

Ephesians 6:5—Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ;

The theme of submission continues throughout Ephesians 6:5-9, but we must keep in mind that only Spirit-filled believers (Ephesians 5:18) understand the benefits of submission. Someone must lead if society is to function according to design—the husband over the wife (Ephesians 5:23-24), the parent over the child (Ephesians 6:1), and the master over the “*slave*” (Ephesians 6:5)—each possessing authority for the purpose of serving those under their charge (read Ephesians 5:25 for example). Therefore, mutual submission is the goal in these relationships, not a dictatorship. As Paul relates how “*slaves*” were to respond to their masters, and masters to their slaves, what a wonderful opportunity to observe how employees and employers should interact within the workplace.

Before the birth of the church (in Acts 2), the Romans brutally mistreated slaves, in fact, treated them as animals. They used them for a variety of purposes, caring little about their person or wellbeing. Slavery remained a socially accepted practice when Ephesians was penned, but much had changed. The slave now had a healthy relationship with his master, a topic addressed in Kent Hughes’ book titled *Ephesians : The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. On page 206 of this work he writes:

The fact is, by the time of the Christian era and the writing of this Ephesians *Haustafel*, sweeping changes had been introduced which radically improved the treatment of slaves. Slaves under Roman law in the first century could generally count on eventually being set free. Very few ever reached old age as slaves. Slave owners were releasing slaves at such a rate that Augustus Caesar introduced legal restrictions to curb the trend. Despite this, inscriptions indicate that almost 50 percent of slaves were freed before the age of thirty. What is more, while the slave remained his master’s possession he could own property—including other slaves!—and completely controlled his own property, so that he could invest and save to purchase his own freedom.

We also must understand that being a slave did not indicate one’s social class. Slaves regularly were accorded the social status of their owners. Regarding outward appearance, it was usually impossible to distinguish a slave from free persons. A slave could be a custodian, a salesman, or CEO. Many slaves lived separately from their owners. Finally, selling oneself into slavery was commonly used as a means of obtaining Roman citizenship and gaining an entrance into society. Roman slavery in the first century was far more humane and civilized than the American/African slavery practiced in this country much later. This is a sobering and humbling fact! (Hughes, 1990)ⁱ

This insight into the treatment of slaves in Paul’s day explains why slavery is nowhere condemned in New Testament Scripture. Both slaves and masters perceived it as positive and necessary. In fact, prohibiting slavery would have meant economic disaster for all. The slave/master relationship in Paul’s day was very similar to the employee/employer relationship we know today. It in no way resembled American slavery (which is clearly forbidden—Exodus 21:16).

Paul states, “*Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ*” (Ephesians 6:5), because some slaves’ environments were so laid back that they refused to respect their masters. Paul realized that no

distinction existed between slave and free man in their standing with Christ (Galatians 3:28), but the slave was to obey his master so long as he remained a slave. Logistically this presented difficulty, especially in instances where slaves held positions of leadership over their masters in the local church (as is sometimes the case with employees and employers today). Even so, the Christian slave was to respect his Christian master, a subject Paul also addresses in 1 Timothy 6:1-2.

The phrase, “*with fear and trembling*” (Ephesians 6:5), is rendered “*with a proper sense of respect and responsibility*” in the J.B. Phillips translation (Modern English New Testament).ⁱⁱ Paul was not encouraging the slave of his day to be terror-stricken when in his master’s presence. The slave was, however, to respect his master as he carried out his master’s wishes. He was also to respond “*in...sincerity of...heart.*” “*Sincerity*” in this case means “singleness, purity, or uprightness.” Hence, the slave’s motives were to be proper and upright by viewing his response to his master as a response to Christ—“*as to Christ*” (Ephesians 6:5). Employees today should adopt this same mindset as they fulfill their responsibilities to their employers.

Ephesians 6:6—not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.

By implementing the phrase, “*not by way of eyeservice,*” Paul is communicating that slaves (employees) should never “appear overly busy” while in the employer’s presence for the sake of personal gain. The employee should perform all tasks with utmost integrity and faithfulness, never doing the minimal just to get by. Such a slave/employee goes the second mile to make certain that his master/employer receives maximum benefit from his time and labor (Matthew 25:14-30, the *Parable of the Talents*, serves as a good example). Neither are slaves/employees to labor faithfully for the sake of impressing bystanders (they are not to be “*men-pleasers*”—Ephesians 6:6). Rather, they are to be “*slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.*” They are to work for what their employer receives (and what Christ receives) through their efforts, for the principle of the cross applies to the workplace like everywhere else.

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

A slave/employee should work as though the Lord were his master/employer (Ephesians 6:7; Colossians 3:23), even in situations where the master/employer is less than fair. The slave/employee must “*render service, as to the Lord, and not to men*” (Ephesians 6:7) in such cases. This principle applies in ministry as well, for obedience (not results) should be the motivating factor as we serve others for their good.

Ephesians 6:8—knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

Paul desired that the slaves who read this epistle would understand an important principle: that God rewards those who do their work as unto Him. Thus, the slave/employee can rest assured that God notices and rewards deeds done in faith. Hence, if the employer fails to reward the hardworking employee for his good service, God fills the gap. What comforting words for a day such as ours!

Ephesians 6:9—And, masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

As the Christian masters of Paul's day interacted with their slaves, they were to display the same respect they expected in return. This principle applies to our day as well. Only those employers who respect their employees' physical, emotional, and spiritual needs are in a position of pleasing God. Therefore, in God's economy, "*threatening*" is out and sensitivity and respect for the employee are in. How could an employer threaten an employee and at the same time live by the principle of the cross—the principle that has controlled the relationships in the Godhead from eternity past? It would be totally impossible! As a result, the master/employer is to concern himself with creating a healthy work environment, paying fair wages, providing proper benefits, not requiring excessive hours on the job (keeping the wellbeing of the family in mind), and doing everything possible to fulfill his role as a godly master/employer.

The "*Master*" of both the slave/employee and master/employer "*is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him*" (Ephesians 6:9)—for neither "*slave nor free man*" (Galatians 3:28) exists in God's economy. Why then would a Christian master/employer treat a slave/employee with anything but respect?

ⁱ Hughes, R. K. *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. ©1990. pp. 206. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.

ⁱⁱ Phillips, J.B. (1996). *The New Testament In Modern Language*. Touchstone Books, a division of Simon & Schuster. Used by permission.