

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (27-10-1996 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Ephesians 6:5-9

Additional reading: Philemon 1-20

Slaves and Masters

Introduction

Writers of the New Testament used no less than 7 different Greek words for “servant”. Paul’s word here is δούλος, the most lowly term of all. The N.I.V. rightly translates this as “slave”. Some editions if N.J.K.V. use the word “bond-servant”. We do not live in exactly the same situation. No slaves, at least in our part of the world. But underlying teaching applies in situation of Christian workers and management, Christian employees and employers, as we find today.

A look at the background helps us to see how revolutionary and striking this Christian teaching was. It must have really shocked these New Testament Ephesians when they first read it. Then we will look at the teaching about the attitude of slaves to their work, c.f. Christian employees, and the attitude of masters, c.f. Christian employers.

Slaves in the ancient world

In Paul’s days there were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire, i.e. two out of every three. Rome was the mistress of the world, it was beneath the dignity of the Roman citizen to work, therefore they used slaves. Slaves were the work force. They were inherited, or purchased, or acquired to clear a bad debt, or prisoners of war. It is quite wrong to imagine they were illiterate and barbarous, walking in chains. Some were, but there were not only domestic servants and labourers among them, but some were medical doctors, teachers, administrators and secretaries.

No one challenged the institution, it was a fact of life. The essence of slavery was that slaves had no rights. They were entirely the property of their master, who could do with them as he wished. Aristotle described a slave as “a living tool”, or “a tool that breathes”. They were things, not persons. Some were treated well. Indeed some Roman masters let some slaves free and set them up in a trade. Others were given the right to property, to marry and to have family.

Others were brutally treated. Masters could whip, mutilate, gouge out eyes, throw to wild beasts, or crucify them. If they ran away and were caught, at the very least they would be branded “F” for fugitive, but more likely killed. They were punished vindictively for the slightest mistake or failure – breaking a vase, or spoiling the soup. Such an error could result in flogging, torture, or even death. Women slaves often had their hair torn out, and their cheeks torn by their mistress’s nails. Cruelty to slaves was widespread according to evidence.

On the other hand, some masters realized it was wise to take care of their slaves because they were a valuable piece of property. But once they were old or ill, they were just thrown out like a broken cart or tool, and left to starve.

It was against this background that Paul wrote, and many members of the first Christian churches were slaves themselves, and lived in these harsh conditions.

Some find a problem because the New Testament does not condemn slavery. Some have even used this as a reason why they will not become Christians. Why did Paul not condemn such evil? Why did he not urge all slaves to revolt? Why did he not command all Christian masters to give up their slaves? Why does he accept the situation? C.f. **Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so** (1 Corinthians 7:20,21). The whole idea of men owning other men and women like animals seems so wrong to us, and the New Testament writers do not say anything about it. The answer – a slave revolt would have been quite useless, because there would have been a total massacre of slaves. And they did not encourage masters to set their slaves free at once, because many were not fit to live as free men, and this would have resulted in starvation or a life of crime. Appalling suffering would result, therefore the New Testament neither condemns nor condones.

But through preaching of the Gospel, slavery was transformed – and this was much more effective in the long run. Through the Gospel, slaves were brought to Christ, and masters were brought to Christ. Conversion brought a new attitude. Slaves were no longer idle, masters were no longer brutal. So slavery changed from within. Christian masters and slaves both belonged to the Lord and therefore had different attitude to each other. Once in the right relationship with the Lord, a right relationship with others will follow, as night follows day.

Paul urged Master Philemon to receive the runaway slave Onesimus back, **No longer as a slave but as a beloved brother** (Philemon v.16). Once slaves and masters saw each other as brothers, all bitterness ended. It was only a matter of time before slavery was brought to an end in a sensible, humane and helpful way. Note that the Christian church's task is not primarily to deal with social conditions as the world thinks or political preachers think. Our task is to preach the Gospel, to encourage men and women to become new persons in Christ, then many social problems are soon solved. C.f. 18th century Revival concentrated on the Gospel. But from that came men like William Wilberforce, whose labours led to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Then came the Earl of Shaftsbury – his Factory Act changed the awful conditions of women and young children in factories and coal mines in early Victorian England. Dr. Barnardo addressed the needs of poor children in London. Thus there were changes in society as a by-product of the Gospel which makes people new persons in Christ.

So Paul accepts the institution of slavery, which was so much part of the fabric of the Roman Empire, but helped transform it by causing slaves and masters to become new people in Christ. So Paul speaks first to slaves in the church at Ephesus, and then to their masters. The stress is not on rights but on duties. Not what we should get, but what we should give. Slaves have duties to their masters, and – here is something entirely new – masters have duties to their slaves. How industrial relations would improve if each person was more concerned with “my duty and my responsibility”, than with “me first and my rights”.

Responsibility of Slaves

And remember there is nothing to be ashamed of in rendering service to others. Consider the example of Christ Himself. **The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve** (Mark 10:45), Jesus washing the feet of His disciples (John 13:1ff), **Made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant** (Philippians 2:7).

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear (Ephesians 6:5) – not craven terror, but anxious not to let the Lord down by mistake or bad workmanship. **In sincerity of heart**, giving undivided attention, concentrating on the task, giving whole self to it. **Just as you would obey Christ** – see beyond serving your master to serving Christ. Work is to be good enough for God. **Obey them not only when their eye is on you** – not just to be man-pleasers. Not with eye on self thinking “how will this affect me or work out for me?” nor with eye on others thinking “what do they think of me, what is their opinion of my work?” Life is not to be controlled by men, and looking for men’s praise, **But like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart**. All is to be done to win God’s approval. His opinion is what matters. Someone once had this sign above the kitchen sink: “Divine service offered here three times a day.” Is that our attitude to the mundane tasks of life? Do we obey the injunction of Ecclesiastes: **Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might** (Ecclesiastes 9:10)? Not working in grudging or surly manner.

