



Sermon – May 17, 2020
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Verses Covered This Week

Ephesians 6:5 - 9

1 Corinthians 7:21

Colossians 3:22

Romans 6:17 - 18

As you grab your seats, let's grab our Bibles. We're going to be back in Ephesians, chapter 6. Ephesians 6 this morning. We want to welcome you if you're joining us online or right here in the room. We've got our high school graduates and their families. And I just want to take a minute to recognize y'all and express our excitement for you. If you are excited about this new chapter our graduates are entering into, will you let them know that this morning?

We're going to be continuing in our study of Ephesians. Last week we talked about the kingdom at home. And this week we're going to begin thinking through the kingdom at work. And here I am, it's my third sermon with you as your new pastor. And this morning we get to talk about the Bible and slavery. We're tackling even the tough topics here as we go through the Bible verse by verse. And I want you to follow along with me here in Ephesians chapter 6 in verse 5. Because what Paul has to say to slaves and masters in the church at Ephesus has everything to do about how God has designed for us to live as Christians in the workplace. If you'll follow along with me, here's what the text says.

⁵Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶not by the way of eye service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. ⁹Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that He who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we bow our hearts to You this morning. We pray that You would shape our hearts, God, in such a way that our affections would be for You. We pray that You arrest our souls for, so

that our desires for You would be heightened. We pray for our minds, God, that You would help us to fix our thought life upon You. And we ask You to fill us with strength this morning, Lord, that we might walk in a manner worthy of the gospel. We want to give all that we have for all that You are. And we ask it in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, here was the situation. There was a bug that was threatening to ravage the entire globe, to create a massive infection. And as a result of that, people had begun to stock up on supplies and create a space in their pantry for canned goods and toilet paper and other needs. And about that same time period, there was a nationally broadcast graduation ceremony presentation by Oprah Winfrey that occurred. And you may be thinking as you hear me describing the situation that I'm talking about right here in 2020, but in fact, I'm talking about my graduation in 2000. Because back then it wasn't Coronavirus that was the presenting issue of the time, it was Y2K. You remember that one? That, not a bug of a disease, but a bug of a glitch in a computer that people worried might infect the entire world and create chaos in a way that caused people to panic and stock up. And we know looking back that that situation didn't play out the way that some feared in ways that, in many circumstances, is today through Coronavirus. But I remember being a graduate in high school in 2000, the first graduate class of a new millennium. Now graduate class, finishing in these uncertain circumstances and the graduation ceremony I was a part of, and the message to graduates at that time was, "You're special. You're different. There's nothing that's ever been experienced like this." And I know for the 30 plus of you that are gathered in the room this morning, you're hearing the same thing about yourself. That this circumstance is different. That times are more challenging. And what I want us to recognize this morning is that the apostle Paul has a word for us. And what he is telling us is that the most important thing this morning is not how you graduate, but how you live once you graduate. And he's going to give us guidance for that from this passage that he is offering to slaves and masters. Remember, he has just talked about marriage at the end of chapter 5. He has just spoken about the home at the beginning of chapter 6. And now he brings it into the workplace speaking to both slaves and to masters. And as we look at this text, it's so fitting to be here this morning as we are recognizing graduates. Because the ways that Paul speaks of about how you are to live in the workplace, had relevance for every one of us. Whether you're finishing that chapter of high school and heading off to college or to work. Or maybe you've been at the same job for 35 years. Or maybe you're retired. Or maybe right now you're on furlough or without a job and you don't know how you're going to provide. What we're going to find this week and next week as we dive into this set of verses that we just read, is that Paul is laying out for us a pattern about what it looks like to bring the kingdom at work.

