Opening Words

After Paul spoke to slaves and told them how to behave toward their masters, he then spoke to masters and said, "do the same things to them." These six little words are shocking – "do the same things to them!" Today, we will find out why.

192 Eph Does the Bible Condone Slavery? 2 – The Fuse that Paul Lit

Today we continue our message from Ephesians 6:5-9, "Does the Bible condone slavery?" This is an important question for our day. We saw the shocking statistic in our previous message that 27,000,000 people are in slavery today. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation may have helped in the United States, but that doesn't mean it helped in other countries.

We saw how the ancient world was steeped in slavery, how it was a common way of life, how it was taken for granted and how masters had absolute authority over their slaves. Slaves were property. But in the ancient world there was also a slow and steady move in society to ease the servitude of slavery, and in some situations slaves could be freed and did find freedom, but these changes were not on a fast track. Society changes slowly regarding such matters. What the world needed was a revolution of the heart, and Paul accelerated this revolution by his teaching on slaves and masters.

Paul presented three ideas in his passage that reverberate throughout the world. It is these ideas that reshape how people think and believe at their deepest level. It is these ideas that form a biblical worldview and that can become strong enough to topple evils such as slavery in a proper way. You see, you can legislate evil out of society, but unless you transform hearts, the evil will come back with a vengeance.

Let's see what Paul's revolutionary ideas were. Let's read the text again:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; 6 not by way of eye service, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. 7 With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, 8 knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free. 9 And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

First is the idea of equality. After Paul spoke to the slaves and told them how to behave toward their masters, he then spoke to masters and said, "do the same things to them." These six little words are shocking – "do the same things to them!" Paul has just told the servants to serve their earthly masters with reverence, with a good heart, and to do it as if they were serving Christ. Then, he said, "You masters, I want you to live the same way toward your servants! Give up threatening! Don't try to get them to do things by threatening them. Stop that! You must remember that you are a servant too. You have a Master in heaven. Is that the way you want him to treat you? Do you want him to stand over your head with a club or a whip? Of course not. And that is not the way he is! Your Master in heaven is a loving Master who serves his people."

Notice that Paul says in verse 9 – "their Master and yours!" He puts the masters on the same level as the servants and finishes the passage by saying, "there is no partiality with Him. Christ is not going to be partial to you because you are an earthly master and he is an earthly slave. You and your earthly slave stand before God as equals and will be judged as equals according to your behavior."

This was earth shattering. This kind of teaching would cause the sun to stand still and the moon turn to blood and by that, I mean that this is the kind of teaching that would turn a society upside down. If every master started living this way and started treating his slaves this way, it would not be long before the master would see the equality of his brother standing before him as his servant, and he would do what he could to serve his servant. He would become like Jesus, the Lord and Master of all, who put on a slave's apron, filled a bowl with water, and washed the feet of the disciples.

As masters began to obey Paul's teaching, they would learn to invest in their slaves, build them up, and eventually set them free from this plague that had engulfed the ancient world because their slaves were equal in the sight of God.

Here is Paul's second revolutionary concept – justice. The word is not used in the Ephesians text. We must go to the parallel passage in Colossians 4:1 which says, "Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven." The concept of social justice was a familiar one to Paul because he was steeped in the writings of the prophets. The ancient people of Israel thought they could go to the temple with their prayers and sacrifices and then treat one another with injustice and enslave one another. In Zechariah 7 we find the people of God coming to the prophet and asking him a question about fasting, a religious question, and the Lord answered through Zechariah, "Don't think that your fasting was for me! You were fasting for yourself! If you really want to be my people then do this, "Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another."

Paul is drawing from this rich resource of prophetic tradition of God's people living with justice with one another and applying it to his churches where he told the people who had wealth and power to live with justice toward those who did not have wealth and power, namely, the slaves. As the people would learn about and think on this prophetic tradition of social justice, it would transform their hearts and change their attitude toward their slaves and eventually toward the whole institution of slavery.

Third, Paul presents the concept of brotherhood. The slaves were brothers in Christ. We see this most clearly in Paul's letter to Philemon. Philemon's runaway slave ran into Paul and was converted, and Paul sent the slave back to his master! That was revolutionary for if a runaway slave was caught he would be flogged, branded, or even executed! Paul told Onesimus, the runaway slave, to return to his master! But he returned with a personal letter from Paul, and Paul told Philemon to receive him back, not merely as a slave but as a brother!

Brothers and sisters, these kinds of concepts were lit fuses attached to bombs that would explode the unjust structures of society and replace them with the justice of the kingdom of God. Or, to put it another way, as Jesus taught, they were like seeds sown in hearts that would grow into great plants. They were like yeast put within dough that would permeate the entire batch of dough. They were small beginnings that would yield great results. Paul's teaching of equality, justice, and brotherhood would not only change hearts but also would change society.

I return to my original question – does the Bible condone slavery? Not by a mile! The Bible, written in a time in which slavery was worldwide, entrenched in everyday life, and accepted by all presented ideas that would set in motion different ideas that would eventually topple wrong ideas.

We bring this to a close by seeing what Paul said to servants.

1. 5 – Be obedient to your masters with a sense of great respect toward them and do this with sincerity of heart and do it as if you were standing in front of Jesus Christ and obeying him.
2. 6 – Don't give your service just so that your master will see you and be pleased with you. Don't do it to impress him as a man-pleaser. But consider yourself Christ's slave and serve him from your heart doing God's will from your heart.
3. 7 – Give your service with good will. Don't have a hateful, grudging attitude. Become a person of good will towards others. And again, do this as if the Lord himself were receiving your service.
4. 8 – All that you do is noticed by Christ and he will reward you for everything.

Can you imagine the impact this would have upon the masters as they saw their servants acting this way? This is what Paul has been talking about all throughout this passage beginning in Ephesians 5:21. Paul talked about being filled with the Spirit of Christ and then he said one of the marks of the Spirit is a submissive, obedient, humble, spirit of good will towards all. And he showed how this spirit could be worked out with husbands and wives, how it could be worked out with parents and children, and now how it could be worked out with masters and slaves.

You and I have an opportunity to live this way. In our families with our spouses and children, we can demonstrate these kinds of attitudes. We can take the admonition to masters and slaves in 6:5-9 and apply them to the workplace. Are you an employer? Grant justice and fairness to your workers. Don't try to get things done by yelling at them. You may be the employer but that doesn't make you better. Your master and theirs is in heaven, there is no partiality with him, and he will judge you by the way you treat your employees.

Are you an employee? Take these admonitions from Paul and put them into practice in the workplace. Be obedient to your employer. When he says to be there at 8 for a meeting – be there. Do what he asks you. Do it from the sincerity of your heart. Don't do it as a man-pleaser, hoping your supervisor will see you. Don't do it for show. Do it because it is the right thing to do whether he sees you or not. Remember, God sees you and God will reward you for your labor. Do all your work as if Jesus Christ were your immediate supervisor. Do it for his glory and remember that he is your employer and he gives the best wages.

These concepts are revolutionary. I have used that word a lot in this message, and I have gladly used it because our message of salvation is the power of God to turn a man upside down, to turn a family upside down, to turn a community upside down, and even to turn the world upside down.