**The Spirit-filled worker**

Text: Ephesians 6:5-9

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**Scriptures:** Romans 6:15-23; Exodus 21:1-11; Ephesians 6:5-9

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 46, ‘O Great God’, 277, 477, 183

**Series:** Ephesians (#26)

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul writes to Ephesian Christian slaves and masters, calling both groups to serve Christ in their respective roles to render service with good will as to the Lord.

**Proposition:**  Christian employees and employers, you are called, as Spirit-filled workers, who are slaves of Christ, to serve your Lord with whole-hearted willing eagerness.

**Introduction**

What thoughts and images does the word ‘slavery’ conjure up in your mind?’ Perhaps shackled black Africans tightly packed in slave ships, where those who survived the inhumane journey would be sold as household labour or heavy manual workers in plantations to white-skinned Americans; many of whom viewed the imported enslaved Africans as being sub-human. Perhaps the conviction a few weeks ago of the Hastings-based Samoan chief, Joseph Auga Matamata, who was sentenced to 11 years in prison for slavery and people trafficking. (Trafficking involves the recruitment, transfer or obtaining of an individual through coercion, abduction, fraud or force to exploit them). Or perhaps a recent report by a human rights charity which states that one in 150 people are living in "modern slavery" in New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Islands. The report stated that *‘exploitation of workers is fuelled by widespread poverty, migration, and the abuse of cultural practices’*.

More people are enslaved today than at any other time in history. Experts have calculated that roughly 13 million people were captured and sold as slaves between the 15th and 19th centuries; today, an estimated 40 or more million people – more than three times the figure during the transatlantic slave trade – are living in some form of modern slavery (according to the latest figures published by the UN’s International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Walk Free Foundation). Women and girls comprise 71% of all modern slavery victims. Not only is slavery far from uncommon in this ‘modern world’ it is the background to our text today from Ephesians 6:5-9 which begins with the single word of address “slaves”.

Slavery was by no means confined to the region of Ephesus in the first century AD, or just to the social fabric of the Roman Empire. Bonded labour was widespread in Bible times and is frequently mentioned in Scripture...which brings us to our first point:

1. **Slavery in Scripture**

In Ephesians chapter 5:22-33, the Christian life principle of being influenced by the Holy Spirt is applied to marriage. In chapter 6:1-4 this principle is applied to family life and in our text, to the workplace. Paul writes to a group of Christian workers in the region of Ephesus: *“Slaves, obey your earthly masterswith fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ” (Eph 6:5).* This first word (doulos) means to be a slave, to serve, to do service, to be in the position of a slave. It means to act or conduct oneself as someone in total service to another. This Greek word is translated ‘slave’, ‘servant’, or ‘bondservant’ in English translations.

Slavery was a widespread, universally accepted and unquestioned practice in the ancient world. The economies of Egypt, Greece and Rome were heavily reliant on slave labour. In the civil law of ancient empires, slaves had no rights. However, many were treated humanely and worked in better conditions than most free people. Domestic slaves were considered to be part of the family and some were greatly loved by their masters. A person could become a slave as a result of:

* being captured in war (Gen 14:21).
* defaulting on a debt – either their own or their parents (2 Ki 4:1).
* being unable to financially support themselves and deciding to sell themselves into slavery (Lev 25:39-43).
* selling themselves into slavery in order to make restitution for a theft (Ex 22:3).
* Being children born to slave-parents who then became house-born slaves (e.g. Gen 15:3; 17:12-13, 27; Jer 2:14).

Slaves were owned, effectively as property. They could be bought and sold as a tradable commodity (e.g. Gen 17:12-13; Eccl 2:7). King David conscripted the conquered Ammonites to do forced labour (2 Sam 12:31). However, in Bible times, slavery was not racially or ethnically based; slaves were of every tribe, tongue and nation.

‘Manumission’ (the freeing of slaves) was a common practice in Roman times. Masters, in their last wills, often freed their slaves. Hard working slaves could earn and save money and then purchase their own freedom. There were many such ‘freedmen’ in the 1st century AD. (Luke refers to the ‘synagogue of the Freedmen’ in Acts 6:9).

Perhaps one of the most surprising and perplexing facts about slavery in the Bible is that it is not denounced as evil. It’s helpful to note that there are other practices which Scripture does not condone, but which are nevertheless regulated, for example:

* **Divorce** (Deut 24:1-4; Matt 19:2-8) was regulated by Mosaic Law, as Jesus said, ‘*because of your hardness of heart*’ (Matt 19:8), but was never part of God’s design for His very good creation. Divorce is never commended in Scripture.
* **Polygamy** (having more than one husband or wife) was regulated by Old Testament Law (e.g. Deut 17:17,25:15; Lev 18:18) but is never commended in Scripture. The damaging consequences of polygamy in the lives of Abraham, Jacob and David are clearly revealed in Scripture.