Hence our service is to the Lord, not men. This way, one day we will be acknowledged by the Lord, “Well done, my good and faithful servant”. May get no thanks here, no one may notice or appreciate or admire, but the Lord does, and He will demonstrate that one day when He publicly rewards us.

The story goes of an old missionary couple returning from years of sacrificial service in Africa, coincidentally travelling on the same ship as President Theodore Roosevelt. The President was welcomed home by big crowds and bands playing. The old missionary and his wife walked off unnoticed, to their cheap hotel. Their first thought was that it didn’t seem right, no welcome for them after giving their lives in service in Africa. Later as they prayed, the Lord spoke to them and reminded them that they hadn’t got their welcome and their reward yet – because they hadn’t arrived home yet.

This teaching means Christians should see work, not as a meaningless necessary evil where they do the minimum to get the maximum, but see it as part of their service to the Lord. One of the benefits of the Reformation – dignity was restored to common work. Hitherto, the church had implied that the only true service was that done by priests and nuns. But the Reformers taught that there was as much dignity in God’s eyes in everyday work as in “religious work”. Luther recognized that the servant girl sweeping the floor was serving the Lord as well as, if not better than, the monk in the cell. Therefore the Christian must be the most conscientious, reliable, careful, especially with others’ money, truthful, helpful, hard-working employee, because he is aiming to please God and live in His will. Unlike the worldling who is concerned with himself. Being a Christian does not add to our IQ and ability, but it means we use what powers we have to the maximum.

And how this commends the Gospel. Like Joseph, David and Nehemiah, we do our utmost and glorify God and cause others to think. Hence the great impression of early Christians in the Roman Empire, because they were law-abiding, peaceful, worked well and were stabilizing influence in society. In history, the attitude of Christians has even influenced authorities to favour Christianity. During the 1939-45 war, Stalin relaxed strict laws against Christians in Russia because he noted that Christians were the most reliable work people in the whole of his territory. So he decided not to be so harsh in his treatment of them. Practical Christianity always impresses.

So our every day work, even hum-drum and tedious tasks, is lifted to highest plane with new incentive, meaning and purpose. As we work for our employer, we must remember it is not him we are a slave to, but slaves of Christ, working for Him. We are not our own, for we have been bought with a price. Show it in the home, work, recreation, and everywhere. So we are evangelists commending Christ through our work.

Responsibilities of Masters

Then with perfect balance, Paul goes on to tell masters of their duties in a world where it is assumed they have no duties, only unlimited rights. **Treat your slaves in the same way** (Ephesians 6:9). If you expect respect, give it. If you hope to receive service, you should also give it. Just like the slaves, the masters should act with fear and trembling for fear of displeasing Christ and harming the Gospel. Like the slave, they should be concerned to do the will of God. Application of the Golden Rule – do to others as you expect them to do to you. Such ideas had never been heard of in the ancient world before.

Do not threaten them. Always danger for man to threaten if he is in greater or superior position. Not to be unkind or cruel. Never show wrong spirit, be sharp, harsh and contemptuous in speech. Even a look can threaten, without uttering a word. Reason – masters are answerable to the One who is master of slaves and owners, and He will not favour the masters. He is scrupulously fair, He has no favourites. His judgment is impartial and even-handed. All are equal before Him.

One day believing masters and slaves are to spend eternity with Him, and those temporary distinctions will all be done away with. No social classes or economic differences in heaven. How such teaching removed bitterness and hatred which existed in those days between masters and slaves, and prepared the way ultimately for slavery abolition.

Interesting to know that the Bible not only gives teaching and warning to those in superior position, whether masters of slaves or owners of property, but also shows them in living examples of correct Christian behaviour. Boaz, sensitive to the needs of his workers, and generous to the stranger, Ruth (Ruth 2:4). Job, concerned lest he had despised the cause of his manservant or maidservant, by denying justice (Job 31:13). Jesus, the Eternal Son, washing His disciples' feet (John 13:1ff).

Conclusion

Although masters and slaves was a 1st century issue, the underlying principles here are applicable to the world today with the roles of employer and employee. What a wonderful place this world would be if this teaching was implemented in the workplace. End of strife in industry, bitterness and division in society, cost of living reduced because of honesty at every level in business. Such things are possible only when men and women belong to the Lord, transformed by His grace, and passionately concerned to live to please Him and do what He wants.

Whole passage is permeated by Christian truth. Remember this subject was ushered in by the injunction **Be continually filled with the Spirit** (Ephesians 5:18). Then in the passage itself, the Lord's name occurs over and over again. The whole thing is based on Christian truth, new birth, the authority of Christ. Cannot have Christian living and standards without Christian foundations.

It is useless to preach these standards to the world, and expect obedience. Got to begin with Christ. Basic problems are not economic, but spiritual. Organisation, penalties, acts of Parliament can restrain evil and regulate relationships. But only the Gospel deals with the real problem – self, asserting rights and claims and wanting own way, always putting self first.

The Gospel tells us of the need for profound change at the centre of the life, else Christian teaching cannot be practiced. New nature is needed, self displaced, and new master in control. The Gospel transforms and changes every relationship in life. New people are created with new power, outlook and attainment. The Gospel – always relevant.