

May 26, 2013

Genesis 39:1-23 / Colossians 3:22-25 / Ephesians 6:5-9  
Mutual Submission as it Applies to Masters (Employers) and Slaves  
(Employees)

It was hard to know exactly how to approach this text. If I simply substituted the words "*employer*" and "*employee*" for the words "*master*" and "*slave*" some would see it as an easy way of avoiding the very controversial and perplexing question of why Paul (or the Bible) never condemns a social institution as evil as slavery.

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Likewise, if all I did was substitute the words "employer" and "employee" as legitimate alternatives, without first addressing how the slavery of the Roman Empire was so vastly different from the typical employer/employee relationship of today, I'd risk the danger of misapplying the text when I do apply it to today.

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And again, I know from past experience, that if I go over this text and don't address the issue of slavery, or why the N.T. does not condemn it / that question will remain in your minds throughout the message, hovering about like a pesty and bothersome fly, distracting you from hearing what I have to say!

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So, this is how I've decided to cover the text:

- 1st)** I will describe slavery as it stood in the 1st century.
- 2nd)** I will explain how it differed from American slavery.
- 3rd)** I will tell you why I believe the Bible did not condemn it.
- Last)** I will tell you how I believe the principles shared here, can be applied to the contemporary employer/employee relationship, which is the closest equivalent we have in our day.

And since we have a lot to cover, let's **FIRST** consider what it was like to be a slave in the 1st century. And as I share these facts, I'm going to ask you to picture yourself living as a slave under the conditions they lived under in the 1st century A.D.

And I want you to do it for two reasons: **1.)** So that the information I share is more real to you. **2.)** So that when Paul gives his advice to slaves and masters, you can understand it with its full impact.

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So, are you ready? It's about 60 A.D. and the population of the Roman Empire now stands at about 60,000,000 people. And of that number, 35% (though some suggest double that or more or at the very least 20,000,000 people) were slaves -- one out of every three people in the Roman Empire. (U.S. = 5% or 600,000 of 12,000,000)

And it wasn't just the Roman Empire. There was no nation on earth (that we know of) that did not practice some type of slavery. In fact, it was so universally accepted by every society, and comprised such a significant part of the economic make-up of every nation, that we have no record of anyone ever questioning its validity.

We DO possess writings from antiquity which advocate more humane, or fairer treatment of slaves, and calling for less abuse. But none have been found which suggest that slavery be completely abolished. It was simply a part of everyday life, and no one questioned that it shouldn't be, because every nation practiced it. And not only did everyone practice it, they couldn't picture how any society or any economy could function or prosper without it.

Yet in the Roman Empire the number of slaves (compared to other countries) was significantly higher. Why? Because the stated goal of Roman society was to get to the point where you were wealthy enough that you never had to do any work or any physical labor.

As rulers of much of the then known world, who had conquered many nations, it was considered, "***beneath the dignity of a Roman citizen to work.***" In fact, at least part of their reason for conquering new nations was to find slaves to do their work for them.

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It was a philosophy entirely contrary to the Bible, where "**work**" is actually assigned to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before they ever fell into sin. God took Adam, says Gen. 2:15, and, "put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it," and then He created Eve to be his, "helper" -- to work alongside him (v. 20).

Which means that biblically speaking, work or physical labor is good for us -- it's good for the soul -- since it was part of what it meant to be living in paradise! Or to put it otherwise, paradise wouldn't be paradise if there was no work for people to do! It's a truth which means that some Christians need to drastically revamp what they think they'll be doing throughout eternity!

According to the Bible it's NOT work that's part of the curse, but hard, futile, exhausting work that sees very little in return for all its efforts! The desire to lay around and do nothing on a constant basis is actually an expression of sinfulness and counter to the image of God in humankind -- the God who worked six days and rested only on the seventh.

Therefore, such a view has no place whatsoever in the life or work ethic of a Christian. If you don't think so (if like the Romans you think that laying around doing nothing all the time would be preferable) then you don't have a biblical worldview or understanding of labor. And not only that, if you think like that (as the Romans did) you've actually embraced the philosophical framework that enables both people and nations to justify slavery. Because **SOMEONE** has to do the work that needs to be done!

And when enough people think that way, slavery is just one small act of legislation away.

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And what else must you do to justify slavery? You first have to convince yourself -- *as the Romans did* -- that slaves were less than human. That's what Aristotle did when he wrote: **"a slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave."** A slave was -- a tool one bought at the market.

