

# Beauty in God's Order: masters and slaves

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, hello friends, my name is King Lee, for those of you who haven't met me, and it's a great joy to bring to you today God's word. Before we open this passage, I want us to help, I want to help you enter the world of the original audience. So imagine with me for a moment.

You're living in first century Ephesus in the Roman Empire. Slavery is deeply ingrained within your society. In fact, 30% of your city's population would have been slaves.

And you know that they're regarded as property, owned by and controlled by masters. And while with enough hard work, slaves could in fact buy their freedom, they possessed few legal rights, lacked honour, and were subject to whatever punishment their masters deemed appropriate.

Many were worked to death or were subjected to awful conditions. And so it's in this context Paul writes his letter to the church. But Paul is neither writing to condone nor abolish slavery. What he does write to is how Christian slaves are to act, to submit in reverence to Christ, which we read earlier in Ephesians 5.21.

And yet what is sown in Paul's letters will become the basis of the abolition of race-based slavery for future Christians. Now, if you've been following us for the past three weeks, you'll know that this is the third set of instructions that Paul is giving to the household.

[ 1 : 23 ] So we had first husbands and wives, then parents and children, and now we come to slaves and masters. In Paul's day, slaves were often part of the household, working in homes, eating and sleeping under the same roof.

And into that very household, Paul writes his letter. And so today, I want to highlight three things to help us understand Paul's instructions to both slaves and masters.

One, the command, or the outward action. Two, the attitude, or the inward motivation. And three, the reason, or the Godward motivation.

We'll examine these for both slaves and masters, but as we read verse 5 to 8, see if you can identify them in what Paul first says to the slaves. So, with that in mind, let's turn now to the passage and to point to in your outline.

From verse 5. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.

[ 2 : 28 ] Obey them, not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

Did you manage to pick that up? Don't worry if you didn't, let's work through it together. We see at the start of verse 5, the command to slaves is to obey.

Obey their earthly masters. And this is repeated in a similar fashion to verse 7, that slaves are to serve wholeheartedly. So, the command is to obey and serve their earthly masters.

Now, we heard last week that children are to obey their parents in the Lord. And so, we see Paul use the same command to slaves, to obey their masters.

And so, remember that these are instructions given to Christian households, and would only be heard if the household were in the Lord. And so, the assumption is that the commands that are given to obey are in line with what God teaches.

[ 3 : 42 ] There may be multiple reasons for slaves to defy and rebel against their masters, but obeying is part of acknowledging the authority that the Lord has given in the household.

But what if slaves were to receive instructions that contradict Christ? Should they still obey them? Well, I want to caveat. Paul is not telling slaves to obey full stop, but to obey just as they would obey Christ.

To obey in the Lord. Which means that if given a command that goes against what Christ teaches, then they are ultimately not to obey. They couldn't obey in good conscience.

Okay, so we have the command, the outward action, obey. Let's look at the attitude. And I wonder how you might summarize the attitude of the slave as you read.

Well, I think the first verse we read summarizes it quite well. See if you can pick it up. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.

[ 4 : 56 ] Respect, fear, and sincerity of heart. Let's start with respect and fear. So what does that mean, to obey with respect and fear?

Well, I think they're part and parcel of one another. Because this fear isn't a fear for one's life, but as a form of reverence to the power and authority that the Master has.

A reverent fear, similar to the reverence we have for Christ. The Master has been given authority by God. An authority to be stewarded responsibly for the benefit of the household.

And so slaves are to treat their masters with this type of fear. But Paul doesn't stop there. He continues to expand the inward attitude to include the sincerity of heart.

As we read, you'll notice that this idea of the heart is repeated twice more. See, at the end of verse 6, doing the will of God from your heart.

[ 5 : 56 ] And the start of verse 7, serve wholeheartedly. The heart, the heart, the heart. And so the inward motivation Paul is trying to bring out is, yes, respect and fear.

But ultimately, it's with the whole heart. Obeying wholeheartedly. And there is a healthy balance of respect for authority and yet not resenting that the authority has been placed over them.

But wholeheartedly serving. Because they recognise that this is God's will. It's the difference between a slave who cuts corners only working when the Master is around.

Or only cleaning the visible areas. Versus a slave who carries out all their duties to the full. Going above and beyond. And I think we know intuitively the difference between a wholehearted and a halfhearted.

I mean, we do. You can tell when someone isn't giving their best attitude to a task. Always complaining, making excuses, doing the least amount that they can.

[ 7 : 05 ] But God is telling slaves here, no. Have the inward attitude of being wholehearted. So, we've heard the command to obey, which is the outward action.

The attitude, which is the inward motivation of the heart. But why? What's the reason that they should obey? Well, let's read in verse 6.

Notice how Paul doesn't say that they shouldn't win favour of their masters.

And in fact, if a slave were to obey wholeheartedly, they would win favour. But Paul's saying that they shouldn't just work when their master is looking at them.

