

Christian Homes: God's Will for Employers and Employees

A Bible Study on Ephesians 6:5-9

Study Bible Studies Not stated

Ephesians 6:5-9

Dear Lord, we give you: our mind – that you may think in us; our eyes – to see as you see; our tongues – to speak your words; our hearts – that you may love in us; our hands – to do your work; our feet – to go your way; our whole self – that you may grow in us. Give us, merciful Lord, an open heart and mind to understand your will for us, so that it is you who lives and works in us. Amen.

A Quick Recap

Let me quote a sentence from the last session so that we can continue with our study of "Christian Homes", or "Christ in our homes":

Had we not been arrested by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, by the blood He shed for us on the cross, by His single sacrifice to end all sacrifices, to redeem us, we would have continued as servants of sin and slaves to our body and fleshly desires. Having thus been redeemed, we need to conduct ourselves in society in a manner worthy of the redemption granted to us by His grace.

In chapter 5, verses 21 to 33, Paul discussed God's will for husbands and wives. We looked at this two sessions ago. Last session we looked at chapter 6, verses 1 to 4, which detailed God's will for parents and children. Today we will continue with chapter 6 and discuss verses 5 to 9, which relate to employer and employee relationships.

Before I go on, let me start with a short illustration:

The boss called one of his employees into the office. "Rob," he said, "you've been with the company for a year now. You started off as a dispatch clerk; one week later you were promoted to a sales position, and one month after that you were promoted to district manager. Just four short months later, you were promoted to vice-president of the company. Now it's time for me to retire, and I want you to take over the company. What do you say to that?" "Thanks, Dad," said the employee.

I would like to highlight a few points before we start with the verses.

It is amazing that Paul described the ideal relationship between employers and employees in just five short sentences. We can probably

consider this the first lesson ever written in human resource management, centuries before Henry Ford introduced the concepts of modern management.

A careful study of what Paul wanted to convey here shows that his teaching is very relevant even in today's context, which makes it all the more interesting, and at the same time very important for us to study these verses carefully and apply their teaching to our day-to-day lives.

Slavery, in some form or other, was very much customary in the times when Paul wrote this epistle. The concept of bonded slavery is no longer permitted in our modern society. Our laws clearly prohibit it, though we do still hear of such exploitation of the weaker sections of our society, especially women and children.

The conflict, or the disconnects, we saw in marriage relationships and in the bonds between parents and children are also very much widespread in employer and employee relationships. The element of distrust can be seen in this relationship everywhere, be it in households, small, medium, and large businesses, or even multinational organisations.

As we did in the last sessions, we will stay clear of any controversial topics and simply study these verses in relation to God's will for the parties concerned.

Some Background

When Paul wrote about Christian homes, it was only natural that he also addressed the master-servant relationship, as this relationship was integral within most homes. It is estimated that there were sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire as a whole. One-third of the population of Ephesus was made up of slaves. There would also have been masters, so we can see the relevance of Paul's discussion of the subject.

Most of the people Paul was writing to were either slaves, or ex-slaves, or, as the Bible calls them, freedmen. Most of them, therefore, had at one point or another been in that master-slave relationship. It is important for us to understand what New Testament slavery really was. To understand this passage of scripture, we must clear away some misconceptions that one might harbour about slavery at that time.

Let me read a passage here:

"Generally speaking, there was no social class distinction between slaves and their masters. In fact, slaves regularly were given the same social class as their masters — so if their master was upper-class, his slave was upper-class also. Indeed, we read that slaves often dressed in the same way as their masters did, and if you were walking down the street you would hardly be able to tell the difference between the slave

and the master. Some slaves even sold themselves so that they might obtain Roman citizenship. But we cannot make the mistake of comparing Roman slaves with the slaves that we had, perhaps, hundreds of years ago in the United Kingdom, or indeed with the African American slaves in the United States. We cannot compare the two, because slavery — believe it or not — in the time of Paul was much more civilised."

We must accept the fact that in every single place where the gospel message has penetrated and the Spirit of God has moved, slavery has disappeared and the abuse of slaves has gone — not by a revolution of morals, but rather by spiritual reformation.