But before we get there, I want you to look back at verse 5. Because Paul is speaking to a specific set of people in the Ephesian church. He speaks there and says,

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters

And we can't just jump right to the prescription for how Paul instructs us to work unless and until we deal with this very important of slavery. The question that we have before us here is does the Bible commend slavery? And in this passage, is this what we see there? Maybe you had people raise objections to Christianity before where they say, "Doesn't the Bible affirm slavery? Isn't it supported in there? Isn't there instruction from people like Paul telling slaves to obey their masters? How do we make sense of that?" Because we know that a loving God and

slavery like we've so often seen it throughout the centuries of humanity, seem to be incompatible with each other. And we can't just gloss over this. We need to wrestle with what's happening here in the text. And it's important to understand the way that slavery worked in the Roman empire. You would have all sorts of people in all sorts of positions. Some of whom would be taken captive when they lost a military battle. Others who might voluntarily offer themselves up as a servant of some kind to pay a debt and they could be in different ages and stages. It wasn't like what we think of in American slavery of primarily race-based, chattel slavery of a forced conscription. There was plenty of that going on, but that wasn't the totality of it. And as Paul speaks here to these bondservants, he's most likely talking to a certain type of slave. Those who were servants in a home who were often seen as part of the family. And he's offering them instructions without offering the idea of slavery affirmation. And how do we know that that's the case? Because if you want to look over in 1 Corinthians chapter 7. Hold your Bible here, but flip over to the way that Paul speaks to the Corinthian church about slavery in 1 Corinthians 7. And what you're going to notice is that in verse 21, he doesn't commend slavery, he condemns it. 1 Corinthians 7:21 says this:

²¹Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)

So it's clear here when Paul is writing to the Corinthian church, he's saying, "If you can get free, get free. Pursue, escape, pursue freedom." There is no way that he could affirm this institution of slavery while also encouraging freedom from it. In fact, when you look back with the way Paul is speaking of here in Ephesians chapter 6 in verse 5 about slaves obeying your masters. It's not approving slavery, it's assuming it. Paul is not talking about what should be; he's speaking to what is. That's what we see happening there. He's not asking, should there be slavery? But how should you live if you are a slave. That's very clear, the Bible does not justify slavery. But unfortunately, over the centuries, people who have claimed to follow Christ, have used the Bible as a justification for slavery. I'm not sure if you've ever heard of a place in Washington D. C. called the Museum of the Bible. I've had the chance to visit there and one of the most remarkable artifacts that they have on display there is a book from the early 1800's made in London that's commonly known as the Slave Bible. And while the slave trade was going on, bringing slaves across to the new world, these people were often Christians, or claiming to be Christians, that were bringing them over. And they wanted to find ways to convert those who were slaves. But they were concerned that if these slaves got too familiar with the story of the Bible, they might see a lot of talk about liberation and setting the captives free, and deliverance from slavery. And so what they did is they took the Bible and they carved out the portions that had anything to do with liberation and deliverance and freedom from slavery and left only those parts without it. There was no word of the exodus, no connection to anything else. They were using their faith to justify the ends and the means of the slavery that they affirmed. And even though we know Christians like William Wilberforce helped to turn the tide on eliminating that type of slavery hundreds of years ago, we've seen the way that the Bible has been misused to justify racism and segregation and all sorts of evils that miss the picture that Paul is giving here. Because what Paul is showing us in this passage is that he's not affirming slavery as an institution. What he's doing is he's affirming slaves as individuals. Just imagine if you're here in the Ephesian church. You're gathered as a new believer. Masters are there. Slaves are there. People were already surprised that Paul addressed children directly as we saw last week. How much more so if you're a slave in that congregation. He's speaking to me?

There's a word from God specifically to me? There's a validation, an affirmation, that's there. But in addition to that, if you look down in verse 9, he talks about changing the way you treat slaves. It gives instruction to masters to stop threatening them and he talks about changing the way that you see them by recognizing, as verse 9 lays out, that we should know that He is both their master and yours in heaven. What Paul is showing us is that, master or slave, you are all equal in the sight of God. You have all been made in His image. You have all been bought with the price through the blood of Jesus. And there will be people from every tribe, tongue, and nation as a part of the kingdom of God. And that has everything to do with the way that we engage at this church. I love the fact that we are investing in our Hispanic ministry. I'm so excited this coming week they're going to be able to gather back together for their Tuesday night worship. What an incredible opportunity to sing part of our worship songs this morning in Spanish and to seek to reach the community and to engage the nations around us. That is the heart of the Scripture that Paul is driving at here.

