

# The Pearl of the Epistles – Ephesians

## God’s Design for the Work Place

### Ephesians 6:5-9

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***Ephesians 6:5-9** Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; **6** Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; **7** With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: **8** Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free. **9** And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him.*

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#### Introduction

Paul’s discussion now focuses on a third group. The first two groups, wives and husbands, and children and parents, were directed at the family unit. This third group is outside of the immediate family, although many families had slaves. Slavery existed in Paul’s day and he exhorted his followers to serve Christ, no matter what their condition might be; slave or free (1 Corinthians 7:17–24).

The word *servant* or *servants* appears in the King James Version of the Bible 982 times in 889 verses. The word “servant” is largely a reference to a slave rather than a hired hand. In most appearances of the word, it means “one who is bound to render service to another whether that service be free or voluntary and having no legal rights.”

Paul is teaching the brethren to carry out their duties, roles and obligations in an acceptable manner in which they are currently find themselves as Christians. For example, if they were married, they were to conduct their marriage as God planned it. If they had children, there were to live as a family as God planned it. If they were a slave, they were to work within that relationship to honor God.

It is Paul’s intention that through love and faith, Christians can gradually modify the morality and customs of a society to one which is God honoring.

In religious terms, “servant” refers to the position of a believer of Jesus who serves the Lord or defines their relationship with God.

Jesus teaching on the Mount, includes this type of relationship:

**Matthew 6:24** *No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.*

Jesus referred to His relationship with the disciples as a “slave/master” relationship:

**Mark 10:45** *For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.*

The Ephesians reading this letter understood the slave/master relationship as it is estimated that approximately one-third of the population of Ephesus were slaves. We can also take from this passage that there would be *slaves* and *masters* in the congregation of the church at Ephesus.

In John MacArthur’s recent book “Slave, The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ”, he says of slavery within the Roman empire:

Slavery was a pervasive social structure in the first-century Roman Empire. In fact, it was so common place that its existence as an institution was never seriously questioned by anyone. Slaves of all ages, genders, and ethnicities constituted an important socioeconomic class in ancient Rome. Roughly one-fifth of the empire’s population were slaves- totaling as many as twelve million at the outset, of the first century A.D.”<sup>1</sup>

Albert Barnes, a nineteenth-century abolitionist, wrote about slavery and Christianity:

“It was the influence of Christianity that slavery was abolished in the Roman empire. It was by the same influence that emancipation occurred in the British empire. And it is still true that the most decided influence adverse to slavery in this land has come from the bosom of the Christian Church.”<sup>2</sup>

The fact remains that many Christians were slave-holders including clergy and missionaries during the founding of the United States. It was the idea of slavery that split the Northern and Southern Baptists. Northern Baptists believed God would not condone treating one race as superior to another while Southerners said that God intended for races to be separate. In 1995, the sesquicentennial annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention overwhelmingly approved of a Resolution on Racial

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Slave, The hidden Truth About Your Identity In Christ*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2010), 25

<sup>2</sup> Albert Barnes, *The Church and Slavery*, (Philadelphia, Scholarly Publishing Office, 2006), 28.

Reconciliation on the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention, they outlined the horrific past of the role of slavery:

“Many of our Southern Baptist forbears defended the right to own slaves, and either participated in, supported, or acquiesced in the particularly inhumane nature of American slavery...we lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest, and we recognize that the racism which yet plaques our culture today is inextricably tied to the past...”<sup>3</sup>

### The Duty of Employees

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*Ephesians 6:5-8 Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; 6 Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; 7 With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: 8 Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free.*

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I have titled this section of the passage: “The Duty of Employees” as that is exactly the point that Paul is trying to make to the church at Ephesus and Corinth. Paul does not take pen to parchment to discuss the wrongs of slavery, instead he teaches how a slave is to live their life, even under this terrible condition, as a follower of Jesus the Christ. Another one of Paul’s letters was written to a slave owner by the name of Philemon on behalf of a runaway slave named Onesimus. In this epistle, Paul was attempting to persuade and encouraged Philemon to take back Onesimus, his slave, as a brother in Christ.