In such reformation, the gospel message is revolutionary and reformatory to the entire civilisation. We must grasp this, and this is what encourages us to study these verses of scripture: that in the home, in the marriage relationship, in the child-parent relationship, in the schools, in the workplace, within the church of Jesus Christ, wherever we live, the gospel of Jesus Christ and the message of the word of God turns everything upside down.

Let us refresh our minds by reading verses 5 to 8 of Ephesians chapter 6:

"Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free." (Ephesians 6:5-8, KJV)

Paul used the terms "servants" and "masters". I personally dislike using the term "servants" to describe employees, irrespective of where they are employed. Paul's teaching applies to proprietor-employers as well as to all those who supervise others, such as managers, general managers, and vice-presidents. We call them bosses.

I am not a human resources specialist, but I feel strongly that people hate to be "managed" by others. People need to be empowered to perform their duties efficiently. This empowering should begin with an understanding of God's will for both parties, and, of course, with business-related training that equips employees to function with minimum supervision.

Employers or employees, all of us are servants of one Master, our Lord Jesus Christ. Everything else we do should bear this in mind.

Let us look at the operative terms in verses 5 to 8.

God's Will for Employees (verses 5-8)

Employees should discharge their responsibilities:

- Obediently (verse 5)
- Spiritually (verses 5-6)
- Gladly (verse 7)
- Rewardingly (verse 8)

Obedience

In chapter 5, verse 21, Paul says: "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God." We have looked at wives, who must submit to their husbands. We have looked at children, who must submit to their parents. We are now looking at employees, who must submit to their employers. This theme runs across all relationships.

We have also seen that Paul first addressed wives when he spoke of husbands and wives, and children when he spoke of parents and children; and now he gives honour and respect to employees by addressing them first in the employer and employee relationship.

The term "obedience" refers to continuous, uninterrupted submission to one's earthly master or employer. The only exception concerns any command that would require disobedience to God's word; we read in Acts chapter 4, verse 19:

"But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye." (Acts 4:19, KJV)

No obedience, therefore, can be in violation of, or contradiction to, our obedience to God.

An employer is a master according to the flesh. Paul still says: obey him, "with fear and trembling." This should not be understood as fright, but as respect for the employer's authority. Even if an employer does not deserve such respect in his own right, it should nevertheless be given to him with genuine sincerity, as if one were serving the Lord Christ Himself. Colossians 3:23 reads:

"And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men." (Colossians 3:23, KJV)

Therefore, it is not a servile fear, an abject terror, or shaking in one's boots. It is not "yes sir, yes sir, three bags full, sir" that Paul is describing. It is a dutiful respect; it is honour for a boss, for his position and his authority — a reverent respect that honours the position of the

employer.

Spiritually

The employer cannot order the conscience; he cannot tell you what to believe or what not to believe, and he cannot tell you how to carry out your religious convictions at all. However, obedience as an employee is spiritually possible. Paul says in verse 5, "as unto Christ" — that is the only way one can truly respect one's employer: by being obedient spiritually. Your employment has to be unto Christ. What Paul meant was that even in your work, your most menial task — whatever it may be — if it is good work, it is a job done for Christ.

We also need to understand from Paul's writing that, as far as these principles go, no distinction exists between the secular and the spiritual world. We cannot say, "This is my business world, this is my employment world, and this is my Christian world," because Paul says that our employment has to be unto Christ, irrespective of our calling. We often hear the term "full-time service of the Lord" within Christian circles — we know it is an expression of convenience for those who are evangelists, missionaries, pastors, and so on. According to Paul, all of us are in the full-time service of the Lord, for we are all working as unto Christ. Everything we do should be for our Lord Jesus Christ; it should be to His glory. The lowest task becomes a love song of praise to the Lord Jesus when we do it "as unto the Lord."

We must realise that, in every moment of every day, we can know the presence of God in our lives if our primary focus is on Him. One may ask how this can be done when one has to concentrate on the task at hand. It is a fine balancing act, or an act of dovetailing our earthly duties and responsibilities with our responsibilities, submission, reverence, and obedience to our Lord. Consider this: can anything be done at all unless we have His blessing?