Or so that they get more favour and better treatment from them. No, he goes on to continue the reason in the second half of the sentence. They are slaves of Christ.

[ 8 : 25 ] And that's their reason. Their God word motivation. They're not merely physical slaves, but spiritual slaves to Christ.

So, that means, while they serve an earthly master, they're ultimately serving their heavenly master. And we see that idea repeated throughout the passage three times.

The end of verse 5, just as you would obey Christ. Here in verse 6, obey as slaves of Christ. And verse 7, serve as if you were serving the Lord, not people.

So, again, picture this. You're a slave in Ephesus. Your master calls you over and orders you to clean the household toilet.

There's no plumbing. You know what that means. You'll be emptying the chamber pot, hauling the waste outside, scrubbing the container clean, and dealing with the smell that will cling to you for the rest of the day.

[ 9 : 26 ] It's hot, unpleasant, and just about as far down your list of favourite jobs as possible. Now, in that moment, how would you respond?

Would you rush to get it over with? Complain under your breath? Only do a quick rinse to minimise the smell because the master isn't watching? Well, Paul's answer is clear.

Remember, you are a slave of Christ. Which means when you scrub that pot, you scrub it as if Christ himself asked you to do it. And when slaves obey in this way, as they would obey Christ, Paul says that they are actually doing the will of God.

It seems a bit funny to say that, doesn't it? How is this doing the will of God? Well, we saw in Ephesians 1, 9-10 that God has made known his will to us, which is to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

So by obeying and remembering it's obeying their Christian masters, they are bringing unity in their household as they fall under their unity in Christ.

[10:44] Yet we know that obeying is often easier said than done. And so Paul continues to give great encouragement directly after in verse 8.

Because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. Sometimes obeying wholeheartedly as to Christ might lead to doing things that the earthly master won't see, like scrubbing a toilet.

And it's easy to lose heart at that point. No one wants to do a chore which they don't get any recognition. But Paul encourages them. The Lord sees the good that they do.

Whether slave or master, authority or powerless, the Lord sees them. And more than that, he'll also reward them for it.

And what a great hope and comfort to someone of a lowly position, to help shift their gaze upward to the Lord who sees their work. That while they might be in a lowly position now, they are assured that they are known and seen by God.

[12:00] And the God who sees and rewards the slaves gives us today that same comfort. That if you ever feel unseen for your service, know that God sees you.

When you come early to set up, or stay late to pack down, when you serve behind the scenes, organising that outing, cleaning up mess that isn't yours, when you scrub that toilet, God sees you and will reward you for the good you do.

Because God sees everything we do. And more than that, he sees our hearts and motivations as we obey him. And that is a wonderful comfort that both slaves and we have.

Okay, we've talked a lot about slaves, but what about masters? How are they to act? Well, we see in verse 9, and masters, treat your slaves in the same way.

But what does the same way mean? They're not obeying their slaves, so what's the deal? Well, to understand the same way, let's recap that what was commanded of the slave.

[13:18] To obey the outward action, with the inward motivation, wholeheartedly, and just as they would obey Christ, which is the Godward motivation.

And so, in the same way, means to adopt the same attitudes and motivations as slaves. Masters are to obey wholeheartedly, not to their slaves, but to their heavenly master.

Masters are to treat their slaves in a manner that is obedient to Christ, to do so wholeheartedly. And as they're exercising authority over their slaves, being mindful that they are ultimately serving the Lord.

And what does that look like in practice? Well, Paul gives us one clear example. Do not threaten them. In the Roman world, threats were a common way to control slaves.

It was an abuse of power, using fear to manipulate those who had no ability to resist. And this is different from fair discipline. If a slave disobeyed, the master may have had the right to correct them.

[14:31] But threats go further. They pressure and intimidate, even when nothing has been done wrong. Just like Egypt in Exodus, when the Israelites cried out about their harsh labor, Pharaoh threatened them and made it worse.

He told them to make more bricks without more straw. And that wasn't justice. That was oppression. And Paul is saying to these Christian masters, don't lead like that.

That kind of leadership has no place among you. As he goes on to say, since you know that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

Threatening like this goes against God's will, because that's not what God is like. Actually, as we saw earlier, God rewards those who do good. He doesn't punish unjustly.

And so I think Paul is doing two things here. He's lifting up the dignity of the slave, and he's humbling the authority of the master.

[15:38] Why? Because both have the same master in heaven, and he shows no favoritism. Whether slave or free, both are equal in God's eyes.

And that was radical in Paul's day. A slave had no standing legally. They were treated like property. But Paul says, So that means, masters are to treat their slaves fairly.

And just like God rewards us, they are to reward the good that their slaves do too, not threatening them, because they both serve their heavenly master.

And that's why Paul finishes by saying, there is no favoritism with him, because both serve the Lord.

And we saw in our Old Testament passage in Deuteronomy 10, that this idea isn't new.

