



Ephesians 6:5-9

# WALK IN WISDOM IN YOUR WORK

*Society arrangements, like laws made by sinners, acknowledge these distinctions of classes. But we are called to accountability before the law of the common Lord and Master of all. We are called to do good to all alike and to dispense the same fair rights to all. God's law does not recognize these social distinctions. If anyone should ask where slavery comes from and why it has stolen into human life—for I know that many are keen to ask such things and desire to learn—I shall tell you. It is avarice that brought about slavery. It is acquisitiveness, which is insatiable. This is not the original human condition. Remember that Noah had no slave, nor Abel nor Seth nor those after them. This horrid thing was begotten by sin. ...We have insulted nature by this system. —John Chrysostom (AD 347-407)*

In NT times, servants were often part of a household and so Paul takes time to address servants and masters who would both be present in the early church setting (cf. Col. 3:22-4:1).

When the issue of slavery comes up in the Bible, it evokes strong images and reactions in our minds today. It is essential that we understand the nature of slavery in OT and NT times.

## OBSERVATIONS ON OLD TESTAMENT SLAVERY

1. “Servant” in the OT usually refers to a debt-servant—one who sold himself into slavery in order to pay off a debt (Lev. 25:39).
2. The slave trade was absolutely forbidden in Israel (Ex. 21:16). Escaped slaves, presumably from other nations, were to be protected and not returned to their masters (Deut. 23:15-16).
3. A servant was to be treated well, enjoying a weekly sabbath (Ex. 20:8-11). If a servant was mistreated and experienced bodily harm, they were to be released (Ex. 21:26-27). If a servant died due to mistreatment, their death was to be avenged (Ex. 21:20).
4. The maximum number of years a servant could serve a master was \_\_\_\_ years, unless the servant voluntarily decided to stay (Deut. 15:12-18). Every 50<sup>th</sup> year, all debts were to be erased and all of society would experience a full “reset” (Lev. 25:8-55).
5. All of Israel’s ethics, in the treatment of servants and foreigners, were governed by the fact that they were once slaves in Egypt and so should love their neighbors as themselves (cf. Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 5:15; 10:19; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18,22).

*It was necessary for Paul to offer instructions for slaves. They were present everywhere in the church which contains all classes and strata of human society, both men and women, parents and children, slaves and masters, rich and poor, governors and the governed. —Theodoret (393-457)*

*If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. —Abraham Lincoln*

*Slavery is the foulest blot that ever stained a nation. ...It would be far better that north and south should be rent asunder, and the states of the union shivered into a thousand fragments, than that slavery should be permitted to continue.*

—Charles Spurgeon (1834-92)

Exodus 21:21 is a troubling OT verse on slavery. It seems to imply that a master could beat a slave within an inch of his life. However, the context indicates that any physical harm to a slave resulted in their freedom (21:26-27). Thus, an injured slave is not to be avenged but to be set free, resulting in the capital loss to the master (“for he is his money”).

## OBSERVATIONS ON NEW TESTAMENT SLAVERY

1. Slaves in the Roman Empire were debt-slaves, captives of war, or born into the slave class. Estimates are that 30-40% of the Roman Empire were slaves. They served in a variety of occupations, from working in the fields to serving as teachers, artisans, and doctors.
2. Slaves could purchase their freedom or, in certain circumstances, be given freedom by their masters, but many chose to remain as slaves, or even go into slavery, for a better, more secure life.
3. The NT condemns slave-traders (1 Tim. 1:10; cf. Rev. 18:13).
4. Jesus entered our world as a servant (Matt. 20:26-28; Phil. 2:7). All believers are called out of slavery to sin into a servant relationship with Christ (Rom. 1:1; 6:15-23; James 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1).
5. The NT erases all social distinctions at the foot of the cross (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:13). Slaves and masters were part of the same body and brothers and sisters in Christ (cf. Philemon).

Note the incredible statement in Ephesians 6:9: Earthly masters are called to “do the same things to them.” In the context of mutual submission (5:21), this command seems to call masters to the same kind of respectful, sincere, devoted service as commanded of slaves. Both masters and slaves are “slaves of Christ” and there is no superiority or special favor given by God to one above the other.

## PRINCIPLES FOR OUR WORK TODAY

- We were \_\_\_\_\_ to work. We were made in God’s image with specific gifts, with a specific purpose, to accomplish specific tasks (Gen. 1:26; 2:15; cf. Eph. 2:10).
- We are to work with...
  - \_\_\_\_\_ for those in authority over us.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ in our character.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ at all times.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ in all that we do.
- We are to work as an act of \_\_\_\_\_, doing everything for God’s glory, knowing that God will reward us for our faithfulness (cf. Matt. 25:21; 1 Cor. 4:1-5; 10:31; Col. 3:23).

*“If I shall be set free, it is all happiness. I care for no man, I speak to all as an equal and I go where I choose.” ...Then he is set free and having no place where he can eat, he looks for some man to flatter, someone with whom he shall sup. Then he either works with his body and endures the most dreadful things or he falls into a slavery much worse than his former slavery.*

—Epictetus (AD 50-135)

*The NT argues against slavery by cutting the legs out from under it. Jesus inhabited the slave role. Paul calls himself a slave of Christ, loves a runaway slave as his very heart, and insists that slave and free are equal in Christ. With no room for superiority, exploitation, or coercion, but rather brotherhood and shared identity, the NT created a tectonic tension that would ultimately erupt in the abolition of slavery.* —Rebecca McLaughlin

**Sincerity.** Greek, *haplotes*, “simplicity, honesty, integrity.”

*The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone.* —Martin Luther

*Wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, to wherever he may apply his hand, ...he is in whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of God (coram deo), he is employed in the service of God, he has strictly to obey his God and above all, he has to aim at the glory of God.*

—Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)