

A slave was the property of another person. In first century Roman society, slavery was a reality. As the gospel was preached, all kinds of people responded and were saved by God through faith in Christ. Spirit filled, Christ fearing, wise obedience became the standard for all members of God's church. Wives (5:22), husbands (5:25), children (6:1), parents/fathers (6:1, 4) as well as slaves and their masters.

Imagine how amazing it would be as a slave or a slave master to become a Christian and then find yourself at church meetings with each other! 'In Christ' has become your new identity. As a new person in Christ you are no longer seen within the societal limitations of gender, race or whether you are slave or free (Col.3:11). But along with your new freedom in Christ come new responsibilities to live out your faith in the relationships of your life. One of the significant platforms for the gospel to be displayed and advanced is in your attitude toward your work, from both the slave and the master perspectives. The calling of Christ on your life is lived out in the everyday world of your work relationships.

As we come to understand and apply this section of God's word it is necessary to ask and answer a few important questions. Too often we miss the depth and beauty of the power of God to transform lives by making hasty applications to the employee - employer relationship. While this section should impact the way we do our work and the relationships we have at work, it also teaches us much about valuing people in the same way God does. Let's ask a few questions.

What was slavery like in first century society under Roman rule?

This is perhaps where we need to set aside our assumptions formed by our understanding of slavery in Britain and America in the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. While there was abuse and cruelty directed at slaves in Roman times, not all slaves were treated badly, nor were enslaved people trying to free themselves. Slavery was not offensive to early Christians. It was a part of life that like other things could be good or bad. A slave could have a wide variety of occupations from low to high responsibility. They were subject to their master and had no legal recourse.

There are several references to slaves and their Christian duty to live out their faith in the New Testament. The Old Testament refers to two types of slavery. One is when a Jew would sell themselves into an obligation to someone else as a way of borrowing money since the land was not to be sold. Another is the prisoner of war who was assigned into slavery. The various laws placed around slavery regulated it for the protection of the slave. Obviously there were abuses.

Another question, why didn't the Apostle Paul or the writers of scripture speak out against the institution of slavery? Why not teach the churches to involve themselves in seeking social justice in this area?

While the purpose of our time this morning is not to deal with the larger issue of the Christians responsibility to address social injustices, it is a valid concern. Remember that Christians were themselves a persecuted minority in no position to take on an imbedded institution like slavery. There does seem to be a primary concern that Christian slaves and masters behave like followers of Christ rather than abolish slavery. The gospels power is to be applied and seen in the darkest and hardest arena first, that of the human heart and attitude. In fact, the teaching of scripture for believing slaves and masters, if followed concentrated on revolutionizing attitudes and behavior towards slaves.

Centuries later in our part of the world, God would raise up and bless the efforts of people like John Woolman and William Wilberforce who gave themselves to reformation in the political and legislative arenas for the abolishment of slavery. These and others both remind and inspire us to do all that we can do to defend the dignity and sanctity of life in any way possible. The tension between social reform and evangelism or works of justice versus preaching the gospel does not have to be an 'either/or' situation. However we must acknowledge that the teachings of scripture identify the ministry of the gospel to save and change a person's heart is primary.

The major observation from our bible text this morning is that believing slaves are as much a part of the church as masters, or anyone else. In the often compressed environment of the work world, the gospel is to be made obvious through the countercultural submissiveness of both the worker and the owner. In fact, these exhortations to slaves and owners result in a revolutionary change of attitude about slavery as attention is focused on the value, personhood and moral responsibility of slaves. It is to be noted that a major metaphor for teaching the relationship of the believer to Christ is that of slavery.

Our theme for today is that the gospel of Jesus Christ should show up at your job as much as in your church, marriage and home. Your work or any other relationship of submission to those over you will be impacted by the fullness of God's love for you and the supreme authority of Christ in your life. Imagine how radically impressive a Christ centered slave-owner relationship would be? The same message of the power and authority of Christ is able to be communicated through your obedient response and submission to Christ in your work relationships.

Note these instructions for both the worker and the owner that are supported by a contrast and a motivation. All of this is connected directly to the lordship and supremacy of Christ.

**1. Worker, obey those in authority over you with submission pointed at Christ. 5-8**

Note the clear command to obey earthly masters with the multiple references/qualifiers 'as you would Christ,' 'as servants of Christ,' and 'as to the Lord.' This implies a clear change of work standards and service from those of self interest or just getting by. Your commitment to Christ will be seen in your attitude re work. There is no separation of the sacred and the secular. All of life comes under the lordship of Christ.

Your submission at work pointed at Christ is to be wholehearted. 'from the heart' 6

Wholehearted does not mean simply enthusiastically, it means that there is a unity in your heart with the heart of God regarding both his ownership of your life and his assignment to the work he has called you to do. It is described in 3 ways in these verses:

- Your work is sacred. 'fear and trembling' 5  
Col.3:22; 1Peter 2:18
- Your submission is sincere. Not grudging, but honest 5, 6
- Your submission is willing. Motivated by God's will 6-7

Your submission at work pointed at Christ is contrasted with pleasing people. 6

Note the terms 'eye-service' and 'people-pleasers.' This is service performed only for self benefit or to gain attention to oneself. This attitude is more concerned with pleasing the boss or co-workers than Christ. Take your work to a whole other level . . . make it worship!

Your submission at work pointed at Christ is motivated by rewards from Christ. 8

The underlying value of a gospel driven employee is that the paycheck, benefits and job satisfaction are not the most desired rewards of work.

Cmp Col.3:24                      2Cor. 5:10

Summarize worker submitted to Christ ... Prov.18:9                      Titus 2:9-10                      1Tim.6:1-2

## **2. Owners, respond to your workers with submission pointed at Christ. 9**

What a shocking word of instruction. 'do the same to them' is a call to those in authority to be submissive to their workers in the same way workers are submissive to them. It is to be wholehearted, sincere, sacred and willing.

Spirit filled, Christ focused employers will have a radically different set of values in running their business. They will recognize the sacredness of their business and respond to their employees with genuineness and sincerity.

This is contrasted with the command to stop threatening the workers. The contrast is seen clearly in how you as the owner motivate and encourage production from your workers. Abuse of authority is as evident in the work place as it is in the home and marriage. The sacredness of work and the dignity of people created in the likeness of God should be evident in gospel focused people at work.

Boice/Sproul illus.                      What leverage do owners/bosses have?                      Jas.5:1-4

The motivating truth/principle that energizes this radical behavior on the part of owners and supervisors is stated in two simple truth statements:

- You have the same master/Lord in heaven.
- He has no favorites.

Cmp. Col.3:25 – 4:1

## **Take Aways**

1. Surrender your work/job to the lordship of Christ and the gospel. Repent of the dualism of treating work as secular. Surrender your life to living out the calling of God on your life.
2. Determine to solve problems with people at your place of work. Perhaps the truth about God has been distorted through your behavior that falls short of Christ focused. Repent and seek help to rebuild a clear gospel testimony.
3. Thank God for your work and the opportunity to advance his glory through it. Ask him to help you respond wholeheartedly in a way that will promote Christ.
4. Repent of the idolatry that work is in your heart. Seek heart renewal that allows you to view yourself primarily as a new person in Christ rather than a certain profession. What you do matters but not as much as who you are in Christ.