

Practicing Supreme Loyalty to Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 6:1–9; Mark 10:13–16; Col. 3:21; 1 Pet. 2:18–25; 2 Cor. 5:10; Col. 3:24, 25.*

Memory Text: “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him” (*Ephesians 6:9, NIV*).

In 2018, an artifact at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, attracted much attention. It was an abridged Bible designed to teach essentials of faith while deleting any passage inciting rebellion by slaves. Published in 1808, the text does not just remove a passage here or there. Ninety percent of the Old Testament is missing, and 50 percent of the New. Of the 1,189 chapters in the Bible, only 232 remain.

Passages seeming to reinforce the evils of slavery, especially in the absence of so much of the Bible's narrative of “good news,” are left fully intact, including such oft-misused texts as “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” (*Eph. 6:5*).

Today, in our time and culture, our important challenge is to read *Ephesians 6:1–9* in the context of the full story of salvation, as is revealed in the complete Bible. What can we learn as we watch Paul apply the values of the gospel to the flawed social structures of his day?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 9.

Advice to Children

What advice does Paul give to children, and how does he support that counsel from the Old Testament? *Eph. 6:1–3*. (See also *Matt. 18:1–5, 10*; *Mark 10:13–16*.)

To appreciate fully Paul’s counsel to children, we must imagine it being read out in the house churches of the thriving metropolis of Ephesus. The word “children” (Greek, *ta tekna*) could refer to a wide range of ages, since children remained under the father’s authority until the father was 60 (in the Greek tradition) or until his death (in the Roman one). These children, though, are young enough to be under parental training (*Eph. 6:4*) but old enough themselves to be disciples in their own right.

We hear Paul appealing to children, who were worshiping in Christian congregations, to obey and honor their parents “in the Lord,” that is, in Christ (*compare Eph. 5:22; Eph. 6:4, 5, 7–9*). We are invited here to respect children as themselves being disciples of Christ and to include them as active participants in worship. This makes the passage a foundational one for parenting and for ministry to children.

Paul’s command to obey is not absolute. When the commands of parents “contradict the requirements of Christ, then, painful though it may be, they [children] must obey God and trust the consequences with Him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 293.

Paul completes his exhortation to children by quoting the fifth commandment, bearing witness to the high value he places on the Ten Commandments as a source of guidance for Christian believers (an obvious feature of *Eph. 4:1–6:9*; especially *Eph. 4:25, 28; Eph. 5:3–14*). He begins the quotation (“‘Honor your father and mother,’” *Eph. 6:2, NKJV*), breaks into it with an editorial comment (“which is the first commandment with promise,” *Eph. 6:2, NKJV*), and then completes the citation (“‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth,’” *Eph. 6:3, NKJV*). The fifth commandment bears witness that honoring parents is part of God’s design for human beings to thrive. Respect for parents, imperfect though they may be, will help foster health and well-being.

How do these verses reinforce how important family relationships are?

Advice to Parents

Compare Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21. What motivation does Colossians 3:21 provide for avoiding irritating one's children?

Sirach, a Jewish document available in Paul's day, advises fathers about the treatment of their sons: "He who loves his son will whip him often. . . . Pamper a child, and he will terrorize you; play with him, and he will grieve you. . . . Discipline your son and make his yoke heavy, so that you may not be offended by his shamelessness" (*Sirach 30:1, 9, 13, NRSV*).

Paul's counsel bears a very different tone. He first addresses a negative command to fathers: "Do not provoke your children to anger," followed by a positive one, "Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (*Eph. 6:4, ESV*). In Paul's day, fathers had complete legal power over their children, who were regarded as his property. Fathers had the right to inflict violent punishment, even death, on their children. Indeed, in some respects a father's power over his children exceeded a master's authority over his slaves. Paul is not endorsing such power but is boldly clarifying and reshaping family relationships. In the context of a supreme loyalty to Christ, Paul invites Christian fathers to rethink their use of power since children who are provoked to anger will not be well positioned to accept "the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (*Eph. 6:4, ESV*).

"Fathers and mothers, in the home you are to represent God's disposition. You are to require obedience, not with a storm of words, but in a kind, loving manner. . . .

"Be pleasant in the home. Restrain every word that would arouse unholy temper. 'Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath,' is a divine injunction. . . .

"No license is given in God's Word for parental severity or oppression or for filial disobedience. The law of God, in the home life and in the government of nations, flows from a heart of infinite love."—Ellen G. White, *Child Guidance*, p. 259.

Though the context of the lesson here deals with parents and children, what principles can be taken from these texts that should impact how we should deal with all other people?

Slavery in Paul's Day

Read through the counsel to slaves and slave masters in the following passages: *Eph. 6:5–9*; *Col. 3:22–4:1*; *1 Cor. 7:20–24*; *1 Tim. 6:1, 2*; *1 Pet. 2:18–25*. How would you summarize this advice?