So to the Romans and Greeks, a slave was not seen as a person, he or she was seen as a "thing" -- *a tool that talked* -- and having no more rights than a shovel, a cart, or a pickaxe. In fact, if he or she was old and sick, then like a broken or defective tool they could be killed or thrown out. / So says Cato of the slave who is ill or unable to work, he, **"is to be thrown out on the scrap heap to starve."**

The slave, as Barclay points out: **"was no better than a beast who happened to be able to talk."** And their **"masters,"** as Stott points out, **"could treat them virtually as they pleased."**

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The slave had no protection whatsoever from the law. They were totally helpless. If you were a slave, your master could whip you, beat you, rape you, brand you with a hot iron, put you in chains, knock your teeth out, gouge your eyes out, cut your limbs off, feed you to wild beasts, and even crucify you.

And he or she could do any of those things for even the most trivial of offenses -- such as Seneca did when his slaves coughed, hiccupped, or sneezed / Vedius did when his slave broke a wine glass / Juvenal did when his slave stole a hand towel / or one wealthy Roman wife did simply because she happened to be upset -- though her slave had done nothing. Such was the life of 1/3 of the population of the Roman empire.

Then **SECONDLY**, how did it differ from American slavery?

**1st)** Roman slavery had nothing to do with the color of one's skin.

There were white-skinned, blonde-haired, blue-eyed slaves from England, Holland and Germany, brown-haired and tanned slaves from France, Spain and around the Mediterranean, slaves from Egypt, Switzerland, the Middle East, and Asia Minor as well as Africa and other places -- because the slave pool came from **EVERY COUNTRY** the Roman Empire conquered in war.

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**2nd)** Anyone could be a slave. In fact, in many cases were it not for their clothing, you wouldn't have been able to tell the master from the slave! Because some of the poorer Romans actually sold themselves into slavery to some of the richer Romans, because at least then they were guaranteed food to eat and a roof over their head.

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**3rd)** Because Romans considered it below their dignity to do any work or any labor at all, slaves were often well-trained, and highly educated and thus ended up working in some of the most elevated of positions.

They filled the role of doctors, professors, philosophers, cooks, bakers, business agents, merchants, city planners, public school teachers, accountants, managers of rich households, wine tasters, jewelry makers, engineers, valets and tailors.

There was hardly any profession where they were absent, since the goal for the upper class Roman was the avoidance of **ALL** work or labor.

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**Last)** Roman slavery differed from American slavery in the sense that slaves could eventually earn their freedom and become full-fledged Roman citizens. Though, sometimes, master's would offer their slaves the promise of freedom -- *not for selfless, loving or altruistic reasons* -- because it made them work harder and be more cooperative while they

were still enslaved. Masters promised to free slaves if they worked hard for a certain number of years, because it benefitted them -- though they could go back on their promise at any time, if they wanted to.

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Then **THIRD**, given the inhumanity and injustice of slavery, why didn't Paul come right out and condemn the practice of slavery for the evil it is? I believe it was because Paul knew that he could not change such a universal practice overnight.

And not only that, if he did condemn it outright when everyone else without exception viewed it as essential to the economic prosperity of any society (including many slaves who viewed it like a welfare system) it would have caused such a backlash against the faith as to virtually nullify it's influence in the world at that time and make it a target for the fiercest of government opposition.

For as history has proven time and again, people will put up with a lot until it adversely affects their pocketbook -- and then they are out for blood!

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Thus, Paul's plan (as we see in Philemon) was to plant the seeds of gospel truth, which would, over time, lead to its eradication. In Philemon 1:10 Paul does a very radical thing. He tells Philemon that his runaway slave, Onesimus, is **"my son"** and in v. 12, **"my very heart."**

That is, he's not a "thing," he's a human being! And more than just a human being, he's like my own child! He's even like a part of me, says Paul, like a piece of my own heart!

And remember: Paul's saying this about a slave! We read it today and say, *"Yep, that's nice."* But in that day, when most people regarded their slaves as tools that talked, that was unheard of!

And not only that, Paul says in v. 15 that he is sending him back to Philemon, ***"no longer as a slave, but as a dear brother. He is very dear to me,"*** says Paul, ***"but even dearer to you, both as a man, and as a brother in the Lord."***

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So, what has Paul done? He's done the unthinkable in the eyes of the typical Roman. He's elevated a slave to the status of a man rather than a beast! And even moreso, he makes him an equal with his master in the spiritual sense by pointing out to he's also his, ***"brother in the Lord."***

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That was unheard of folks! It was revolutionary for its time! So revolutionary that the Romans saw it as a dangerous way to speak or think! Concepts, which if they took hold on a large scale, would be a threat to their very way of life. And all that, even though he doesn't come out and condemn slavery outright.