**Slavery** is carefully regulated in the Bible (e.g. Ex 21:1-11; Lev 25:39-55; Deut 15:12-18), but is never commended. The abduction or kidnapping of people in order to enslave them was a crime punishable by death in the ancient world. This was the sin of Joseph’s brothers who sold him to slave traders who on sold him to an Egyptian high official (Gen 37:36; 39:1). The Old Testament law prohibited kidnapping and the enslavement of others, both Israelites and Gentiles (Exo 21:16; Deut 24:7). ‘Enslavers’ (kidnappers, slave dealers) are condemned in the New Testament (1 Tim 1:10) as ‘*lawless and disobedient*’.

The kind treatment of slaves is prescribed in Leviticus 25 ‘*you shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God*’ (v43, 46, 53). Hebrew slaves who had been purchased were to be released after six years of service with a parting ‘golden handshake’. ‘*You shall not let him go out empty-handed’* (Deut 15:13).

Whilst the Apostle Paul does not compel slave owner Philemon to set his returned run-away slave Onesimus free, he does write these words to the Christian master of a Christian slave: “*For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother- especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord*” (Phil 15-16). It seems that Paul encouraged Philemon to set his brother in Christ Onesimus free from slavery to his human master.

Notice however, that when the Apostle writes to the Corinthians, he does not exhort Christian slaves to forcibly break free from their masters but rather he says: “*Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ*” (1 Cor 7:20).

To wrestle wisely with the question of why slavery is not clearly condemned in Scripture, the following is required:

* Careful study of the Scriptures.
* A good understanding of the differences between slavery in Israel, as regulated by God’s law and race-based kidnapping, slave trading and modern-day enslavement of vulnerable people groups.
* A recognition that when practiced according to Biblical law in ancient times, slaves received care, protection and provision from their masters, often much more than free men and women did.
* An acknowledgement that our own western welfare state and our civil government’s approach to those who cannot support themselves financially is by no means a perfect system.

Before we move onto the body of our text today, it is important to recognise the significance of the metaphorical or figurative image of slavery in the Bible. Many of the Old Testament ‘heroes of faith’ are called slaves/servants of God, for example Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and the prophets (Exo 32:13; Deut 34:5; 2 Sam 7:5; 2 Kings 21:10).

The ‘servant songs’ in Isaiah portray the lowly human status of the promised Messiah (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12). “*He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief*” (Isa 53:2). Jesus, the Divine Son of God “*made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*” (Phil 2:7). The word translated ‘servant’ here is the same one as in our text; ‘slave’.

Jesus willingly adopted the status of a slave, dramatically demonstrating his humility when He washed the feet of his disciples (John 13:4-16), as a household slave would. Christ taught His disciples to follow his example of servanthood, or we could say ’voluntary slavery’, speaking to us brothers and sisters, with these words: *When you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty*.'" (Luke 17:10). Again, the word ‘servants’ here is literally ‘slaves’.

As we heard earlier from Romans 6:15-23, slavery is the metaphor used to describe the bondage of Christians to righteousness rather than being slaves of sin. “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Rom 6:23). Now let’s look at Spirit-filled slaves at work.

1. **Spirit-filled slaves at work**

We’ve spent a significant amount of time on the first word of our text ‘slaves’, giving some background to the many references to slavery in Scripture, but there is something else which is really incredible about this word in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesian Christians. Can you spot it? It is that slaves should be addressed at all! In the early New Testament church, many of the weak and vulnerable in society responded to the gospel.

The 2nd century Greek philosopher Celsus, who opposed Christianity wrote that the faith was only for “*foolish and low individuals…****slaves****, women, and little children*”. You can see that this statement is **not true** from our text because both slaves and the masters of slaves are addressed. At least some in the congregations in the region of Ephesus were wealthy and influential, also some were slaves.

Just as there was a wide socio-economic range in the church back then, so likewise, today in each local congregation there are also a variety of different workers represented, some with more favourable employment conditions than others, some with higher pay than others, some whose work environment is harmonious and pleasant and others whose employment situation is difficult and troublesome. Our text covers the whole spectrum of workers: from those who are most vulnerable to those with the greatest potential control over others.

Brothers and sisters, we are all included in the application of this text to our workplaces both outside and inside our homes today. Whether we are factory workers, Chief Executive Officers of multi-national companies, keepers at home, elderly couples caring for one another, students at school, Polytech, or University, learning in an apprenticeship, or have our names on a ‘chore chart’ at home. Whatever your occupation brothers and sisters, all our work has value because in that work we are “*servants of Christ, doing the will of God*” (v6). Again the word ‘servants’ is the word ‘slaves’.

