

# **EPHESIANS**

Part 12: “Authority in the Workplace”

Ephesians 6:5-9

Sunday, November 18, 2018

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## **Scripture Reading**

<sup>5</sup> Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, <sup>6</sup> not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, <sup>7</sup> rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, <sup>8</sup> knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. <sup>9</sup> Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. <sup>1</sup>

*Heavenly Father, today we come before you, and we acknowledge that you are our God and Lord. You speak to us through your word, and we are called not only to hear what you say but to submit to what you say. Help us by the power of your Spirit to know in our hearts that we are most free when we are most submitted to you. We pray this in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. AMEN.*

## **Introduction**

You could make the argument that reason the United States exists is that we have issues with authority. In 1776, our forefathers decided that we did not need a king or a parliament across the ocean to tell us what to do. So we declared our independence.

Fast-forward two hundred plus years, and it appears that even though we do not have a king, our issues with authority pervade almost every aspect of society in America. We celebrate rebels without a cause, and we are instinctively distrustful of “the man.” We believe that famous dictum of Lord Acton that “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

So as Americans, we are culturally predisposed to flinch at commands like the one we find in today’s passage to “obey” (□πακούω).

Authors Eugene Kennedy and Sara Charles suggest there is a reason for this. In their book *Authority: The Most Misunderstood Idea in America*, they suggest that most

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eph 6:5–9.

Americans do not distinguish between “authority, which is something good, from authoritarianism, which is something bad.”<sup>2</sup>

They go on to say that the word “authority” at its root means to create, enlarge, and author; that we need good authority because good authority generates life that would otherwise disintegrate into entropy. But our gut reaction is not to think about authority in this way, is it?

And, certainly, for many of us when we hear the term “authority” our thoughts immediately shift toward examples of those who have used and abused authority. We think of the domineering parent, the cruel teacher, the abusive boss, and the corrupt politician. But does it mean just because it is so easy to see examples of bad authority that we should distrust all authority?

For Christians, the answer must be “no.” Why? Because in order to be a Christian means that we must acknowledge and submit to the authority of God. God is not just a divine being. He is our rightful Lord. This means that he possesses both the might and the right to speak into our lives, and we are obligated as his people to listen to him and obey him. Moreover, we are obligated to listen to and obey the authority that God sovereignly places over our life.

As Paul begins to work towards the conclusion of his letter to the Ephesians, he has just explained the glory of the Christian gospel and has been talking at length about God’s people should live in light of that gospel.

In this particular passage, he is going to show how God calls Christians to interact with authority in their vocations. Specifically, we are going to look at the roles of what Ephesians 6 calls Christian bondservants and Christian masters. These roles might at first glance seem old, outdated, and even offensive. But as we drill deeper, we will find this passage is extremely relevant to our lives today.

## **Exposition**

### **1.) Defining the terms “bondservants” and “masters.”**

Let’s take a look back at verse 5: “*Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ*” (Ephesians 6:5, ESV).

First things first, you need to know that this verse is one of the most controversial and misunderstood verses in the Bible. There have been atheist groups that will put this verse (or similar verses) on billboards and advertise that the Bible is an outdated book because it condones and supports slavery ([Show Image of Billboard](#)).

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Kennedy and Sara C. Charles. *Authority: The Most Misunderstood Idea in America*. (New York: Free Press, 1997), 1.

I think in a culture that is growing increasingly hostile toward biblical Christianity, the people of God need to be equipped with ways to “make a defense” (1 Pt. 3:15) to those who would challenge the word of God and the credibility of our faith.

So when Paul uses terms like “bondservants” and “masters” in Ephesians 6 what is he talking about? Well, the term “bondservant” in Ephesians 6 comes from the Greek word “δοῦλος.” This term can be translated as “servant” (KJV) or even “slave” (NIV, NASB).

Because of this, sadly, there were Christians in the southern states who sinfully used these verses to justify the institution of chattel slavery in the United States. If you are not familiar with that term chattel slavery, here is a good definition for you from the organization *Fight Slavery Now!*: ***“A chattel slave is an enslaved person who is owned forever and whose children and children's children are automatically enslaved. Chattel slaves are individuals treated as complete property, to be bought and sold.”***<sup>3</sup>

Who could deny that chattel slavery is an utterly evil institution that dishonors people made in the image and likeness of God? But the question arises; does the Bible condone chattel slavery? The answer is emphatically, “no!”

In fact, if you study history, it was Christians like William Wilberforce (1759-1833) who led the charge in bringing down the institution of chattel slavery in the western world. You can see his story in the movie *Amazing Grace*. We cannot impose the category of American chattel slavery in the 1800s onto a letter that the Apostle Paul is writing in the first century A.D.