Gladly

Paul goes on in verse 6 to say, "not with eyeservice, as menpleasers." The word "eyeservice" we could perhaps translate as "eye-slaves." How many of us are sincere and diligent enough to discharge our responsibilities totally unsupervised? Most of us watch every move of the boss and relax, or neglect the task at hand, when the boss isn't looking. We forget that there is an all-seeing Master, One who sees everything, all-knowing, all-wise, almighty, and always watching. Can we possibly escape His watchfulness?

Remember those days in school when we were told to do push-ups? The moment the physical education teacher turned around, we would stop and take a breather. I remember in the swimming pool, we had to swim so many lengths. I got halfway, and when the trainer turned his back, I

turned back too, giving the impression I had done the full length! That's what we do, every time we get the opportunity — we are "eye-slaves." When the person of authority isn't looking, we, in a sense, cheat them out of work. It is said that a Christian's standard of performance should not vary according to the geographical location of his manager or supervisor. The Lord has no use for, and no place for, lazy people. Indeed, that is what the parable of the talents tells us. The servant who did nothing and buried his master's talent in his absence was told by the master: "Thou wicked and slothful servant."

The great need of today is that we work unto the Lord, that we serve the Lord in our workplace. It is possible for a housewife to cook a dinner as if the Lord were going to dine with the family that night. Think of that in relation to our work. It is possible for the teacher to educate children, for doctors and nurses to treat patients, for solicitors to help clients, for accountants to audit books, for secretaries to type letters, for shop assistants to serve the public, for builders to build buildings, for dustmen to empty bins — all to the glory and service of the Lord. It is a matter of attitude. The key to the right attitude towards work is to know that we are doing it "as unto the Lord." Do we work with a sincere desire to please the Lord? That makes a day's work a holy sacrament, an act of sacred worship, to go out to our work in the morning and do it diligently and honestly, acknowledging our Lord with every breath. It would bring untold glory to His name.

Story of Three Men:

It's like the three men who were building a church. A passer-by asked the first man, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm chipping stones." He asked the second man, "What are you doing?" and he said, "I'm earning my wages." He asked the third man, "What are you doing?" and he said, "I'm building a great church." Do you see the difference in attitude? We should not feel an obligation to do the work. Our thoughts should carry no sense of "having to do it." Paul says it should be cheerful, willing, done with gladness and pleasantness. Even if the master is harsh and unreasonable, it brings great glory to Christ if we obey even him. There is no room for the attitude of the father whose son asked him, "Daddy, why do all the idiots come out when you're driving?" You know what that means — it is the attitude!

Think of the motivation this offers anyone in the drudgery of life, trying to keep the budget afloat amid the ever-soaring cost of living, if you can do it all to the glory of God. That is hard, but that is the life we are called to live in Christ.

Rewardingly

Obedience is to be given by the employee to the glory of our Lord. The

main incentive is not the reward; the main incentive is to glorify the Lord. The outcome will be that for every good work we do as unto the Lord, He will reward us. He does not reward with status or money, but He rewards us when we do work that is unpleasant, that is not enjoyable, that deep down annoys us in some sense — yet we still bring ourselves to do it as unto the Lord, respectfully, sincerely, honestly, spiritually, and gladly. Do it rewardingly, for He will reward us. He always rewards what is done for Him.

Masters

Now let us look at Paul's thoughts on the employers:

"And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him." (Ephesians 6:9, KJV)

God's Will for the Employers (verse 9)

Employers should:

- Reciprocate
- Deal without threats
- Live under lordship
- Act impartially

We have already seen that Christianity does not change social distinctions; it is not a movement of rebellion, nor some such cult. What it does is change the heart — it changes the heart within society, a change that becomes visible in every sphere, and, in our present context, it changes the responsibility of masters towards their servants.

Reciprocate

How do we guard against violence on the shop floor, or shouting in the office, ulcers in the stomach, and nervous breakdowns on our medical records? The answer is: follow Ephesians. As a Christian, if you are a boss, you do unto your employees as they would do unto you. Look at verse 9: "And, ye masters, do the same things unto them..."

Do as the employees would do to you.

