

Ephesians 6:5-9 – Masters and Slaves

Paul was writing to people who had been born again – God had given them new life in Christ. Now they needed to know how to live as light; how to live as new people. In 5v21, he began talking about relationships, and different kinds of submission that are needed. He has told us about husbands and wives, about fathers and children; now he talks about masters and slaves.

1. The people Paul wrote to

There were believing slaves and believing masters in the early church. In recent times, slavery has been about stealing people, which is evil. In the Old Testament there was a God-approved slavery where a ruined man could sell himself – only for 7 years – to pay his debts, and be restored to society. In Ephesus there was Roman slavery. The Roman laws were harsh and cruel; a master completely owned his slave, as property. This was wrong, but Paul did not preach revolution. He taught the believers how to please God in their situations; we can do that even when our situations are bad. The gospel does work to destroy slavery – but not through political violence. If we are in a difficult situation, often the way forward is to trust God, do our duties in that situation, and wait for him.

2. What slaves were to do (v5)

The duty of slaves was very simple. They were to obey their masters. They were to obey completely, and obey sincerely. They were to obey as if Christ himself was commanding them. We today who have jobs must remember that our time is not our own – someone else has purchased it. We owe it to that person, completely; anything less is a form of stealing. This was true even for bad masters. A slave could complain, “my master is evil and my wages poor – I will not serve him”. The master would then say “my slave is lazy, I will beat and fine him.” But the gospel way is different. It teaches us to say, “Whatever anyone else does, I will do my duty.” We should not make excuses and point fingers at others; *our* job is to do the best *we* can in every situation.

3. Why they were to do it (v6-8)

Every servant's true master is Christ himself. We are “slaves of Christ” (v6). Christ really does own us, completely – he purchased us with his blood. He is the one we must finally answer to – our maker and our final judge. He is always watching; we must work for him. Is that how you work? He himself once came as a servant, and obeyed his Father even to the death of the cross; how can we deny him and do less? This is very liberating; even if our employer is very bad, we can still serve with our whole heart knowing that it is Jesus himself who is over us and will reward us. Both kings and slaves must answer to him. All work therefore has great dignity, whatever it is.

4. What masters were to do (v9)

The law of God teaches us to love our neighbour as ourselves. So masters were commanded to show justice to their slaves. They must be fairly treated and paid, not treated as animals. Christ was once himself a servant, and service has great dignity.

5. Why they were to do it (v9)

Masters must remember that they also have a master; a greater one in heaven, who owns him. Before him we are all servants. Every believing slave is spiritually free; every believing master is a slave of Christ. Christ will judge all according to justice, not according to our position. Before him we are all brethren. In this way, the gospel destroys slavery, overcoming evil with good, teaching us to love. That is Christ's way!