In verse 17, Moses says, For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

[ 17 : 14 ] God shows no partiality to the rich, poor, slave or free. And earthly status doesn't count for more with God. Both will give an account.

Both are called to obey wholeheartedly wherever they're at. And the greater truth is that the God we see here is now revealed fully in Jesus Christ.

When Paul says, their master and yours is in heaven, he's not talking about a distant God. He's talking about Jesus. The one who made both, made both of them alive when they were dead in transgressions.

The one who saves both by grace in his loving kindness. The one who brings both near by his very blood. And so it's this great servant king that has served both slave and master equally.

And so for us too. There's no need to worry about what status we have, whether high or low, employer or employee, pastor or flock.

[ 18 : 20 ] God shows no partiality. So we've looked at both slaves and masters, both instructed with the command to obey with the outward action, the inward attitude to serve wholeheartedly, and the Godward motivation to obey just as they would obey Christ.

So let's take a step back. Let's take a step back and let's think about what does that mean for us today? Now, the slave master relationship that Paul was speaking of was very real in his day.

But in Australia, here and now, it's not our experience. We are far removed from this type of relationship between slave and master, or at least I hope so.

But that doesn't mean we ignore this passage. Even though slavery isn't part of our lives today, serving and authority still apply to us. And so what Paul gives us is a principle, a gospel-shaped way of thinking about our attitude towards authority and serving under it.

And so while slaves and master don't directly apply to us, we should ask ourselves, am I obeying the authority over me? Am I serving the Lord wholeheartedly?

[ 19 : 44 ] Am I obeying as I would obey the Lord? So when you're under authority, how do you respond? When someone else is calling the shots.

When your boss tells you what to do. When a ministry leader gives direction. When someone in authority makes a decision that you don't like. It's easier to obey when you like whoever you're serving under.

But that doesn't matter here. Because Paul says to serve wholeheartedly, as if you are serving Christ. So, I wonder if you think that you serve wholeheartedly where you're at.

For example, many of us here work part-time or full-time jobs. So when you're at work, what does your work ethic look like? Do you take extended lunch breaks?

Doom scroll when you should be focusing on that task? Do you show favouritism to your colleagues that you're better friends with? Do you alt-tab out of that video when your manager walks by?

[ 20 : 52 ] Or do you serve wholeheartedly in the roles that you've been given? Giving the best even when no one is watching. Because as you serve under authority, you are serving Christ.

So, is it wholeheartedly or half-heartedly? Now, I know many of you do work hard. And you do put in the effort. And that's a great and wonderful thing.

So, keep going. Keep working hard for the Lord. But we all know that there are times when we struggle. When we drift. And when we get distracted. I know that's true of my own heart.

And I'm sure it's true of yours too. And so, let this passage remind us that we ultimately serve our heavenly Master. And that means serving wholeheartedly for the sake of Christ who first served us.

So, that's when you're under authority. But what about when you're in authority? Now, some of you might be thinking, well, I'm not a master. Or I'm not a CEO or manager.

[ 21 : 58 ] Or have a great deal of influence over others. But there are still situations where you do find yourself in positions of power. So, I wonder, how do you treat people who serve you?

How do you treat the waiter at the restaurant? The cleaner at your workplace? The person in the call centre who picks up your complaint? The barista at the cafe?

Or the Macca's worker who has to clean up after your table? Now, I know that being a master and having the Macca's worker clean up after you is not the same thing.

So, for one, we have employment laws today that protect workers and give them rights. But it's still customer service. And the way we treat those who serve us matters.

Do we realise that as we're being served, God is watching us and our attitudes? The Lord sees how we treat those who serve us.

[ 23 : 01 ] And so, do we raise our voice to get our way? Become impatient or angry when service is slow? Are we the type of people that we would want to serve?

Now, picture this. You're not a first century slave. In fact, you're far from it. You live in the 21st century. You might be a student in uni or in the workforce.

You've been given many opportunities to serve and be served. And so, what would it look like for you to serve Christ where you're at? In your outward actions, what might it look like to be respectful?

Sorry, what would it look like to obey and serve? In your inward attitude, what might it look like to be respectful? To be sincere?

To always do the will of God wholeheartedly? And in your God word motivation, what might help you remind you of who you ultimately work for?

[ 24 : 06 ] Because tomorrow will come. And with it will come lectures to attend, emails to answer, projects to finish, people to serve, and people to lead.

And in all of it, this truth still stands. You are ultimately serving the Lord Jesus Christ wherever you're at. He's in the room.

He sees. He knows. And so, how will you serve him wholeheartedly? Let's pray. Dear Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are our true Master in Heaven.

The one who has made us alive through the blood of Christ. We ask that you would help us to obey your word as we serve wholeheartedly in the places you have called us.

Shape our hearts so that in every task, in every relationship, and in every moment, we might serve you with our whole hearts. Help us to remember that we serve you above all.

[ 25 : 12 ] And may our obedience bring glory to your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.