8-4-19

Ephesians 6:5-9

We come now to a very difficult passage. One reason is because it contains some truths that we as human-beings don’t like; they go against our carnal, rebellious nature and even our own human sense of justice. The other reason is because it deals with slavery. Most people in this country have some sense of shame regarding our past with slavery, and a deep abhorrence for the current level of human trafficking; a nice term for slavery.

Christians come under attack due to these verses, because Paul says nothing about trying to get out of slavery. He does not advocate rebellion; in fact, the very opposite, submission. We have the additional problem of some Christians throughout history using verses like these to justify having slaves. Just to clarify, while the Bible does not condemn slavery, neither does it justify it. Those who use the Bible to allow slavery are not relating these verses to the context of the Bible as a whole. All people are created in the image of God, for one to claim ownership of another is fundamentally against God’s created order. God gave man dominance over the earth and all the animals; not each other.

Let me give you a brief understanding of slavery in the Roman Empire. Slavery was legal, it was expected, and the whole of the Roman state would have fallen apart were it not for slavery. The empire ran on slavery just as our country runs on machinery. There were all different levels of slaves. Some were actually professionals such as doctors or accountants. Some of these were able to amass substantial wealth. Many slaves were household servants or farm workers. There were also those who worked in chains in mining and other projects under horrendous conditions. None of this is to justify slavery, just to show what the culture was like during the times the New Testament was written.

We have to look at these verses through the lens of what the Bible is really about. This is something that only Christians are able to do, because we understand that this world is not all there is. The Bible’s main concern is our relationship with God. Our relationship with God is what determines our eternity. While God does care for us while we are here on earth, the evil that happens to us in this fallen world will be forgotten in heaven.

Romans 8:18

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Although it is difficult to keep in mind, there are two important tasks for each of us. The first is to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, so that by faith we claim Him as Lord and Saviour. This is the only way to eternal life. The second follows; live our lives for Jesus Christ. Whatever our station in life, our focus must be on Christ and glorifying Him. This is how Paul can tell slaves that have become Christians that they must be submissive to their masters.

When considering this question of slavery, we must keep in mind that becoming a Christian doesn’t change our position in this life. There are people who live in small tribes in South America who have converted to Christianity; they still live in the jungles of South America. People who are the poorest of the poor in Asia, who daily search garbage dumps to survive become Christian. They still search the dumps. India exists in a cast system. Those in the lowest cast who become Christian remain in the lowest cast. Whatever job you had when you became a Christian, you still had afterword.

This is the problem with the “prosperity gospel”. It promises that everything will be better in this life if we become a Christian. By reading the Bible, we can see that this is a lie; if anything, things can get worse. So, what’s in it for these people living the lowest of lives, what’s in it for the slaves? The sure and wonderous hope of eternal life. And by living for Christ as revealed in the Bible, reward from God in eternity.

Keeping these things in mind, Paul says in verse 5, “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ” There were many slaves in the Roman Empire who became Christian; they needed to know what to do. He does not tell them to rebel, he tells them to be obedient. Again, the focus of the Bible is our relationship with God. Submissiveness and humility are important factors in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus demonstrated both of these during His life on earth and we are to follow suit.

Notice that Paul refers to “your masters according to the flesh”. Paul is making an important distinction here. These masters are only human-beings, their mastery is temporal, they are only flesh and they only have mastery over the slave’s fleshly body. They do not control the person’s soul. As Christians, Jesus has become their true master over their entire being.

Paul uses the phrase “with fear and trembling”. When we hear this, we tend to think of cowering in terror. But this phrase is used elsewhere in the Bible and we need to consider what it means. Paul uses these words of himself in 1 Corinthians 2:3. “I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling” We know that Paul stood before Jewish courts, governors, kings, and even Caesar. He was not afraid of the Corinthians. We know from his prayers that he was concerned to give a proper explanation of the Gospel. His fear and trembling were that he might displease his Lord. This is what he means for the slaves, that their utmost concern should be to please Jesus.

As we go through these verses, we see that Paul focuses on the attitude of the heart. He writes things like “in the sincerity of your heart”, “not by way of eye service, as men-pleasers”, and “with good will render service”. When the slaves do their work, they are to do it well. It is human nature to work while the boss is there, but these are called to work even in the master’s absence, doing what they are told to do. It would be easy to hate life or be angry with their masters, but Paul is calling for Christian service and love for all people.

It is important to see that in each verse, Jesus is mentioned either as Christ or as Lord. He is, of course, the focus. The slave is to look past his earthly master and perform his work as if he is doing it for Jesus; and actually, he is. When working in good will toward his master, the slave is being obedient to Jesus; obedience to Jesus is how we show our love for Him.

Even though we may not be slaves, these things do apply to us. This is certainly the case if we have a job. We, as Christians, are called to work hard at our jobs and perform them to the best of our ability. People are created to work, we see this as far back as the garden of Eden, where man was to till the soil. And that was before the fall. As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or **whatever** you do, do all to the glory of God.” This is important; everything we do is to be to the glory of God. This is how we are called to live our lives, and one of the main reasons is because other people are watching us. When we claim to be Christian, others will make judgements about God based on our behavior. This thought should make us think about everything we do.

