

Ephesians God's New Community
New Relationships in the Workplace!
Ephesians 6:5-9
6th March 2022
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

Introduction: Nobility and Fallenness

The War in Ukraine has brought out both the nobility of mankind made in the image of God, and the fallenness of mankind. On the one hand, at the train station in Berlin, many Germans offered to take Ukrainian refugees, complete strangers into their homes. But on the other hand, the sinful fallen side of human nature has been displayed in the terrible suffering caused by bombs and bullets, reigning down on cities.

I don't believe that I should mention the war in Ukraine every Sunday, but I mention it this morning, only because we have to talk about another deed of fallen human nature, in addition to war, and that is slavery. Look: "Slaves" (verse 5), "Masters" (verse 9). One of the outcomes of preaching systematically through a book of the Bible, from the start to the end, is that preachers are compelled to speak about subjects that they might otherwise be reluctant to preach about; sensitive or difficult or even painful subject. We cannot pick and chose from God's Word.

Many Christians have seen in these verses, 5-9, guidelines as to how Employers and Employees should treat one another. They argue that if slaves are encouraged to obey and respect their masters, even though they did not agree to work for them, how much more should employees obey and respect their bosses who they voluntarily choose to work for. It is sound logic: we can draw lessons about employees and employers from here, but before we do that we must consider the issue of slavery.

So this morning's sermon is in two parts: first we must talk about slavery, and then we will say a few words about how the Gospel transforms work place relationships between employees and employers.

Slavery

Slavery in the first century was not New World Slavery, it was not racial, it was not white on black slavery, it was any colour against any colour slavery. That doesn't make it less evil—Roman slaves could be treated terribly—but it's an important point to make. This is the issue we can't fail to notice: Paul does not say, "Slaves leave your masters" and he does not say "masters free your slaves." In fact nowhere in the New Testament are slaves urged to run away from their masters and nowhere are masters encouraged to free their slaves. In 1 Corinthians 7: 21 Paul says to slaves, "If you can gain your freedom, do so" but apart from that verse, the New Testament does not explicitly speak against slavery. For sure it never condones slavery, but neither does it condemn it in so many words.

And this has been a stumbling block to some unbelievers who point the finger and say "How can a Book which claims to come from a just and holy God overlook such a terrible injustice?" This is the question we must answer.....

Why doesn't the New Testament condemn slavery?

1) The Church is called to make preaching the Gospel her first priority

In the first place, the church is called to make the Gospel, preaching the Gospel her first priority. Read the book of Acts. Christians—every one of them— lived under an oppressive Roman Empire and yet the apostles did not preach sermons against tyrants such as Nero, or their puppet rulers around the world. No the apostles simply preached the Gospel! The church's main task is to preach the Gospel. Have you ever wondered why at MPC we do not preach about Global Warming or the Metoo Movement or Gun Violence or Vaccine

Inequality? It's not because they are unimportant, it's because there is a more important message to preach—the Gospel: the New Testament's main concern is that men and women have a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

May I ask you? What do you think your biggest problem is? Poor health? Not enough money? Broken family relationships? Fear of another war? The Gospel says that your greatest need, my greatest need, is to have a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, so that we can go to heaven when we die. And we can come to know God if we believe the Gospel! And equally, the greatest blessings we can know and enjoy in this world, is not wealth or national peace or good health, but peace with God and the hope of eternal life! How thankful we can be!

The earthly benefit of preaching the Gospel, of course, is that as people are converted to Jesus Christ their hearts and lives are transformed by the Gospel, they begin to see and feel the injustice of the world around them and seek to put wrongs right! The campaign to abolish New World Slavery in our country was led by Christian men and women, and especially William Wilberforce who worked for 20 years to have slavery abolished in 1807! Making the Gospel the Number 1 priority, is actually the best way of solving social problems!

And, let's think about it, if the apostles had made it their practice to preach against slavery everywhere they went, then Christianity may have been opposed and even eliminated by Rome for whom slavery was a social blind spot. (Around 10% of all Romans were slaves, 5 million slaves, 50 million). If the apostles had preached against slavery the rulers may have seen Christianity as a threat to social stability and sought to destroy it for that reason.

And if they had preached against slavery, would they not have been obliged to preach more generally against Rome, which oppressed everyone everywhere? Why stop at one form of evil oppression?

And if the apostles had preached against slavery would they not have alienated every slave owner from hearing the Gospel? But the Gospel is for everyone—even wicked slave owners!

Preaching the Gospel is the church's number 1 priority!

2) *The Christian is called to look to heaven as their home*

The second reason the NT does not preach against slavery is even more offensive to the world than the first, and it is this: that Christians are called to look to heaven as their home. This world is simply not our home, we are pilgrims on a journey to heaven. "Our citizenship is in heaven." (Philippians 3:20) "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world." (1 Peter 2:11). Even Old Testament saints thought the same way, "They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one." (Hebrews 11:16)

We must not get too caught up in the things of this world, we mustn't be too worried about the conditions we find ourselves in, for this world is not our home. "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave." (1 Corinthians 7:21-22) Everything changes when we are born again! All our thinking changes! If we are free men and women we suddenly become slaves of Christ, if we were slaves, we become free in Christ now and one day free in reality in the world to come.

Christians can put up with all sorts of injustices in this present world, (across the world today, Christians are persecuted, imprisoned, beaten, killed), knowing that God will put all wrongs right on the day of judgment, and that there will be no injustices in the world to come.

