

Eph 6:5 Servants, Obey Your Masters

The third type of relationship within the household code is concerned with slaves and masters, again keeping in mind the broader context of these verses—that believers are to walk in wisdom by understanding the will of the Lord and to be filled by the Holy Spirit (5:15–18). It is understood that Paul is speaking to believing servants and believing masters here in order to create an harmonious relationship between slaves and masters. It's important to understand slavery in different times, so that we can understand what Paul is trying to say. The institution of slavery existed long before Greek and Roman times, and even long before the Law, in fact Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers to the Ishmaelites before the Israelites even came to Egypt. Because of this, God had to put limits on slavery for the Hebrews, so that they didn't abuse their servants. For example, in Exodus 21:1–6 **2 "If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall leave as a free man without a payment to you. 3 If he comes alone, he shall leave alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall leave with him. 4 If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall leave alone. 5 But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not leave as a free man,' 6 then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.** Notice that slavery was more like indentured servitude for up to 7 years, and then he would go free. Typically, this might happen if a person was starving or in deep debt, and the only way to pay it off was to work it off through slavery. Also, the only way that it could become permanent is if the servant or slave decided that his life was better as part of his master's household than it would be out on his own, and he made the choice to stay permanently. God is saying that temporary service may be sold to a master, in case that the person was so poor that they couldn't take care of themselves, but it was only until the year of Jubilee, and then they would be set free. This is because All Israelites belonged to God in the first place, to be His servants, and could not be true slaves, but must be treated as brothers who were temporarily in a desperate situation, saying in verse 46 **But in respect to your countrymen, the sons of Israel, you shall not rule with severity over one another.**

This was a time when slaves were taken as part of the spoils of war—instead of killing the enemy population, you might take them as slaves. Which is one of the main incentives a people had to defend their territory—they didn't want to become slaves of the enemy. So, these slaves would come from countries that attacked Israel, since Israel shouldn't have any desire outside the land that God had given them. Also, it was part of the process of adopting a slave into the household, that they would be "brought before God"—in other words taught about God, and his laws and ways. This gave these slaves or servants the opportunity to serve God and follow Him. Ultimately, from a spiritual standpoint, this was an improvement in their lives, since they had the opportunity to have a relationship with God that presumably they wouldn't have had in their home countries.

In ancient Greece, slaves were treated much worse. In Hellenistic writings slaves were thought to have no deliberative faculty to reason, and were considered stupid, unable to live by themselves; thus, the institution of slavery was really beneficial to them—so we see that this kind of thinking, as well as slavery itself has its roots in pagan culture, not in Biblical instruction. God was trying to minimize harm in an already bad situation. There are great difference between the slavery God tolerated in the Old Testament by the Hebrews, and that horrible institution that existed in the United States until the slaves were emancipated by decree of President Abraham Lincoln, and this was in large part due to the work of abolitionists acting out of their belief in God, and their service to Christ to make sure that all men were indeed treated as they were created—equally.

The abolition of slavery is a modern phenomenon. Certainly Paul and the early Christian church did not prioritize the abolition of slavery as an institution. Why did not Paul advocate the abolition of slavery? First, he was more concerned with the big picture, eternity. He taught that suffering in this life was

nothing in comparison with the joy of eternity (Rom 8:18–30). Second, in Rom 13 he advocated obedience to government. To propose the abolition of slavery would defy the government. Because had the early church started with this as their mission, they would have been immediately stomped out by Rome in a much harsher manner than they already were, because about 20-30% of Rome's population were slaves, and they lived in fear of an uprising. Most importantly, Christian priorities have always been on the personal transformation of individuals by rebirth into God's family. Then, these Christians, upon understanding who God is through His Word will influence society to do what is right, not the transformation of society which will then transform individuals. Paul makes the point in 1 Cor 1:20-25 that worldly wisdom is hopeless, so it makes a pretty poor starting point for transformation anyway. **20 Where is the wise person? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than mankind, and the weakness of God is stronger than mankind.** In fact, God seems to choose those, mostly, who are not as noble, and well-esteemed by the world—maybe precisely so that they won't try to do God's work with Worldly methods, or relying on their own strength, instead of leaning on God to do His Work. Furthermore, both slaves and masters are equal brothers in Christ (Gal 3:28 **28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** Christianity does not promise a release from the present circumstances but gives one power to endure those circumstances.

6:5. "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling in singleness of your heart as to Christ, Paul is saying that since we are all bondservants to Christ, it shouldn't feel that foreign to serve others. And, he is saying that we should give service to those over us with goodwill, serving God, even if we don't especially want to serve them. Although they each may function in different roles, both masters and slaves should carry out their responsibilities as to Christ.

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters."--In many traditions of Greco-Roman culture, slaves were not considered worthy to address in a letter. Paul completely ignores, this directly addresses believing slaves here, and in Colossians. Certainly Christian slaves were part of the church at Ephesus and heard the message directly from Paul's letter when it was read in front of the Church. Paul uses the word obey, just like he did for children, which means " 'to do what one says' or 'to carry out someone's orders.' Slaves were to obey "their masters according to the flesh." This just means that he's not exhorting them to obey God here, but to their "earthly masters". That means that slaves couldn't try to wiggle out of it, saying that Paul is just saying obey God.

with fear and trembling--The idea of serving with fear and trembling is similar to what was stated above with respect to God. Remember in Eph 5:21 the command that all believers are to submit to one another in the fear of Christ, which is accomplished in the power of the Holy Spirit (5:18), in reverential fear or respect. And, remember in Eph 5:33 in connection with the wife's reverential respect for her husband's position as head of the home. The idea, is that when wronged, both earthly masters, or employers, or anyone else who is over us, which certainly includes our Heavenly Father are all capable of inflicting punishment for wrongdoing.

in singleness of your heart.-- The word here for singleness of heart means ... straightness, openness, speaking without a hidden meaning, cunningness, or craftiness. Although, it's a different word, the admonition of Paul is to act just like Nathanael, when Jesus complemented him saying in John 1:47 **Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite, in whom there is no deceit"** I means lack of guile, singleness of heart, sincerity." It conveys the idea that slaves should obey wholeheartedly or completely. Not to pretend to labor while actually loitering, giving their undivided

attention and effort to the task in hand. This is true of us too, which kind of prohibits the “doom scrolling”, or side-tracking, or news-watching that we can get caught up in, if we’re not careful! And, in fact, Paul has additional words for those slaves who had masters who were Christians in 1 Tim 6:2 **2 Those who have believers as their masters must not be disrespectful to them because they are brothers or sisters, but must serve them all the more, because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved. Teach and preach these principles.** In other words, service to believing masters was considered service to the Lord, because they were serving one of His Children.

as to Christ.--This phrase as to Christ is a reminder to all of us, and in particular servants or slaves, or employees even, that our ultimate Master that we are going to have to someday give an account to is Jesus Christ, our ultimate Master. In other words, slaves were to obey their earthly masters as they would obey their heavenly master, Christ.