It is startling to hear Paul address Christian slave masters and to imagine Christian slaves and their Christian slave master seated together in the house churches of Ephesus. Slavery in the Greco-Roman world could differ from the later version in the New World in significant ways. It was not focused on a single ethnic group. Urban, household slaves were sometimes offered opportunities for education and could work as architects, physicians, and philosophers. Freedom sometimes occurred for these household slaves after a limited period of service, though most slaves never gained their freedom. In an attempt to acknowledge such differences, a number of recent Bible versions translate the Greek term *doulos* (“slave”) in Ephesians 6:5–8 as “bondservant.”

Regardless, slavery at any time, in any culture, in any circumstances, is an inexcusable evil, and God will judge, and condemn, slaveholders according to His infinite justice—and for that we can be thankful.

The cry of ex-slave Publilius Syrus is haunting: “It is beautiful to die instead of being degraded as a slave.” Given the full range of these realities, the translation of *doulos* as “slave” is to be preferred (*NIV, NRSV*), especially since these slaves are living under the threat of their masters (*Eph. 6:9*).

Slavery was an ever-present evil in Paul’s world. He addresses it, not as a social reformer but as a pastor who advises believers how to deal with current realities and to cast a new vision centered on the transformation of the individual believer, which later could have wider implications for society at large: “His vision was not for *manumission of slaves in the Roman Empire*. Rather his view was about something other than *legal manumission, that is, a new creation sibling-based fellowship on the basis of adoption as children of God*. . . . For Paul the social revolution was to occur in the church, in the body of Christ, at the local level, and in the Christian house church and household.” —Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), pp. 10, 11.

One of the great stains on Christian history is how some used these biblical passages about slavery to justify this evil. What frightening message should we take away about how carefully we need to handle the Word of God?

Slaves of Christ

What does Paul require of Christian slaves in his detailed instructions to them? *Eph. 6:5–8*.

Paul asks Christian slaves to obey their masters, offering heartfelt, excellent service. What is notable is his repeated reference to a grand substitution that he asks them to make. They are not to place their slave master in the place of Christ, offering to him the allegiance that belongs only to Christ. Rather, in the commitments and allegiance that motivate their heartfelt, excellent service, they are to substitute Christ, the Lord, for the slave master. In encouraging this essential substitution, Paul is offering a transformed, Christian understanding of the master-slave relationship.

Notice the several ways Paul presses this substitution upon them:

- * Their slave masters are diminished by Paul as their “*earthly masters*,” pointing toward the real and heavenly Master (*Eph. 6:5, ESV; emphasis added*).
- * They are to serve “with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, *as you would Christ*” (*Eph. 6:5, ESV; emphasis added*).
- * Paul notes this substitution most clearly in arguing that Christian slaves are to offer genuine service as slaves, not of their masters, but as “*slaves of Christ*” (*Eph. 6:6, NIV*).
- * In performing their service, they are to do “the will of God from the heart,” offering heartfelt service directed to God (*Eph. 6:6, NIV*).
- * Paul invites positively motivated service, offered “as to the Lord and not to man” (*Eph. 6:7, ESV*).

For their heartfelt service, Christian slaves may expect full reward from Christ when He returns. They have done their work for Him and may expect reward from Him, an especially attractive idea for those trapped in this horrific institution. A slave might feel unappreciated or worse by an earthly master (*compare 1 Pet. 2:19, 20*). The believing slave, though, has a Master who is attentive, noticing “whatever good thing each one does” (*Eph. 6:8, NASB*), and offering sure reward.

However much we might wish that Scripture had openly condemned this horrible practice, it doesn’t. Nevertheless, what principles can we draw from Paul’s words in this context about how we relate to people we work with in our own context?

Masters Who Are Slaves

In Paul's final words to slaves, "whether he is a slave or free" (*Eph. 6:8, NKJV*), the word "free" refers to slave masters, allowing Paul to transition to his counsel to them while imagining slaves and slave masters standing on an equal footing before Christ in the judgment (*compare 2 Cor. 5:10; Col. 3:24, 25*).

Assuming that you are a Christian slave master who is listening to Ephesians being read out in your house church, how might you react to this counsel, offered in the presence of your slaves? *Eph. 6:9*.

Paul addresses masters, slave masters, in a pointed exhortation, which turns on the sharp contrast between "the lords" (Greek, *hoi kurioi*, translated as "masters"), who had a habit of "threatening" their slaves, and "the Lord" (*ho kurios*), Christ, with whom there is "no partiality" (*ESV*).

Paul asks masters to "do the same to them" (*ESV*), the slaves, which would have been shocking to a first-century slave owner. Masters should respond to their slaves with deeds of goodwill governed by their allegiance to Christ, corresponding to what Paul has just asked of slaves (*Eph. 6:5–8*). He tells them to stop threatening their slaves, a common practice of a time in which masters administered a wide variety of punishments, including beating (*1 Pet. 2:20*), sexual abuse, being sold (and parted from loved ones), extreme labor, starvation, shackles, branding, and even death. For this, they will be judged—by God.

