Week 5: Ephesians 6:5-9

Introduction

Previously, we have explored two types of relationships in Ephesians 5–6: husbands and wives (Eph 5:22-33), parents and children (Eph 6:1-4). As we kick-start our remaining weeks on the topic of "work", we will look at the third type of relationship that Paul talked about: **masters and slaves (Eph 6:5-9)**. As mentioned, they are all governed by this overarching biblical principle: **"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Eph 5:21)**

Historical context of slavery

In the first century, slavery was a common practice for many households and not necessarily abusive. It was estimated that one-third of the population in the Roman Empire were slaves. The essence of slavery was ownership: a slave was owned and was the property of his master, and the master would provide for his slave entirely.

So how did first-century Christians view slavery? They largely accepted it as the "reality" and acknowledged that many Christians were owning slaves, but **Christian values should impact on how masters and slaves treat one another**. The early church condemned the practice of trading slaves (1 Tim 1:10; Rev 18:13), and gave slaves equal rights of receiving sacraments, taking part in church meetings, and being buried in cemeteries — all of which would have been revolutionary in those times.

On the other hand, although believers were set free through Christ and ought to love one another as brothers and sisters, this would not justify disrespect or disobedience on a slave's part; **godly obedience and submission** was still being called for. For more on "master and slave" in the context of the early Church, read the Book of Philemon to see a real-life shift of mindset.

Do Bible verses on "master & slave" still apply to us now?

Factually speaking, "employer and employee" is very different from "master and slave". One is just a contractual relation (employer pays salary and employee provides service), while the other is a proprietary relation (master owns the slave as his property). However, both relationships involve **an assumption of authority** – God has put us under certain people's authority, and authority entails obedience and respect.

"Paul was writing specifically for a society where slavery was a legal institution. However, there are certainly some principles from the passage that can be applied to employee/employer relationships in the present time. Primarily, ***Christian employees*** *should serve their employers with fear, diligence, integrity, and good will and* ***Christian employers*** *should deal with their employees with integrity and goodwill, without threats. Both Christian employees and Christian employers need also to realize that they have* ***a heavenly master*** *to whom they are accountable for their attitudes and conduct. Furthermore, the behavior of both parties should be* ***a testimony to the unbelievers*** *with whom they work."* – Hoehner (Bible scholar)

Warm-up question

Which term(s) best describes your relationship with your current or previous boss/supervisor: family, friends, acquaintances, transactional, slavery, enemies, etc.? Do you struggle to obey him/her?

Read Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22–4:1 (Optional: Read Philemon v.1-25)

1. Based on Eph 6:5-8, what is the ultimate reason/motivation for your obedience?
Which of the following element(s) do you struggle to agree with or apply in your job/work, and why?

- Elements:
  - "with respect" (6:5) – reverence and honor.
  - "with fear" (6:5) – being careful and watchful.
  - "with sincerity of heart" (6:5) – single-mindedness, without hypocrisy.
  - "not only to win their favor when their eye is on you" (6:6) – with proper motive and consistency.
  - "serve wholeheartedly" (6:7) – with the master's interest and welfare in mind.
  - "as you would obey Christ" (6:5) / "as slaves of Christ" (6:6) – obedience out of reverence for Christ.
  - "serving the Lord, not people" (6:7) – recognising our ultimate master; treating our work as our service to God.
- The "reward" (6:8) refers to the reward for believers at the judgment seat of Christ at His second coming (2 Cor 5:10; Rev 22:12). Yet our works are not conditions to our salvation. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ, and our good works should overflow naturally as the fruit of our new identity in Christ (Eph 2:8-10; Gal 5:22-25).

2. According to Eph 6:9 and Col 4:1, how should a master treat his slave, and why?
As a current or future supervisor, how would you apply this to your subordinates?

3. Pick <u>one</u> scenario below, and discuss what would be an appropriate and biblical response in light of Eph 6:5-9.

(a) Your boss instructs you to do something that is non-biblical or unethical.
(b) Your boss gives you an unreasonable amount of workload that takes away your time for God and for church.
(c) You have a Christian boss but he/she does not live up to the biblical standard at work.
(d) You have a non-Christian boss who assumes that you (as a Christian employee) must obey him/her in everything.
(e) You don't want to be a "harsh Christian boss" but your non-Christian subordinates underperform seriously / disobey you.

4. Knowing that God is your ultimate master, and your service at work is to be done as your service to God, how does that influence the way you work / interact with others at your workplace?

- Further prompts that may guide your discussion of this question: Do you truly believe/feel that God is your ultimate master? How would obedience "just as you would obey Christ" (Eph 6:5) look like at your job / in your workplace?