*Servants* – The Greek word used here is δούλος (doulos) *which is* a slave, literally or figuratively, involuntary or voluntary. This word is translated as *slaves* (NRSV, NASB95, NIV, NIV84, LEB), *bondservants* (ESV, NKJV), and *servants* (KJV).

In the first century Roman Empire, you were either free or a slave. Anyone could become a slave and any slave could become free. Therefore at the time of Paul’s writing, Ephesus was under Roman rule

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<sup>3</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, *Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention*, Atlanta, Georgia – 1995, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/899>

and both slave and masters lived and worked together, the only distinction was the status of being “slave” or “free.”

How did one become a slave? Before the first century, most slaves were captured by Roman conquest. Although by the first century, the most common means of becoming a slave was birth. A child born of a woman slave, became a slave no matter who the father was.

There was a shocking and dreadful practice where the birth of a freeborn child, which was not wanted, was cast aside like trash to die. These babies were often picked up by slave traders and sold.

One other method of becoming a slave was if the father, due to poverty or great debt, sold a child into slavery (bond servants). The adult, mother or father, could also indenture themselves for debt.

“...*be obedient to them*” – I would say that it is quite easy to sit in our comfortable church and hear these words. We would say, in agreement with Paul, that if a slave would live in submission and obedience, it would be a great testimony to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Let us remember that being a slave meant that you had no rights! The life you once had: wife, children, family, business or positions held would come to an end. And let us also remember that while many of the slaves were treated very well and held prominent positions in the family<sup>4</sup>, but many were beaten and treated as less than animals. No matter which condition they found themselves in, they were to show the relationship to Christ to their masters by their obedience.

If they could be made free, they were to prefer that condition to a state of bondage, 1 Corinthians 7:21; but while the relation remained, they were to be kind, gentle, and obedient, as became Christians. In the parallel place in Colossians, Colossians 3:22, it is said that they were to obey their masters "in all things." (Barnes, Notes on the New Testament, Explanatory and Practical, 1957)

“...*masters according to the flesh*” simply means “your human masters.” So the question for our time is “who is your master.” This would include any person who has rule over you.

The principles in this passage apply today in terms of submission to any lawfully constituted authority, the only exception being if such a lawfully constituted authority were to require a believer to disobey God’s Word or

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<sup>4</sup> Slaves had a variety of tasks; they ran errands, charged with educating the children, stewards, cleaning, preparing meals, or doing menial work

to fundamentally compromise one's commitment to Christ (as in the case of Acts 4:19, 20)<sup>5</sup>

The born-again slave was obligated to perform the service in their physical bodies, but the masters were not God, the spirit and soul of the slave belonged to the LORD. And as such, they served a higher power than the men in which they were indentured.

“...with fear and trembling,” – The Apostle Paul uses this phrase on four occasions: his first and second epistle to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 2:3, Paul dealing with enemies; 2 Corinthians 7:15 dealing with salvation), his epistle to the church at Philippi (Philippians 2:12 dealing with salvation) and here, dealing with relationship and submission.

It was a common phrase implying the highest level of attention and attentiveness as they carry out their duties. In this case, the term means with “devotion, reverence and a dread of offending them and thereby grieving the Spirit of God.” The law gave the masters power to punish slaves for any act of disobedience, now Paul says that their service is to be as if God is their master and they should approach it with “fear and trembling.”

“...in singleness of your heart,” – with one purpose, not being double minded. The slave was not to serve their master just on the outside, but on the inside as well. They were to consider everything they do with their master in mind. Roughly speaking, the goal of the slave was to see their master succeed.

“...as unto Christ” - This is the key in my estimation. The slave is to approach their work for their earthly master in reverence and dread of offending, but they are to do it not just through fear, but of a purpose of serving their master as they would if he were Christ himself.