He doesn't have too! For he lays down the truth which would eventually -- *as society became more and more Christianized* -- lead to slaves being seen as people, and then equals, and thus lead to their eventual liberation!

We thank people like Wilberforce and Lincoln and the Quakers, but we also owe the Apostle Paul a deep debt of gratitude for planting the seeds of truth that led to their liberation.

In fact, Paul couldn't have been any more clear than he is in Gal. 3:28, where he wrote: ***"There is no longer (that is, because of Jesus) Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus."*** In Christ, all are equals.

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Yet how does Paul bring that equalization about? Not by calling for bloodshed, or an armed revolution, nor immediate change -- which

would have led to the deaths of millions of slaves and a fierce backlash against Christianity. No. Paul's method is to fight injustice and bring about change with Gospel truth and godly persuasion. It's to let truth change more and more hearts until it leads to a culture-wide movement for change -- even though he knows it would take years (many, many years) for that Gospel truth to break down something so culturally ingrained.

In this sense Hoehner is right when he says: ***"Christianity's emphasis has always been on the transformation of individuals who will in turn influence society, not the transformation of society which will then transform individuals (I Cor. 1:18-2:16)... He depicts the slave as a free person in Christ and the free person as a slave of Christ (I Cor. 7:22). Furthermore, both slaves and masters are equal brothers in Christ (Gal. 3:28 / I Tim. 6:2 / Phlm. 1:16)."***

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Then **LAST**, how can the principles Paul shares here, in relation to masters and slaves, be related and applied to the employer / employee of today?

**1st)** Paul says, ***"Slaves obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ."*** That is the Christian ideal. We work for people, and they tell us what we need to do, but in the ultimate sense, when it comes right down to it, we are not to do it ***"as unto them,"*** but, ***"as unto the Lord."***

That is, no matter where you work, or what job you do, or what your boss is like (good, bad or otherwise) -- *be it flipping burgers at McDonald's for minimum wage, or stocking shelves at Giant for a little more, or running a big company, or teaching at a school, or simply doing chores around your house* -- you are to give it your all, and do your best at it, and do it with sincerity of heart.



**NOT** for the person or people you work for, but for Jesus Himself, as if He were the one asking you **TO** do it, and to do it **FOR** Him... because He is!

No matter what we do or who it is that asks us to do it (a good boss or a bad one) Christians should be the best workers, and have the best attitude as they work, for they are called by Jesus Himself to do everything they do, ***"as unto Him."***

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In fact, he goes into further detail, saying: ***"Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, for you know the Lord will reward everyone for the good he does, whether he is slave or free."***

You see, even the worst of work situations (like slavery in the first century) can be transformed into opportunity to serve Christ! All we have to do is simply remember it's not our boss (or bosses) that we should seek to please. Nor should it be our goal to seek to be seen as a good worker simply to try and get a raise (that wasn't even an option for slaves in the 1st century)!

No! We (like they) are to do what we do as if in doing it we are serving Jesus Himself, and doing it wholeheartedly, regardless of what the task might be. And we are to do it, and do it to our best ability, even if those in charge are nowhere to be found. For as one man said, ***"A person's character is most easily discerned by what they do when they KNOW no one is watching."***

Even the biggest scoundrel alive will work hard and appear honest when he knows he's being watched, is trying to impress someone, or get a raise. It's when they're **ALONE** and no one is around to watch them that the real truth about their character comes out.

In fact, that is why a person of faith should be different. Because a person of faith knows that God is always present. He's always there! No matter what we do -- *be it in the daylight or the dark; in the open or behind closed doors* -- an audience of One is always there watching everything we do, even if no earthly authority is anywhere around to be found!

That's why an earnest Christian works the SAME whether being watched or not. Because they know the Lord sees them even if no human being (or surveillance camera) is anywhere around.

And **LAST**, Paul says to masters (Christian masters, or for our sake, employers -- people who have earthly rank or a delegated authority over others) "treat your slaves (or employees) in the same way" -- that is, with dignity, respect, and as equals.

***"Do not threaten them," says Paul, "since you know that He who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with Him."***

On earth, Paul says, people have different positions or rank or status and all that other stuff. But it all means nothing to Christ! In the eyes of God all people stand on equal ground. He shows no favoritism. He cares nothing about titles, earthly position or rank.

For in God's eyes we are all slaves serving Him as Master, regardless of whether we run a company from an office, or clean the toilets in that office. God is the master of all, and has no favorites, so treat others as your equals, since in God's eyes they are!