

Sermon

31st March 2019

Steve Clancy

Text: Ephesians 6:5-9

We're in our last 2 weeks of our sermons on the Book of Ephesians, and we've just had the passages of the letter that speaks to husbands and wives and to children and parents. We now, in these 5 verses, turn to slaves and slave masters. This might seem like a change in direction to us, the previous situations being so common place and 'everyday' in nature - and here we have slavery, which we do not have in the West, and haven't had for over a hundred years. It does seem, then, that this passage does not speak to us today. Or if it does, it's really about a work type relationship - employee and employer. Or does this passage show the bible endorsing slavery? And if it does endorse slavery - how should we treat this part of scripture? Do we ignore it? Do we condemn it? Should we think slavery is a good thing?

Well, let's deal with each of these separately, and work through this passage together.

Employee/employer relationship?

I want to deal with this question first - is this really about an employee/employer relationship? I've heard multiple sermons that make a significant point of trying to establish that slavery in biblical times was very different to what we think of as slavery - maybe our most vivid images of slavery are of the North American type in the 17 & 1800s. And our knowledge of this period of slavery in the colonies and later the US, starts with harsh, inhumane conditions on ships traveling from Africa. Where a slave was likely to die on the voyage over, and when he or she arrived, they would be subject to harsh treatment, including rape, beatings, torture and even murder at the whim of the slave-master.

This type of slavery, it is said, is different to biblical slavery. Biblical slavery was more like a permanent employment contract. And the slave master was more like a permanent boss. And you could even sell yourself into slavery for a period of time to pay off debts or if you were very poor. I think these aspects of slavery in Roman times is emphasised for maybe two reasons;

One, to disassociate the bible from seeming to be OK with slavery like we think was practiced in the Americas.

And, two, so that a sermon can be more applicable to modern ears by making the sermon all about work.

Now, it is true that in the recent history of slavery in the Americas, there was some terrible treatment of African slaves - no one disputes this. But not all slaves were beaten to death and cruelly punished. We picture American slavery from what we see in movies - and movies are dramatic, violent, heart-wrenching. They have to be, or the movie is boring. But not all slaves were treated like characters in movies.

And on the other hand, slaves in the Roman empire were often treated well by their masters, and some did gain their freedom, and some people did sell themselves into slavery for just a period of time. But there were also terrible punishments given to slaves by cruel masters. Slaves were also abused from time to time, or even killed. And in the Americas, there were some cases of people selling themselves into slavery - these were white slaves from Europe, not Africa. And American slaves could in some cases earn their freedom or be released from their masters.

The truth is, slavery in America and slavery in the Roman empire were not different. One was real slavery, and the other was also, real slavery. Most slaves, throughout history, have been treated well by their masters because they were a very costly economic asset. If a slave master was crippling or killing or working to death his slaves, he was destroying his means of economic production. Most of us treat our cars or our animals well - but there are always some people who don't - they are the exception, not the rule.

I say this because we need to see that when Paul is talking here about slaves and slave masters, he's talking about slaves and slave masters. He's not talking about employees and employers. If Paul wanted to address workers specifically he would have. The Greek words for workers were *ergates* and *sunergos*. The word for slave here is *doulos*. Very different words - because very different people. A slave here in the text is a slave - and everything that means.

So, Paul is writing to slaves, genuine slaves. And he's also, in verse 9, addressing Christian slave masters - again, the Greek text is clear.

And what Paul is saying seems troubling to us. He doesn't say "slaves, you are now free" or "Slaves, you should be free"

He says,

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, (verse 5)

And he continues on in the verse:

and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.

So, what is Paul saying here? Is he saying that slavery is OK? He's not condemning it.

Endorsing slavery?

Some people feel that the bible, God, is endorsing the institution of slavery. Maybe even it is approved by God, a good thing.

God condemns sinful behavior. God condemns the wicked. For example, in Psalm 5

*4 For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness;
with you, evil people are not welcome.*

*5 The arrogant cannot stand
in your presence.*

*You hate all who do wrong;
6 you destroy those who tell lies.
The bloodthirsty and deceitful you, Lord, detest.*

But not here:

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, (verse 5)
Serve wholeheartedly (verse 7
And masters, treat your slaves in the same way (verse 9)*

Paul's talking to Christians who are slave owners. Paul doesn't tell them to stop their slave owning. So does this mean that slavery is OK in God's eyes? The answer is no. God doesn't desire for people to be enslaved - but we need to see here that slavery is a social institution rather than an outright evil.