This is mutual. We have seen this mutuality throughout all these relationships. First, the husband and the wife: "wives, obey your husbands in the Lord," but then there is the reciprocal love of the husband, to love and honour his wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord," but then, "parents, provoke not your children to wrath" — there is mutual

responsibility in love. Now we come to this: "employees, obey your bosses in the Lord," "bosses, do the same." It is not one-upmanship; it is not a dictatorship by any one of the parties, but a matter of doing as you would have them do unto you. Treat them as you would wish to be treated as an employer; do not exploit them. How many times have we heard people say, "My boss is supposed to be a Christian, but one would never know it"? That is exactly what Paul is writing against here. If you want respect as a boss, show respect to those who work for you. If you want sincerity, show sincerity and honesty. If you want pleasantness, be pleasant, and look after the welfare of your people. Do unto them — the golden rule — as you would have them do unto you.

The entire concept flows from the words of our Lord: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:39, KJV).

Without Threats

Christian masters rule without threats. Look at verse 9: "forbearing threatening" — that is, to be enduring, and not threatening. In the Roman Empire of those times, a master could kill his slave if he wished, or give his slave a beating. This did not actually happen most of the time, because it was too costly to kill a slave — good slaves were not easy to come by. But the point here is that even if a master could not kill a slave, he might threaten him, or abuse him verbally. Paul is warning us: no bullying behaviour; do not behave like an arrogant overlord.

Let me give you an illustration:

"I see you were last employed by a psychiatrist," said the prospective employer to the applicant. "Why did you leave that job?" he asked.

"Well," she replied, "I just couldn't win. If I was late for work, I was hostile. If I was early, I had an anxiety complex. If I was on time, I was compulsive."

Employers use various ways to bully their employees, simply to prove their superiority, without realising that all are equal in the Lord.

Under Lordship

Christian masters or bosses must always remember that they are not the final authority — that they too have a Master, one in heaven, and they are His slaves and His servants. No matter what the relationship is in the workplace, there is a spiritual equity; they are spiritual equals in the sight of God. The employer and the employed will both answer to God in the end. The servant and the master will both give an account to God on the same level. There is no class difference in the eyes of our Lord — we have seen this throughout His ministry on earth. Now imagine the sanctifying influence this would bring to the workplace.

Imagine the impact upon your employees, or upon your boss, when you see God as your ultimate Boss. If you are a boss, it means you pay them their wages fairly; it means you care for them even in their afflictions and illnesses; you should be concerned about their family's welfare — and this, let me say, is true socialism. True socialism is not the abolishing of distinctions, but the levelling of all men under Christ. Ultimately, this whole passage could be summed up in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the rule by which He lived His earthly life. He said:

"And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all."
(Mark 10:44, KJV)

A good master on earth will be a servant of heaven.

Impartiality

Christian masters will rule impartially. There is equity before God in the judgement, when we will all stand before that great white throne.

Look at verse 9: "neither is there respect of persons with him." This does not mean that God disrespects everyone; it simply means that He shows no preference for anyone — He is impartial. If there is no partiality with God, employers cannot show partiality in the workplace. No favours. Bosses need to treat everyone with parity.

In conclusion, let me say this: employers or employees, there is no option but to deal with each other with respect, appreciation, and without partiality, as unto the Lord. There is no distinction between the secular and the spiritual worlds. Think of the impact it would have if we all lived filled with the Spirit! And when you are filled with the Spirit, you will do all things for the glory of God.

Let me spend a few minutes reading out something interesting I read recently, which drives home the disconnects in this relationship:

1. When you take a long time, you are slow. When your boss takes a long time, he's thorough.
2. When you make a mistake, you are an idiot. When your boss makes a mistake, he's only human.
3. When you do something without being told, you are overstepping your authority. When your boss does the same thing, that's initiative.
4. When you overlook a rule of the code of conduct, you are being rude. When your boss skips a few rules, he's being original.
5. When you please your boss, you are buttering him up. When your boss pleases his boss, he's being co-operative.
6. When you are out of the office, you are wandering around. When your boss is out of the office, he's on business.

7. When you take a day off sick, you are always sick. When your boss takes a day off sick, he must be very ill.
8. When you apply for leave, you must be going for an interview. When your boss applies for leave, it's because he's overworked.