Paul supports his commands with two motivations that call slave masters to look beyond the social structures of the Greco-Roman world: (1) they and their presumed slaves are co-slaves of a single Master ("knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven," *ESV; compare Col. 4:1*); and (2) the heavenly Master judges all without partiality. Since their own Master treats those regarded as slaves on an equal footing with others, so should they (*compare Philem. 15, 16*).

Much of Paul's language in Ephesians would be especially heartening for Christian slaves: adoption as sons (*Eph. 1:5*); redemption (*Eph. 1:7*); inheritance (*Eph. 1:11, 14; Eph. 3:6*); being enthroned with Jesus (*Eph. 2:6*); becoming "fellow citizens," "members of the household of God" (*Eph. 2:19, ESV; compare Eph. 3:14, 15*), and integral parts of the body of Christ (*see Eph. 3:6, Eph. 4:1–16*). Ephesians 6:5–9 activates all the teaching in the letter as operative in the relationships between slaves and slave masters, including the counsel about speech (*Eph. 4:25–32*) and sexual ethics (*Eph. 5:1–14*).

Further Thought: Paul’s respect for children as fellow believers (*Eph. 6:1–3*) heightens our concern for the ways in which children are treated in our world today. His word to fathers (*Eph. 6:4*) invites us to consider parental responsibilities. Applying Paul’s counsel to slaves (*Eph. 6:5–8*), and, especially, his counsel to slave masters (*Eph. 6:9*), is more challenging, since the social setting is distant for many of us and because we know that slavery, *in any form*, is one of the greatest of moral evils. Still, since these words are inspired ones that are part of Scripture, we should ponder how to apply them today. With the believers in Ephesus in the first century, we have the privilege and responsibility of applying the values of the gospel to our relationships. The discussion questions below are designed to foster that important work.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What does it mean for Adventists that love for children is identified as evidence of “a people prepared for the Lord”? *Luke 1:17* (quoting *Mal. 4:6*).
- ❷ Paul’s obvious respect for children suggests a searching question: What is our responsibility to extend the care of Christ to children who have experienced violence, sexual abuse, and shame in their early lives? In view of research on the profound impact of adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs; see <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/>), what is our responsibility toward them?
- ❸ As an extension of Paul’s respect for children and Jesus’ care for them, what responsibilities does the church have to nurture and protect the children in its care? What systems and procedures need to be in place to do so?
- ❹ Paul’s counsel to slaves and slave masters, *Ephesians 6:5–9*, is often applied to the relationships between employees and employers. In what ways might this be appropriate? What dangers present themselves in doing so?
- ❺ Slavery remains a painful reality in our world, with more than 40 million people enslaved (according to “The Global Slavery Index,” <http://www.globallslaveryindex.org/>). As free people whose spiritual forebears were firmly committed to the abolition of slavery, what are our responsibilities to these enslaved sons and daughters of God as we sing of Christ, “Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother, and in his name all oppression shall cease” (lyrics to “O Holy Night,” public domain)?

A Book and a Ride

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Alexei Arushanian, a 33-year-old Ukrainian living in Poland, was running late. He had just finished his work, installing windows, and had to stop at the gas station as he raced to meet his wife for an evening shopping trip.

At the gas pump, Alexei noticed a young man trying to start his scooter. He kept trying to start the scooter but to no avail. A large, insulated bag on the back of his scooter showed that he was making a food delivery. Alexei didn't speak good Polish, but he didn't want to pass up an opportunity to help. He thought about the young man as he filled up the tank and paid for the gas. Back in the car, he opened the window and called out, "What's wrong?"

The young man was Polish. He said, "The scooter doesn't want to start."

Alexei belonged to a group of church members who distribute Ellen White's *The Great Controversy*. It is a difficult task with few receptive people, and he saw an opportunity. He handed the young man a book.

"I have a gift for you," he said. "It's a Christian book that contains the history of Christianity from the first Christians who defended the truth after Christ returned to heaven to the events that will occur at the end of the world. I think that you will find it interesting."

The young man accepted the book and thanked him. Alexei returned to his car. And sat. And thought. *I can't leave. I haven't done my duty as a Christian*, he thought. *I gave him a book, but I didn't fill his need*. Opening the car door, he said, "I can take you to your delivery place."

"Really?" the young man asked with surprise.

"Really," Alexei said. "I understand how you feel. I'll take you."

The young man grabbed the bag of food, and Alexei drove him about 2 miles (3 km) to the address. "Will you wait for me?" the young man asked.

"Of course. I brought you."

On the way back to the gas station, the young man marveled at Alexei's kindness. "In Poland, very few Christians stop and offer help, but you are a Ukrainian Christian and offered help," he said. He introduced himself as Kamil. Alexei spoke about the love of God, and Kamil listened intently. As they arrived at the gas station, a coworker from Kamil's workplace pulled

up to fix the scooter.

Alexei left. Kamil had help, and he could leave.

Alexei was late to his appointment to meet his wife—but it was worth it. He had been delayed by a divine appointment.



This quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will go to the Trans-European Division, which includes Poland. Thank you for planning a generous offering.