If God saw slavery as a good - then wouldn't He also want people to remain always as slaves? Like marriage - let no man separate what God has joined? But God doesn't say this.

On the other hand, if slavery is such a great evil sin, then it would be condemned. But the truth is - it is not. Slavery is an aspect of certain types of political economic or legal environments.

Look what Paul writes to the Corinthians:

*1 Corinthians 7:21-24
21 Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22 For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. 24 Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.*

The fact is, whether you are a slave or not, whether your system of laws allows for slavery or not, doesn't matter. One of the troubling things about this passage in Ephesians - to us in the 21st century - is that it appears to imply that slavery is just another circumstance that people find themselves in. Also, there are Christian slave owners - and Paul is not telling them to free their slaves!

Why freedom isn't the goal

This troubles us so much, I think, because we as individuals in the west value our personal political economical Freedom above all things. To many people, freedom in Christ is less important than freedom, full stop. But the freedom we have as Christians, is freedom from the law and the binds of sin, a freedom where we can follow Christ, by grace. Freedom to follow the will of God and do good works.

But our whole society is focussed on social and economic and personal freedoms. We want to buy the things we want, say the things we want to say, travel where we want to, work in the job we desire, study the courses we want to, live where we want to. So the idea of slavery is abhorrent. A slave doesn't chose their vocation, a slave doesn't chose their workplace, their salary, their living arrangements, their study options, their leisure time.

This is what is really troubling for many people today - the lack of self-direction. What's in the Declaration of Independence? Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Freedom is not the goal. What the world means by freedom is not the goal. We need to believe this. Freedom in Christ is our goal. But this means something totally different to worldly freedom. In many cases, this seems to mean the opposite. Free to become slaves of Christ might mean we need to change our job, change our reading or listening or watching habits. It means that we submit to the bible, not just read it - but submit to the direction it gives us.

This is why in verses 6-8 we see Paul say this to the Christians who are slaves:

6 Obey 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, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

See, the situation these believing slaves find themselves in is just their position in this earthly life - what they are really being called to do is do the will of God. Their service is really to God. Their reward will be given to them by God. So, it doesn't matter that their early master is a slave owner - it could just have well been their commanding officer, or their employer, or their parents - they are do do the will of God from their hearts.

We are all under authorities

We are all under earthly authorities. The police, or employers, or governments. We get parking tickets because we're under the authority of the local council where we parked. Depending on what industry we work in, there are multiple laws and regulations imposed on our behaviour. If we seriously contravene these laws we face fines or jail time - and jail impacts your freedom.

Now slavery is not the same as having a job that requires you follow certain laws and regulations. But consider the system of the military draft during wartime - compulsory service. This is where a man can be forced into the military, sent to a warzone, no choice over where he sleeps, or what he says, or when he has leisure, or what he does, or how he does it, and if he is fortunate he doesn't get killed or maimed, or captured and tortured by the enemy. This is not completely different to slavery - maybe ust in the amount of time a man is put under these conditions.

But, unless we're radical libertarians or pacifists, we don't see the draft as a great social evil - in fact, it is seen as necessary for the protection of society in certain times.

My point with that example is that we mostly accept that living in a society, with a government, we are called to do things which we might ordinarily not want to do. We accept taxes, we accept following the laws of the land. That is because even though we want to maximise our own freedom, we recognise that if we abandon our duty to authority, the society would be in very bad way.

There is a tension, then. We want freedom, but need authority. Many of us have areas where we have earthly authority - even if only as a customer buying products. You've heard the phrase "the customer is always right". When we step into a store, we have a brief period where our needs and desires are superior (or should be) to those of the store employee who is there to serve you.

Maybe we're managers or business owners, and have more people over whom we have authority. Maybe we are in government or police or military roles that have very strict authority positions. In any event, we need to remember that, just like a slave working wholeheartedly for the Lord, those of us who are in positions of authority need to remember not to abuse this position.

So Paul, address the Christians who own slaves here in verse 9:

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

This is completely in line with the passages we studied over the past 2 weeks. Husbands and wives, and parents and children. In each, there is a call to submit and to do the will of God. Wives are to submit in a special way to the authority of their husband. Children are to submit to the authority of their parents. But in both situations, the husband or parent doesn't have any authority to be mean or unloving. They are called to submit to Christ and to do the will of God.

It is the same here with the slave owners. They have authority over a slave, but they are still under the authority of God.

We are all under the authority of God. There is no area of our life, or relationships, or work, of finances, or leisure, that is not under the authority of God. And this means that we must submit to Him. We have His word to us here in the bible. This is our guide for life.