Why doesn't the NT explicitly condemn slavery? Because the church's first priority is to preach the Gospel

Because the Christian is called to look to heaven as their true home. But in case someone here thinks that the NT's attitude to slavery is lame and impotent, let me say this:

3) The New Testament sowed all the seeds of slavery's destruction

There is more than one way to end the evil of slavery. Preaching against it might have been one way, but who knows what the results would have been? Another way is to sow the seeds of its ultimate destruction! To work slowly and subversively—to fill the world with a people who would be salt and light and who would change the world! Christianity sowed the seeds of slavery's demise. The Scriptures teach that every human being is made in the image of God. There are no hierarchies in God's eyes between one human being and another. All people are born equal. The Gospel transformed the relationship between Christian slaves and masters, in preparation for the institutions ultimate demise: If Christians slaves and masters behaved according to Ephesians 6, the relationship would between them would be like two loving and harmonious brothers! William Wilberforce was born in 1759 became an MP at the age of 21. When he was converted at the age of 25 his whole outlook on life changed! He began working for the abolition of the slave trade at the age of 28 and campaigned for the 20 years until, finally the evil trade was abolished in 1807.

The Gospel exposed the evil of slavery and sowed the seeds of its ultimate destruction.

So let no-one say "Christianity is soft on injustices like slavery." While it is not the task of the church as a whole to preach against injustice, the joy and passion of individual Christians whose hearts have been changed by the truth and love of God is to be salt and light in the world. Individual Christians have been at the forefront of many campaigns to right wrongs. We've mentioned William Wilberforce against New World Slavery. Lord Shaftesbury in the 1800s worked to prevent children working in mines, and little boys working as chimney sweeps. Dame Cicely Saunders in the last century developed the hospice movement to help people with terminal illnesses. And so the list goes on.

These points will help us all understand that while it is not our task as a church together to preach against slavery—or any other social issue—as the Gospel transforms individual lives here and there, it changes whole communities and nations for the good. And so a few words about employees and employers, you can work these things out in your home groups one week.

Christian Employees - respect your boss and work well

If this high standard (verses 5-8) is expected of Christian slaves, who were working against their wills, who had never signed a contract of employment, how much more do the attitudes Paul outlines here apply to Christian employees who have agreed to work for their employers, signed a contract. If you work for someone else, four words:

(1) Christian employee respect and obey your boss. "Obey your earthly masters with respect and fear"
Christians never slag off their bosses do they? They don't engage in any kind of gossip behind their employer's backs.

2) Christian employee—work well. "Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you." You know the kind of worker? When the boss is looking, they look busy, animated, energetic, spirited, but when the boss turns away they're on social media, chatting, YouTube, whatever. I had a technician work for me once, many years ago, who only worked when I was actually watching him. The rest of the time he disappeared into a kind of half-hidden den he had created behind tall cupboards in our enormous university laboratory. (I'd have given him the sack, but I didn't have the permission to do so!) he was not a believer. Christians work hard!

3) *Christians serve from the heart.* “With sincerity of heart” (verse 5) “Doing the will of God from your heart.” (verse 6) “Serve wholeheartedly” (verse 7). This point is made three times. It’s possible to do a job like a robot, as a duty, not a joy, and without an ounce of soul in it. No says Paul, we should serve from the heart! “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart” (Colossians 3:24). If our work is in the home, let’s cook or iron or clean or garden with all our hearts! “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart” (Colossians 3:24)

3) *Christian employee remember your real boss is Jesus (This is for everyone, not just employees).* “As if you were serving the Lord, not men.” (verse 7) Wouldn't that be a helpful perspective for a Christians slave who had an unpleasant master? “I’m doing this task for Jesus!” “Look beyond your employer and see the one you are really serving.” Paul says.

4) *Christians employees, remember you will be rewarded by the Lord, again this if for everyone.* “The Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.” (verse 8). No-one in this world may thank you for cooking that meal, cleaning that bedroom, changing that nappy, being pleasant to that difficult client, writing that essay, but a record is being written in heaven, and one day, on the day of judgement that book will be opened, and God will reward you.

What a wonderful thought! The Lord himself will say to you, one day, “Well done you good and faithful servant.” Do you sometimes say “No-one thanks me?” Well Jesus will, one day.

Christian Employers— Respect your staff and treat them well

And finally, how does the Gospel transform employers? Just two words for you:

1) *Christian employees—respect your staff.* “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way.” What same way, Paul? In exactly the same way that they are called to treat you, remember, verse 5, with respect and fear. No Christian employer can expect respect unless they first give it!

2) *Christian employers—treat your staff well.* And in the second place, Christian employers are to treat their staff well. “Do not threaten them” Don’t use your power over them to intimidate, to mistreat, to threaten them. “Since you know that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.”

One day both you and your employee will give an account of your behaviour and God won’t take sides with employers or masters. He won’t say, “Well John was the employer so he was allowed to mistreat his employee!” God will treat both employee and employer the same. You and I have to work all these things out for ourselves. And as we do we should look to the example of Jesus who was both a Master and a Servant: a Servant to his Father in heaven, perfectly and fulfilling his Father’s will, and a Master to his disciples whom he took good care of.

May the Lord make us more like Jesus day by day. The world is watching. People who have no other access to the Gospel except you! What an opportunity you have to be witnesses to the Lord Jesus in your place of work, by the power of his Holy Spirit working through us.