Paul adds a promise to being obedient; “knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.” Here is what the Christian knows in their heart that the rest of the world can’t understand. This life is short, and it is not the end. Much more is waiting for us in eternity with Christ. Not only do we get to be with Jesus, but we have additional reward based on how we live our lives. Jesus Himself tells us in Matthew 6:19-20 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal”. The Lord is no respecter of persons; before Him there is no slave or free and He will reward each one generously.

As with the other examples Paul has discussed, obedience stops if the master’s command goes against the Lord. This would come with consequences, probably severe ones. But we are called to the same. If in our employment we are called to go against the Lord we must stand firm in refusing to do so. This may cost our job, but the calling of God is higher no matter the result.

Masters also became Christian, and Paul tells them that they have responsibility in this arrangement. It would be easy to treat slaves poorly because there would be no repercussions and the slaves would have no recourse. But the Christian masters are told to treat them as fellow human-beings, to treat them with respect and kindness. Although Paul’s words to the masters are much shorter, they are very powerful. Their own master is God, and God loves the slaves just as much as the masters. Furthermore, God is not impressed by their earthly status.

Once again, what Paul calls for sounds strange to our ears; he does not call for rebellion but for obedience. Now this doesn’t mean that a person must remain a slave. In 1 Corinthians 7:21 we are told, “Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.” The Lord God may have worked things out for a slave to obtain their freedom; in which case, it was a good gift from God. But they must continue to cling to Jesus, just as they did before.

Earlier I mentioned that the Bible is sometimes criticized for these verses because Paul does not call for an end to slavery. Slavery is obviously a great evil; and it is very widespread today. Human-trafficking pulls in more money annually than the world’s biggest companies combined. So, what is the church called to do about slavery? The answer might surprise you. Nothing; that is, nothing directly.

The church is in this world, but it is not of this world. We are not to be entangled in the affairs of the earth, but to focus on the affairs of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Bible is clear regarding the business of the church. We are to worship God; we are to make disciples of all nations; we are to disciple and tend the sheep; we are to devote ourselves to prayer and preaching of the word; we are to examine God’s word and live to be more and more like Christ. Our only social focus is to tend to widows and orphans who have no other means of support, and the poor. This world and all its problems will come to an end in a fiery cataclysm; but the church, as the body of Christ, will live forever.

The individual Christian, however, is called to do good works. These works would include interfering with the evil of slavery. We can do this by prayer, by reporting it when we see it, and by supporting those Christian groups that are actively involved in trying to stop it. This comes with two warnings: We must never let this kind of activity interfere with, or become a substitute for, our relationship with Christ. He must come first. Secondly, we must be wary of being unevenly yoked. If we tie ourselves with a non-Christian organization, we risk being involved with things that are ultimately against the will of our Saviour.

Ultimately, freedom from slavery comes from God in His own timing. Our example of this comes from the book of Exodus. God’s chosen people, the Israelites, had gone to live in Egypt. This was part of God’s plan, to give them a safe place to grow into a nation. Over time, they were enslaved by the Egyptians. Then, in accordance with God’s plan, He led them out of Egypt. There was no rebellion, no war, no great action by the Israelites themselves. God, in His great power, simply led them out of slavery.

This whole glorious event was a type; it was a foreshadowing, a prophecy, of God’s future plan. All of the human race is born into slavery. We are slaves to satan, we are slaves to sin. None of us are able to rise up against satan and free ourselves. But God, in His timing, sent His Son Jesus to die on a cross. This is the Christian Exodus. It is completely by the power of God that we are graciously given the faith to believe on Jesus and be freed from the tyranny of sin. It is all to His credit and glory.

There is something else we need to be aware of in our freedom. Remember some of the things the Israelites said after they had been released from slavery.

Numbers 11:5

We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic

When we read this, we are amazed; How can these people who have been given their freedom from cruel bondage, look back at the days of slavery with longing, wanting to go back? This too, is a type for us. We have been released from slavery to sin, but how often do we look at sin with longing? How often do we wish that maybe, just for a little, we could go back to some favorite sin? When we do this, we are behaving exactly as the Israelites did.

We have a master. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. He has purchased us with His blood, with His very life. The price He paid for us is very high and we owe Him our eternal life. Paul’s call for slaves to be obedient to their earthly masters is a type. We have become slaves belonging to Christ, we are to be obedient to our heavenly Lord and Master.

Prayer

Almighty God, we do praise You and give You glory, for it is by Your mighty hand that we have been delivered from slavery. When we become Christ’s, we die to sin and escape its hold on us. But we live forever in You.

We do at this time ask that You would release those who are currently held in slavery. It is a great evil and very wide-spread; it is beyond our ability to stop, but nothing is beyond You. We also ask for revival, an out-pouring of Your Holy Spirit to bring people to You in freedom from sin.

We humbly ask the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our own lives. It is our desire to be obedient to You, but we are weak. Remember that we are but dust, and provide us with Your own power to be faithful to You.

It is in the most holy name of Jesus we pray

Amen