And what we want to notice now as we turn our attention from the subject of slavery to the subject of how it is that the kingdom is at work, we need to notice something. See, Paul was addressing a particular situation of slaves and masters in that time period. But the principles he lays out for what it looks like to work faithfully in a way that honors God apply to every Christian. And so what we want to notice is that even if some in that time period were living as bondservants, they could follow this command that Paul had called them to, so how much more for those of us who are free? And I want you to notice as we look back at verse 5, the first thing that Paul shows us about the way the kingdom of God should be at work in our lives is through our attitudes. Do you see the way he talks about their attitudes there? He says, "Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling." Fear in the original language gives us the word we often call phobia. And one of the things I'm doing is I'm getting to know our staff. I've had chances to sit down one on one with every one of our ministerial staff over the last two weeks and I'm learning all sorts of things about them including some of their phobias. So Sherry Maggard, if you don't know, is apparently deathly afraid of snakes. Anybody else afraid of snakes out there? That's what he's speaking of here. Fear. And then trembling. It has, in the original language, the idea of quaking. Almost like the instability you would experience in an earthquake. There is fear and trembling. And when those come together in a phrase, Paul uses it over and over again in the New Testament to point to something particular. And that is best found in the way that he talks in Colossians 3:22 about this whole idea. He is speaking to slaves and their masters. And instead of using the phrase fear and trembling, what he says is that they should have the fear of the Lord. That they should fear the Lord. And so when Paul is speaking here and a slave were to hear, treat your master with fear and trembling, they'd say, "I got that. Every day I wake up, I'm afraid of what he's going to do to me next. I tremble at the thought of the way he's going to mistreat my family. I am filled with anxiety about how he might show me harshness." When they hear fear and trembling, they probably originally thought, "Alright, I'm on it. I got it." But what we notice is that when we look at this text in light of that verse in Colossians 3:22, what Paul is showing us is that the fear for these bondservants should not be directed at their earthly master, but at their heavenly Father. That the focus of their attitude when they work should be one of reverence and respect for their King. And that has everything to do with the way they and us work today.

Now when I was heading through seminary, we lived in Louisville, Kentucky and the biggest event every year in Louisville was the first weekend of May with the running of the Kentucky

Derby. It's known as the Run for the Roses. And I remember taking a couple of our boys to the grocery store one of the mornings that weekend when they were very young. And we walked into Kroger and there was all this commotion; there were all these people. I had no idea what was going on until we came around the corner and we saw that in the floral section, they were handcrafting the rose garland that would be worn later on that weekend by the winning horse. Now if you were a florist at the Kroger, you spend 364 days of the year doing mundane things. Prepping wedding bouquets. Putting together valentine rose gatherings. There's all sorts of things you do that you're just going through the motions. But don't you think when all eyes are on you, you're preparing the most important thing for the most important recipient, that you are going to invest in all year, there's a heightened sense of intensity, urgency, and respect for the moment that you find yourself in. And when Paul speaks here of our attitude in our work being one of fear and trembling, that's the picture that we are all in on what we do because we know who we're doing it for. We are seeking to live in a way that is filled with reverence and respect. And so the question before us, especially for you graduates this morning, is what does it look like to embrace the attitude that Paul is calling us to here when we see the kingdom at work? And what I think we're going to find as we look across the Scripture, is that God is far less interested in what you produce through your work than what your work produces in you. Yes, you want to do things with excellence. You want to pursue your vocation in a way that honors God with your head and your heart and your hands. But at the same time, God is interested in not just shaping the world around you through what you create, but shaping your own heart through what He is creating in you. Which means if we're going to live out this call from Ephesians 6:5 in our own work life, one of our primary concerns in the workplace should be, what does it look like to manifest the fruit of the Spirit in our labors? Then when people see you at work, they notice something's different. That you're seeking to do things in a way that works with fear and trembling out of respect and reverence to God knowing that He has given you this opportunity to work on this world in a way that reflects Him and honors Him with your life.

