**MASTERS AND SLAVES, EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES**

***Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart.******6Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7******Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, 8because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.***

***9******And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him***

Ephesians 6:5-9 (NIV)

Paul now turns to the relationship between servants and masters. In context the setting is still relationships within the family or household. Slaves were clearly accepted members of the Christian community and Paul expected them to weigh up his instruction as responsible people.

Slaves outside of the Christian community were not treated anywhere near as civilly. William Barclay estimated that there were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire at this time. They were the main workforce and included not just domestic servants and manual labourers, but educated people as well, like doctors, teachers and administrators. Slaves could be inherited, or purchased, or acquired in settlement of a bad debt, and prisoners of war commonly became slaves. No one queried or challenged the arrangement.

The dehumanisation of slaves in the public mind was mirrored in Roman legislation. Slaves had no rights and the state left the problem of the discipline of slaves to their owners. The head of the household had complete control over all slaves in his household and the right to punish by whipping, confinement or execution. Slaves were sometimes whipped, mutilated and imprisoned in chains, their teeth were knocked out, their eyes gouged out, they were even thrown to wild beasts or crucified and sometimes for relatively trivial offences. This kind of treatment was not habitual or universal however. Although the law initially prescribed no penalties for slave owners who ill-treated their slaves, they were more often restrained by other factors, either by their own sense of responsibility, or by public opinion, or by self-interest. Masters knew their slaves represented a high capital investment and it was to their advantage to take good care of them.

Although slaves who had become Christians were in the apostle’s mind as he wrote these words, the principles of this passage apply to employees and employers in every age, whether in the home, in business or in the state. The attitude to work and the spirit demanded of masters and those under them are just as relevant in a free society as they were in a slave economy.

Paul begins with another application of the principle of submission that is the key-note to this whole section. ‘*Slaves, obey your earthly masters’* (6:5). The word for ‘*obey’* is the same used in 6:1 (‘*Children, obey your parents’*). Paul’s description of masters as ‘*earthly masters’* immediately brings to mind the higher master, Christ, who is Lord over all. This obedience is to be ‘*with respect and fear*’ (6:5). The thought that dominates the whole section on relationships is that of submission ‘*out of reverence for Christ’* (5:21) or more literally ‘in the fear of Christ.’ The parallel passage in Colossians 3:22 speaks of obedience out of ‘*reverence for the Lord*’ (literally: ‘fearing the Lord’). Whatever the Christian does is to be done ‘to the Lord’ (Romans 14:7-9) and this is particularly true of the attitude of submission that he or she shows towards others.

Paul now adds that service must be done ‘*with sincerity* (singleness) *of heart’* (6:5). This means honest and whole-hearted effort. The same Greek word for ‘*sincerity’* is applied to a Christian’s ‘spiritual’ service (Romans 12:8; 2 Corinthians 8:2; 9:11,13). God doesn’t make the same distinction between sacred and secular that we tend to.

Slaves were to apply the same principle of obedience to their masters that they expressed to Christ Himself (‘*just as you would obey Christ’*). Here and in Colossians 3:22 a word seems to have been invented by Paul to express the ‘single-eyed-ness’ of service, ‘*Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you’* (6:5). Christians are to see their work as ‘*doing the will of God* *from your heart’* (6:6) because they are ‘*slaves of Christ’* (6:6). Paul again repeats that the worker is to do his work ‘*as if you were serving the Lord, not people’* (6:7). In everything, the way we work, the heart we put into it, is what matters. All we do needs to done ‘*wholeheartedly*’ and ‘*not to people*,’ not just to be seen by others. In all this Paul’s greatest concern is that a Christian’s life is to be lived in a wholehearted way as ‘unto’ Christ.

Paul now turns to the future. Wholehearted service is to be given as to the Lord who is a witness to all that’s done ‘*because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free’* (6:8). Both good and bad are mentioned in the parallel Colossians 3:24,25 passage, in 2 Corinthians 5:10, and in the judgement parables in Matthew 25. In contrast, only good is mentioned here. Paul’s purpose at this point is encouragement and not warning. He knows what it will mean for those who hear this letter read out who as slaves live out its instructions. They will need to know that nothing they do is missed by Christ in heaven; nothing they do is in vain. They may not be thanked on earth but heaven holds an unfailing reward for faithful service (Luke 6:35; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 22:12).

Finally, as a link between 6:8 and 9 Paul adds ‘*whether they are slave or free.*’ This principle applies to all alike, to rich and poor, slave and free, servant and master.

‘*And masters, treat your slaves in the same way’* (6:9). The same principle applies to them. There is the same need to act toward servants as to the Lord (6:7), as doing ‘*the will of God from the heart’* (6:6). ‘*Do not threaten them’* (6:9). Threatening came very easily to the lips of masters to slaves in the ancient world and the slave had no legal right to answer back. Christian masters are reminded that all they say and do to their slaves must be said or done knowing that they too serve a ‘*Master … in heaven’* (6:9). Servant and master ultimately stand on the same level. Christ is master of both ‘*and there is no favoritism with him’* (6:9). Both will give account to Him. Servants have been told to render service as to a heavenly Lord. Masters have been told to act toward their servants while always keeping in mind that they are themselves servants, and the heavenly Master is the One to whom they must give account.

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

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