So in order to understand what Paul is talking about we need to know what a “δοῦλος” (“bondservant”) was in the Roman Empire. One of the clearest definitions I found of this word came from the translators’ preface to the English Standard Version of the Bible:

**In New Testament times, a *doulos* is often best described as a “bondservant”—that is, someone in the Roman Empire officially bound under contract to serve his master for seven years (except for those in Caesar’s household in Rome who were contracted for fourteen years). When the contract expired, the person was freed, given his wage that had been saved by the master, and officially declared a freedman.**<sup>4</sup>

So in Roman society, to be a “δοῦλος” (“bondservant”) was to be someone who had some type of debt and then contracted his or her services to a “master” or “boss” to pay off that debt. Typically this would be a poorer person who was trying to advance in society or a non-citizen of Rome who was trying to work towards establishing his or her citizenship.

By the time that Paul was writing, most people who had a vocation in Roman society were working off some type of debt as bondservants. You had high-class bondservants

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<sup>3</sup> <https://fightslaverynow.org>

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016). Preface.

and low-class bondservants. So you had bondservants who were maids and custodians. But you also had bondservants who were doctors and lawyers and teachers and political officials.<sup>5</sup> Most bondservants had their own homes or apartments, and more than half of all slaves of the Roman Empire had paid their debts and purchased their own freedom by the age of thirty.<sup>6</sup>

So what does this all mean for us, you might ask? It means when Paul uses the term “bondservant” in Ephesians 6, he is talking to anyone who is working under the authority of another so that they can pay off debt and have the means that they need order to live life. In other words, *we can take many of the things Paul is saying about “bondservants” and apply them to anyone who is an employee.*

They sold themselves to slavery for seven or fourteen years. We agree to a mortgage – a term that literally means “death pledge” – for fifteen to thirty years. Bondservants submitted to masters. Employees submit to bosses.

So as we approach this text, we need to get into the headspace where we are seeing this passage as dealing with employee-employer relations and how the gospel motivates and instructs us in these matters.

## **2.) What does it mean to be a Christian bondservant/employee?**

Let’s take a look back at Ephesians 6: *“Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free”* (Ephesians 6:5–8, ESV).

As Paul has been saying throughout this letter, the gospel is not just a beautiful doctrine for us to believe, but rather it is a truth that is to bleed into every aspect of our lives. The gospel is to influence the way Christians practice marriage and families and even our vocations.

After all, for the great majority of people, our jobs are a big part of our lives. Professor Andrew Nabor of Gettysburg College estimates the average American will spend 90,000 hours of their lives working.<sup>7</sup> That ends up equating to roughly one-third of our lives being spent in the service of someone else. The question is: how should believing in the

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<sup>5</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 207.

<sup>6</sup> “A slave could be a custodian, a salesman, or a 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!” R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 206.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.gettysburg.edu/news\\_events/press\\_release\\_detail.dot?id=79db7b34-630c-4f49-ad32-4ab9ea48e72b](http://www.gettysburg.edu/news_events/press_release_detail.dot?id=79db7b34-630c-4f49-ad32-4ab9ea48e72b)

life, death, and resurrection of Jesus influence the way we work?

Well, firstly, there are some sinful approaches to work we need to avoid. The first of which doing our job *“by way of eye-service.”* This is that unique skill of not working hard at your job, but rather the skill of looking like you are working hard at your job. This is the temptation to be lazy: to conserve our energy, our creativity, and focus for ourselves instead of doing our job. There are many people in the world who go from job to job, attempting to do the least amount possible. Perhaps you have worked with or for or over such a person, and you know very well, such a person is not pleasant to work with.

And Paul is saying something more. Such a person does not honor the name of Christ by working this way.

After all the God of the Bible is a God who works. Genesis 1 reveals a Creator God who is glorified by the work of his creation. He creates men and women in his image and likeness to work and steward the good creation that God created (cf. Gen. 1:28-30). Work has been cursed by sin (cf. Gen. 3:17-19), but work itself is not a curse – it is a part of the goodness of God’s creation. Thus, we honor God whenever we honor our vocations.

Secondly, we are not to work *“as people pleasers.”* This would be the exact opposite of the overly lazy approach to work. It is the way of life that looks to our job as the way we find our value, our purpose, and our approval. This can lead to a very toxic relationship with work in which we are not working to honor God, but rather to find honor for ourselves.

Like the ancient farmers who sacrificed their children so that Molech would send rain on their crops, our society is filled with men and women who will sacrifice their marriages, families, and health just to chase the ever elusive feeling of “success.”

Paul is saying do not take a good thing (which in this case is work) and make it into a god thing (which is an idol). Realize and rest in the fact that your ultimate value and validation is in Christ’s work, not yours. Put work in its proper place, and learn the spiritual rhythm of Sabbath rest. In Sabbath, we rest not because our work is finished, but because Jesus’s work is.

Instead, Paul says, Christians are to approach their vocations in a posture of *“fear and trembling,”* which is an expression that means appropriate reverence. We are to work with *“a sincere heart”* and *“obey”* and submit to those who oversee our work.

In practical terms, this means Christians are to pursue a work ethic that contains three virtues: diligence, respect, and integrity.