Look, there are tough days right now when it comes to work. We haven't seen unemployment numbers like this since the 1920's. There's hardship all around us. We don't know what to expect. But here's what I know. No matter how difficult our work situations might be right now or in the days ahead, it might be challenging conditions or a difficult boss or high stress. What we might experience now, is nothing compared to what these bondservants were encountering in that very moment in the Ephesian church. And if Paul can lay the expectation for them that they can have an attitude that is pleasing to the Lord in their work, how much more so is that true for each one of us? But I want you to notice the way that Paul doesn't just stop there. He goes on in this text and back at the end of verse 5 and then on into verse 6, he doesn't just focus on the attitude in terms of how we work; he also focuses on our heart. Do you see it? He says, "With a sincere heart as you would Christ." And then later on in verse 6, he says, "But as bondservants of Christ doing the will of God from the heart." There is this call, not to just have your attitude shaped by God in the workplace, but also your heart. That your heart should reflect the heart of the gospel when you work in a way that pleases the Lord. And so he speaks there of a sincere heart. What is the picture that he's giving us there? First we've got to remember a slave's work would be anything but sincere, wouldn't it? In most cases, they were just going through the motions. They did things not because they really wanted to, but they felt like they had to. That there was no choice in the matter. That they were under obligation. They saw their work as an obligation, not an opportunity. And yet, Paul was speaking to them in this moment and he's saying that your work should be done with a sincere heart. There should be a level of

commitment that's there. And it's one you think about in places like in Matthew 6:24 where Jesus is speaking about how we cannot serve two masters. He's saying, "We don't want you to be double-minded. We want you to be singularly focused, devoted." So what does it look like to be sincere in the way that you work? How do you know if you have a sincere heart? Well, part of it is the intensity with which you bring to your work. When you wake up every day and you clock in are you all in when you clock in? Are you saying, "I'm going to give this everything I have because I have a heavenly Master that I'm seeking to honor in the way that I work." That's what Paul is showing us. But that sincerity of heart doesn't just reflect our intensity. It also reflects our integrity. You know what integrity is, right? Integrity is when your reputation matches the reality. The appearance of who you are reflects the actuality of who you are. That's what a sincere heart looks like in the workplace. And maybe as we are starting to get out and about more, we can understand this in a fresh way. I've had the chance to start heading back into some restaurants this week and I noticed that the staff there are even more intentional than they've ever been about how they're managing things. Most of them are wearing masks. After every, every set of customers gets up from a table, they're not just doing a casual cleaning trying to wipe off any of the crumbs. There's an intentional, an intense effort to make sure that it is prepped and ready. Why? Because they know there's a threat around us. They understand that there's a danger in their midst. And they want to do everything they can to serve others well with a sincere heart? And when Paul speaks here about that sincerity of heart, that's the picture. That we're doing whatever it takes in order to honor God. And so he speaks there about having a sincere heart. But then we see bookended at the end of verse 6, he speaks there in another way about having a commitment of the heart when we are working. And he says there, "But as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart." He speaks of Christians as bondservants of Christ. Or more literally, as slaves of Christ. He's saying, regardless of your status, if you are slave or master, if you are free or in chains, every one of us is a slave to Christ.

And what does that mean? That means our first and primary allegiance in our life is to our King. That He is the one that we are committed to follow under all circumstances. That's why when you look at the New Testament, you see this recurring theme about redemption. That language of redemption is a language of the slave trade. So when a slave would be on the auction block and people would be making bids for them in order to purchase them, the redemption price that is paid for a slave is the amount of money it requires in order for them to become yours. In order for them to be placed under new ownership. And when Paul is speaking throughout the New Testament about how we are slaves of Christ, that we have been bought with the price, He's reminding us we are under new ownership. That we have laid down our lives to follow our heavenly Master. And he speaks there of how we are to be slaves of Christ doing the will of God. That when we wake up every day, if a slave were to wake up in that time period, they would wake up each day in order to find out what the will of their master was so that they could begrudgingly do it. But what Paul was showing us here is that we are to be slaves to Christ doing the will of God every day with joyful hearts. That seek to honor Him. That's the picture that's here when he speaks there about doing the will of God from the heart. More literally, it's your soul. It's your inmost being. Everything about you to be all in in how you labor. To be wholehearted, devoted, committed to your cause.