Paul writes: *“Slaves, obey your earthly masterswith fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servantsof 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 slave or free”.* The workplace of every believer is radically changed by the revelation of God in Christ. All Christians serve the same Divine Employer, we just have different roles and tasks. All of us workers have value. Our diligent and sincere work is part of the way in which we ‘*do the will of God from the heart*’. Here is glory in the grind of everyday labour. Every type of Biblically permitted work is a high calling from God.

Martin Luther expressed this glorious gospel truth in these words, *"The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays - not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship."* Your work may be tedious, you may not be appreciated by your boss, you may have difficult working conditions, you may not be paid what you think you are worth, or you may not be fairly paid, you may work long tiring days which leave you drained. However, whatever your situation, your labour has great value because you are serving Christ in that work.

The Spirit-filled worker is to labour not merely to satisfy his or her human boss, but to honour Christ. Not just to look like you’re working hard when your supervisor is around. Not to become suddenly busy with housework when your husband comes home, or with your lessons when teacher is looking. Not arguing with the boss, but willingly following instructions, willingly obeying orders as directed. Not lingering and extending smoko breaks, clocking in late, surfing the internet in company time, calling in sick when you’re not. As students, not being satisfied with just scraping through tests and examinations, but working hard for Christ! Learning well for His honour and glory. As keepers at home, no longer thinking of domestic duties as burdensome chores, but as cleaning, cooking, and washing for Christ!

A Christian hotel maid once said, “*I know I’m a Christian because I sweep underneath the rugs now!*” Children and young people, do the dishes at home carefully as though the Lord himself was coming to tea! Martin Luther had this written above the kitchen sink in his home” divine *service conducted here”.* Work becomes worship, when done for the Lord. Our labour is to be approached with godly passion and zeal. Every job is worth doing very well. Because it is for Him. Pursue excellence in all things for Him! Did not Christ, the slave, willingly do everything He was asked to do: “*He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:8).

How did Christ spend the years before his public ministry? Likely, in a carpenter’s workshop in Nazareth with no power tools, just handsaws, planes, manual drills. The 1st century workshop was a place of hard physical manual work. A productive place. The One who called forests into existence, through whom trees were made would have worked carefully and diligently as a valued carpenter. Brothers and sisters, the Lord does not ask us to do anything which He has not already done. We now turn to masters as we move to the last verse of our text.

1. **Spirit-filled masters at work**

Paul writes: *Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Masterand yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him”.* (v9) Wherever you work, your boss or supervisor is not the top boss! If you are self-employed, you are not self-employed: your Master is Christ. The Chief Executive Officer of a corporation is not the CEO! The Prime Minister is not actually the Prime Minister! The human master is always under a higher authority- a Master in heaven. Leaning down from his pulpit in Wittenberg Martin Luther addressed the milk maids in the congregation: “*Be diligent about your labours, because God milks the cows through you*”. Above the milkmaid was the supervisor/farmer/land owner. But above them, God, the owner of the cattle on a 1000 hills (Ps 50:10). All authority which we have is not our own, it comes from God.

This key principle applies in all areas of life:

* A man cannot exercise Biblical authority as a husband if he is not in submission to Christ.
* Parents cannot exercise Biblical authority over their children if they not in submission to Christ.
* Elders cannot exercise Biblical authority in a congregation if they are not in submission to Christ.
* Christian bosses cannot exercise authority over other workers which pleases the Lord unless they also work in their role by ‘*rendering service with good will to the Lord and not to man*’ (v7).

The masters in a workplace are to treat other workers justly and fairly (Col 4:1) without showing favouritism to one another. They are to stop threatening those who serve under them. The Greek word translated ‘threat’ here is applied to Paul himself, when he was a persecutor of Christ before his conversion: “*But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest*” (Acts 9:1).

The opposite of threatening someone is to encourage them, perhaps with the promise of a reward for a job well done, or with kind upbuilding words. Our Lord does not threaten us, but encourages us to follow Him with the promise of an imperishable inheritance in His Kingdom (Eph 1:11,14,18; Col 1:12; 3:24; 1 Pet 1:4). He says “*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*." (Matt 11:28-30).

Christ yielded Himself up in obedience to His Father in Heaven so that we might be given the desire and strength to yield to Him in everything, including our work. So, will you yield to Christ as you work in your own calling? Christ is a just and fair master. He does not ask of us what He has not given us the ability to do in Him. Brothers and sisters we have been renewed in Him, we have been given the Holy Spirit so that under His influence, we can become willing slaves of our Lord who came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28).

Will you be a willing boss or supervisor, rendering service with good will as to the Lord both in your own work and in your treatment of those who work under your authority? Will you be a willing slave of Christ and obey in everything those who are masters on earth, not with external service, as those who *merely* please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Doing your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance?

Brothers and sisters, whatever work we do, it is the Lord Jesus Christ whom you and I serve.