Firstly, we are to work diligently. This means we work hard. When we have a job or task, we are to be thorough and careful to complete the task. We want to be a people who are known for doing quality work that possesses excellence.

Secondly, we want to be people who work respectfully. This means we respect those in authority over us. We respect customers that we are serving. We choose to work with a good attitude, instead of begrudgingly.

Lastly, we are to work our jobs with integrity and character. This means we don't cut corners. We don't take advantage of people. We keep our word and our promises, and we do not deceive people.

When God's people work this way, it brings honor to God.

And you might be saying, "Well, that all sounds well and good, but you don't know my boss." I have no doubt there are people in this room who have served and are serving under bad bosses. In fact, if you've never had a bad boss who is tempted toward pettiness and insecurity, you are unique. And if you have a good boss, be thankful.

But for those in a tough place, know this. When we render our service with "*a good will as to the Lord and not to man*," we know that God sees us, he approves of us, and he will reward us, even when our bosses do not.<sup>8</sup> The epistle of 1 Peter says something similar: "*Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly*" (1 Peter 2:18–19, ESV).

How do we endure under a bad boss or manager? We rest assured that our ultimate justice is not from this world.

### **3.) What does it mean to be a Christian master/boss?**

In the same way, as we talked about the gospel bleeding into the way Christians work under authority, the gospel should also bleed into the way Christians possess authority in the workplace. So what does it look like for bosses, managers, leaders, and business owners to hold authority in a distinctly Christian way?

Let's look at the last verse from our text: "*Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him*" (Ephesians 6:9, ESV).

It's interesting that the one thing Paul forbids "masters" (κύριοι) from is the constant use of threatening.

I firmly believe this is not just a biblical idea in the workplace; it is also a very effective idea in the workplace. The best leaders lead from a position of influence, not compulsion. Needing to constantly appeal to your hierarchy or title or the ability to fire

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<sup>8</sup> "However unworthy, however ungrateful or cruel, their masters may be, God will accept their services as rendered to himself." John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 331.

someone to exert your will is a sign of weak leadership, not strong leadership. Being petty, demeaning, and prideful about the authority you hold over someone – whether big or small – is a sign of insecurity, not strength.

Christian leaders are to be distinctly different from this mindset (cf. Mt. 20:25-28). We are to lead well, but we are to do so in a way that honors God and shows love for our neighbors. Christians who have authority are to look at their employees not as property, not as utilities, but as people made in the image and likeness of God.

This means that all of the things that applied to bondservants now apply to masters as well. Christian employers are to work with honor, diligence, respect, and integrity.

Now with this said, if you have authority in the workplace, you will have to make unpopular decisions. You will have to make disciplinary decisions. You will have to have hard and uncomfortable conversations. That is all part of the job. But as you do this job, do so in a way that conveys that you are accountable to the God who is Lord and master of all. Recognize there is a higher authority you will answer to for your use of authority: *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil”* (2 Corinthians 5:10, ESV).

## **Conclusion**

Now I’m aware that this text can be pretty controversial and despised by some in our culture.

I had an English professor in college who was actively hostile toward Christianity, and she would try to attack it as often as she could in her lectures. She would say that what the Bible’s teachings on authority were designed to be used for imperialism, colonialism, and every other “ism” that caused evil in the world.

After one particular class, I thought about how utterly ironic the words of my professor were. Far from being an advocate of bad authority and imperialism, Jesus was literally crucified at the hands of bad authorities that represented an empire.

Jesus isn’t just sympathetic toward those who have been used and abused bad people who have power. He has truly experienced suffering that comes from the brokenness of creation. At the cross, he allowed evil and injustice and suffering to consume him to the point of death so that in the victory of the resurrection, we could have a sign of hope that one day a new type of kingdom and authority is coming. One day he will set all things right. One day there will be perfect justice. Every tear will be wiped away. Death will be no more. And the kingdom of God will reign forever.

But until that day comes, we can rest that no matter what we suffer under bad authority in this life, ultimate authority flows through nail-pierced hands. He is trustworthy, and he is in control.

So Redeemer Christian Church, as many of us go into the workplace in the days to come. Let us both submit to and hold authority in a way that honors Christ. In the words of Paul, may we *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (Philippians 2:5–11, ESV)

### **Community Group Discussion Starters**

1. *What are some of the reasons American culture is often distrustful toward authority?*
2. *In its original context, the “bondservants” referred to in Eph. 6:5 were people who were contracted to work off a debt or bond. The relationship of a bondservant to a master has many similarities with a modern employee and his or her relationship with a boss. How can the words of this passage give us insight in approaching our jobs/vocations in a distinctly Christian way?*
3. *Following up on the last question, how might Eph. 6:9 motivate and instruct Christians to conduct themselves when they hold positions of authority over others?*
4. *How did Jesus practice the honoring of authority in his life and death, and how might this influence the way Christians interact with authority today?*



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