And it is not our guide for life when times are good or even OK. The bible informs how we should live when times are rough. And this is one point I want to make tonight. And I think the verses here are helpful to us, tonight, in the West.

Enduring through bad times.

This period of time, the 21st century, represents the most wealthy, technologically advanced, healthy, peaceful time in history. Even for those here who are more advanced in age, things like penicillin, electricity, motor vehicles, anesthetics, air travel, trains - all were present from your earliest memories. Not everyone had access to them, but they were here. Think of life just 250 years ago. Even in the most advanced economies, like Britain and the US, over 90% of all labour was devoted to agriculture - the biggest expense for most families was food.

Today, you can be considered poor in Australia even if you have a car, a TV, microwave, fridge, DVD, mobile phones. Now, I'm not in any way saying that it is easy to be poor in 2019 in Australia, but we have to agree that being poor today is not the same as being poor 250 years ago. Or being poor in the Middle Ages, or being poor in the first century church.

We really would struggle to understand the hardships that people faced every day in the early church. Not just Christians, but all people. But in these letters, we see Paul focus on doing the will of God - despite the circumstances you may be in. Paul spent many periods in jail - any one of those could have killed him. He speaks from authority when he calls people to persevere through hardships.

Saves, they were in a bad situation. Even those with good masters, they still didn't have the liberty or social respect that their masters took for granted. But despite these circumstances, they are to:

Obey your earthly master with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6 Obey 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, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

Does this also apply in work situations?

So can we take these verses addressed to slaves and slave owners, and apply them to our work situations? Yes, of course we can. But our work situations are nothing compared to that of a first century slave in terms of hardships. So if it applies to the slave, how much more does it apply to us? We have the duty to obey those in authority over us, and to serve wholeheartedly as if serving Jesus. Not just in work, but in school, in our community groups - especially in our churches.

Remember, when Paul's writing to these slaves, and to the married couples, and to the parents and children, he is not giving these instructions to follow only in the good times. These instructions are to be followed when things are going bad.

There's this similar passage that Peter wrote in 1 Peter chapter 2:

18 Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

But also to those who are harsh. This is the instructions given to Christian slaves. And the reason is given in verse 19:

19 For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God.

Peter is not saying that is good for you to suffer. He is also not saying that suffering makes you holy. Look at the verse:

19 For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God.

The reward is going to those who are bearing under “unjust” suffering “because” they are conscious of God. They’re suffering because they refused to do a sinful act for their master. They are suffering because of their faith and commitment to Jesus.

Peter continues in verses 20-23:

20 But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

*22 “He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”*

23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Husbands and Wives - Children and Parents

Maybe you feel that you’re in a bad situation at work, or in your marriage, or with your family.

Tolstoy famously wrote at the beginning of Anna Karenina:

All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

Your calling as a Christian then is to obey where you are to obey, and to submit to the will of God. The passages in Ephesians where wives are called to obey their husbands, is not only to good husbands but to husbands that might be harsh or unloving. Husbands are called to love their wives even if the wife is unlovable and insolent. Husbands are called to die, for their wives. But this applies equally when the wife is a nag, or selfish - not just when she is a godly, lovely wife. Wives are called to submit and obey, even if the husband is a dimwit, or selfish. As long as the obedience is not for ungodly or sinful things, then the wife is not excused from her duty just because the marriage is difficult. Children are to obey imperfect parents.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians was to a group of people living in times that we would consider desperately poor. Paul wrote to Christians who had bad marriages, to widows struggling to make ends meet. Paul was writing to people suffering persecution from both the state and the Jewish and pagan religious groups they lived next to. Paul was writing to slaves who had harsh and cruel masters. He was also writing to slave owners who had responsibility for the welfare of many people under them. He was writing to children of pagan parents, or Jewish parents who had shunned them because of their faith in Christ. He was writing to parents struggling to raise their children in the faith amongst an ungodly world.

In all of this, however, there is the call to do all for Christ. Not for men, and not for themselves. Not even for their wives or husbands or children or parents - but to serve God.

As James writes in his letter:

James 1:2-3

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.
and

12 Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

We all have earthly masters and authorities. But we all have a Master in heaven who rules over all, and who has the power of life and death even to our souls. It is for Him that we are to serve. It is with His will that we are to concern ourselves with. And this reaches through all of our life - our work, our family, our relationships.

Let us, along with those in the church at Ephesus, make the will of God, and service to the Lord, be our guide in all we do - here in Melbourne - here in 2019.