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***Ephesians 6:6*** *Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;*

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“*Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers*” – “not only when their eyes are on you and you are being watched, but all the time. I am sure we all know someone who is active and energetic when the boss is present, but lazy and slothful when the boss is absent. This is not a good Christian example.

“...but as the servants of Christ” – the slave of Christ, bound to obey the law and to submit unto Jesus. We are bound to obey the teachings of Jesus where peace and joy are the by-product of work.

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<sup>5</sup> Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (p. 2273). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

“...doing the will of God from the heart” – Not in a civic sense, but in a spiritual attitude bringing a cheerful and joyful heart in obedience to the master. God requires the slave to be conscientious, loyal, dependable, obedient, and meek.

We can apply this to our lives today as Christians. Whatever work we do, we should do our best as if we were working for God Himself. Our paycheck should be the gift from God for the work we have done in His honor.

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***Ephesians 6:7*** *With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men:*

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God’s purpose is that man should perform his duties in an congenial and pleasant manner that would be acceptable by the Lord, which is a much higher calling than that of their master.

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***Ephesians 6:8*** *Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free.*

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I believe Paul is echoing the teaching of Jesus on the Mount.

***Luke 6:31*** *And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.*

Paul outlines seven ways in which Slaves were to carry out their responsibilities to their masters:

1. Fear - respect
2. Trembling – sincere loyalty
3. Singleness of heart - sincerity
4. As unto Christ
5. Not with eyeservice - consistently
6. Doing the will of God from the heart - Inner motivation
7. With good will - wholeheartedly

### The Duty of Employers

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***Ephesians 6:9*** *And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him.*

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“*And, ye masters, do the same things unto them*” – in every area that the slave is to act towards his master, the master is to “*do the same things unto them*”. For example, they are to treat their slaves with goodness, fairness and to be reasonable.

“*...forbearing threatening*” - The Greek word forbearing means, to let up, slacken, forbear, relax, or loosen. The Greek word for threatening means, *menace* or *terrorize*. The master was not to rule over the slave ruthlessly (Leviticus 25:43). This does not mean that the master cannot punish where it is deserved, but to guard against correction with anger. In much the same way that Paul exhorted the fathers concerning their children; “*provoke not your children to wrath*” (Ephesians 6:4) he exhorts masters not to “*terrorize*” their slaves.

### Conclusion

Let us remember that this section of Paul’s letter began with; “*Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.*” (Ephesians 5:21)

Slaves were to carry out their responsibilities to their masters with:

1. Fear - respect
2. Trembling – sincere loyalty
3. Singleness of heart - sincerity
4. As unto Christ
5. Not with eyeservice - consistently
6. Doing the will of God from the heart - Inner motivation
7. With good will - wholeheartedly

Let us remember that Christians today were purchased, in much the same way as bond slaves:

***1 Corinthians 6:20*** *For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.*

***1 Corinthians 7:23*** *Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men.*

Each of the seven areas that Paul spoke of to the slave, can be aimed at the church today. The question of “How are we to live under the rule of others (bosses)?” can be answered in the exact same way as a slave was to live under their master. These same principles apply.

### GIVE TESTIMONY

B. B. Barton, in his commentary on Ephesians comments on how a Christian is to work;

- (1) Our work needs to be worth offering to the Lord, whatever our field. How shameful for Christian employees to do their work in a substandard, slipshod, or unethical manner. Those people lose all credibility with their

coworkers. (2) Our work can be a holy offering to God. Our attitude of service transforms our menial tasks into beautiful sacrifices of love.<sup>6</sup>

J. Vernon McGee says:

What can break a man's shackles? Only the power of the gospel of Christ. He will make you free. "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). It is Christ who offers freedom. Think of the thousands today who are trapped by drugs and by alcohol. There is slavery on every side of us.<sup>7</sup>

*Robert C. Crowder*

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<sup>6</sup> Barton, B. B., & Comfort, P. W. (1996). *Ephesians* (p. 126). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed., Vol. 5, p. 276). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.