glory over the entire planet by preaching God's word. This mission goes forth regardless of who is in office. Let's not be confused here. God's mission does not depend on a Republican president who fights for capitalism, nor does it depend on a democratic president who fights for social issues.



### *Gospel-Centered Servants?*

Now that we understand some critical historical issues and their implications, let's notice the gospel-centered servant's nature.



First, the gospel-centered servant has dignity. This detail is perhaps apparent but significant. When this letter was first read to the Ephesian church, masters and servants would have been in the audience, sitting next to each other. This is not a word given to masters to tell their servants after church; instead, Paul spoke directly to servants.

Second, Paul commands servants to obey their earthly masters. This command may seem like an evident command – servants must by Roman law obey their masters but notice how Paul describes their obedience. Christian servants must obey sincerely. He describes this as being characterized by “fear and trembling.” A servant who is fearful and trembling toward a master takes seriously their authority, which was extensive in the Roman Era. This heart that produces trembling should be sincere. The idea of a “sincere heart” is that the servant should be singular in their obedience. They should not serve with “eye-service” as a people pleaser; rather, the Christian servant must have a heart inclined to sincere obedience. External obedience void of a sincere heart is not Spirit-filled obedience. This sincere, internal quality of a servant’s obedience is highlighted in verse 7. Christian servants are to serve with goodwill: that is, with wholehearted obedience. The phrase “serve like you want to” is in mind here.



Thus, the idea is that servants are to serve from the heart, sincerely. We see this in

- *Fear and trembling (5)*
- *Doing the will of God from the heart (6)*
- *Rendering service with a goodwill (7)*

Let's also notice that this sincere obedience is not contingent on the character of the master. Paul does not say, "You only need to obey your masters who treat you well" or "obey only when you are being treated properly." No, the command is for Christian servants to obey their masters even when the master's actions do not deserve it.

Third, this sincere unconditional obedience is demanded because Jesus is worthy of sincere obedience, and the human servant-master relationship points beyond itself to how Jesus relates to his people. Just like marriage, and the child-parent relationship, so the servant-master relationship images to the world how God and his people relate to one another. In one sense, God's people relate to God as his servants, and we owe him complete, unconditional, sincere obedience. When Christian servants model this in their relationship to their masters, they show the gospel amid this old dying world.

Paul is quite emphatic about making this point. We observe this in verses 5-8 in the following phrases:

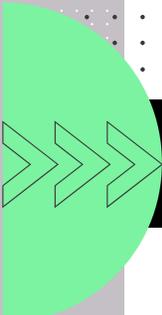
- *As you would Christ (5)*
- *As bondservants of Chris (6)*
- *As to the Lord (7)*

The Christians in the Ephesians church who were servants were called to obey their earthly masters as to the Lord. Obedience to an earthly master was none other than obedience to the Lord.

Fourth, Christian servants should obey their masters because their sincere obedience will have an eternal impact. Paul tells the Ephesian servants that whatever good they do, they will receive back from the Lord (8). The behavior of Christian servants, then, must look toward heaven, and cannot be fixed on this earth. Now, earthly masters, likely, did not always reward the good service of their servants since this was their duty, but this is not the case with the Lord, although obedience is our duty. Despite that, notice the character of our God. He promises to reward sincere obedience with good. Our God delights in giving good things to his people.

The main idea here is that Christian servants should obey their masters sincerely.





## MASTERS (EPHESIANS 6:9)

“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.

Next, Paul addresses masters. Masters are “to do the same thing” (9). They are to relate to their servants with the same type of sincerity and integrity. I summarize the command to masters as follows: they are to treat their servants with dignity. Christian masters have no right to threaten their servants. Now, in Roman Law, masters had every right to threaten their servants, and they had every right to follow through with their threats. They could threaten to have the servant executed or even separated from their family. Christian masters, although they had this right by Roman Law, did not have this right by the law of Christ. Gospel-centered masters should relate to servants with sincerity, not threatening.

Masters should treat their servants with dignity because God is their impartial judge. Contrary to Roman Law, these Ephesians masters did not have ultimate authority over their servants or even their own life. Instead, God did. Therefore, it didn’t matter what Roman Law permitted these Christian masters to do. The law of the Lord took precedent and demanded that those with authority relate to those under them sincerely, and not with abuse.



## CONCLUSION

Church family, I am praying that our church would be committed to God and the gospel above all. Let's pray this week that God's character and what he has done for us in Christ would transform us to be more like Christ.

Non-Christian friend, my hope today is that you would come to Christ. He can transform you for your joy. Please come to him today by trusting that he died for you and by turning from all of your sin. Trust in Christ and be transformed. If you have decided to follow Christ today, please reach out to us. We would love to walk with you as you strive to obey Christ.

## LET'S PRAY

Oh God, you are good and kind. Thank you that your gospel transforms us to be like your son. Help us to hold firmly to the gospel above all else. We pray these things in Jesus name, amen.