Now you probably heard over the years when you think about the subject of work that there's this divide between the secular and the sacred. Work that's for the sake of God and work that's not for the sake of God. And there's this disconnect. And sometimes those of you that aren't

servicing in ministry in a situation like me, might feel like what you are doing doesn't always have a clear connection between what you are doing and how it relates to who God is and why He's put you in this world. But for every one of you, including you graduates this morning, we need to recognize that when we work faithfully, we are doing the will of God from the heart. And what that means for you is that every crop you harvest, every diaper you change, every student you teach, every toilet you clean, every well you drill, everything you do in the workplace is an opportunity to honor God with your heart. That's what Paul is driving us to this morning. And the question we need to wrestle with is the one that Paul is laying us out for there in verse 6 when he calls into question, are you a slave of Christ this morning? Paul is speaking to the Ephesian church. He is speaking to them as slaves of Christ who have been brought with the price called to honor God and the question for each one of us, is that true of you today? And I want us to be crystal clear on what it looks like to become a slave of Christ. And so if you have your Bible, turn over to Romans chapter six in verse 17. Because Paul lays it out as clearly as can be. We don't want to miss this this morning. Because you can do everything you try to do to please God in the workplace, but if you're not doing it as a slave of Christ, then it's impossible to please Him. But notice the way that Paul speaks here of what it means to be a slave of Christ in Romans chapter 6 in verse 17. Here's what he says.

¹⁷But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed. ¹⁸and, having been set free from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness.

What Paul is showing us there is that every one of us is a slave to something. Maybe it's a slavery to success or to the pursuit of significance or financial wealth or maybe it's fame or maybe it's a particular addiction or besetting sin. We feel that sense of slavery that we're in bondage to our desires. He speaks to that here in Romans 6. And he talks about how every one of us is a slave to sin apart from Christ. And yet, what we see is that in the gospel as God sends His only Son to live a perfect life and die for us and to be nailed to that cross and to be raised from the grave, what He is empowering Himself to do is to send the Spirit so that He might set the captives free. So that dead bones might live. So that slaves to sin might become slaves to righteousness. Have you experienced that in your own life? Just this week I had the opportunity to share the gospel with someone I'm very close to. And I watched God open blind eyes and rip out a heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh. And take somebody I care deeply about who was a slave to sin so that he might become like Paul speaks of here; a slave of Christ. And that offer of the gospel is available to you. Whether you're in the room here gathered just because you came as a family member of a graduate or you're watching us online from the comfort of your own home, wrestling with the guilt of sin and the conviction that God is bringing in your life. Paul's call to each of us this morning is to lay down our lives in submission to our King so that we might be slaves of Christ who honor Him, not just with submission and salvation, but with every aspect of our lives through our work.

Now I have to say, looking back 20 years ago to my graduation in 2000, I don't remember much about that time period. I remember a lot of my friends had family who were very intense about stacking up canned goods for the Y2K. But I don't remember anything about my graduation other than a friend of mine who tripped on purpose as he was walking across the stage to get the diploma just to draw some attention to himself. Sorry y'all won't have the chance to think about doing that since you might not have an in person graduation. But here's what I do remember. I

remember then the same word that Paul is leaving us with here this morning. You are not defined by your circumstances, but how you respond to your circumstances. You are not defined by the way you graduate, but by the way you live after graduation. And you are defined, not by what you do, but by the things you do, shape who you are. The call of the gospel for us this morning is to live as slaves of Christ as we see the kingdom of God at work in our attitudes and in our hearts.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Lord, as we come to You this morning, Lord, I'm lifting up people in this room and those that are watching by livestream, even right now, Lord. And I pray that You would awaken hearts that might be closed to You. If there are those that feel enslaved to sin, that You might set them free. If there are those who feel trapped in their jobs without joy, without peace, without hope, without those fruit of the Spirit evident in their lives, I pray that You would use this word to renew us and to set us free. We're praying, Lord, that you would reshape our attitudes. That we would be the kind of people that would be intensely committed to doing everything we can to honor You with our work. And that You would change our hearts, Lord, that we might live in a way, not to please others, but to be pleasing to You. And we pray especially this morning for these graduates, God. As they go forward into whatever chapter they have next, that they will take You with them. That they will live in submission to You. That they will walk in a manner worthy of the gospel. That they will live out their days as slaves of Christ. We ask these things in Jesus name. Amen.