

## **“Slaves and Masters: Re-Writing the Code”**

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Twelfth in a series on Ephesians

Ephesians 5.18b, 21; 6.5-9

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Be filled with the Spirit like this . . .  
be subject to each other, out of reverence for the Messiah . . .

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect, with a sincere loyalty, just as you obey the Messiah. Obey not only while being watched, to please them, but as slaves of the Messiah, doing the will of God wholeheartedly. Give service with a good will, as if you were serving the Master himself and not human beings. Be certain that whatever good you do, this you will receive back from the Master, whether you are a slave or free.

Masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them. Know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and that there is no favoritism with him.

Ephesians 5.18b, 21; 6.5-9

*“Slaves, obey your masters?!?”* Slave owners waved this, saying *“Look! God blesses slavery.”* Critics of Christianity wave this, saying *“Look! Their God blesses slavery.”* One supported slavery. The other condemns it. Both agree on what this passage means.

I wonder, however, if they’ve got it wrong.

This morning, I have two questions. What did Paul’s teaching here – his whole teaching, not a fragment ripped out of context – what difference would it have made to real slaves and masters he was writing to? What can it say to use, who belong to Jesus today?

## II

Paul talked about slaves and masters with real people in mind. A few weeks ago, we met Zosas and Nostimos.<sup>1</sup> We know them from their grave marker.<sup>2</sup> Theirs was a typical farming household. So they would have owned slaves.

Let’s imagine one, named Persis.<sup>3</sup> She might have been born into slavery, or abandoned at birth (as girls often were), or sold by her father to pay a debt. Maybe she was captured

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<sup>1</sup> See my March 16, 2014 sermon, “Walking in Marriage.”

<sup>2</sup> [www.flickr.com/photos/7945858@N08/8237294603/in/photolist-dxUhGK-dxZLX3-dxUioP-dxUhtZ-dxZLwY-dxZLjS](http://www.flickr.com/photos/7945858@N08/8237294603/in/photolist-dxUhGK-dxZLX3-dxUioP-dxUhtZ-dxZLwY-dxZLjS).

<sup>3</sup> Persis is one of the women Paul names in Romans 16. It was a name often use for female slaves, and I’ve borrowed that name for this fictitious woman in Zosas’ household. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 741.

in war. Her slavery might have been a punishment for some crime.<sup>4</sup> Her slave status could be temporary. Zosas could give her freedom. Or, she could save up to buy her own liberty.<sup>5</sup>

Slavery was not based on race.

Still, slavery was terribly dehumanizing. Persis was “an animal with a voice,”<sup>6</sup> a tool that happened to be alive.<sup>7</sup> She was under the absolute control of the family-father, and his wife too.<sup>8</sup> She might be valued and loved. Or, abused and humiliated.<sup>9</sup> They could beat Persis, whip her, have her imprisoned, tortured,<sup>10</sup> and executed. They could abandon her, if she got sick or grew old.<sup>11</sup> She was sexually available to her owner, or anyone he lent her to. Persis was at the bottom of the ladder.<sup>12</sup>

Maybe Zosas and Nostimos were kind. Still, Persis was always vulnerable, always exploited, and always subhuman.

Also, necessary (everyone thought). Slaves were the energy source of their civilization. Most families owned slaves. Slaves powered farms and homes. They fueled mining, shipping, construction. They were doctors, teachers, civil servants. Slaves were the fossil fuels of the ancient world. Our economy rests on oil energy. We don't like that, but changing is hard, right? Slaves powered the ancient economy. Imagining it otherwise was hard.<sup>13</sup>

### III

So what can be the good news of Jesus, for Persis?

A computer virus. (Stick with me for a moment!)

A computer program is millions of lines of instructions. They tell the computer what to do.

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<sup>4</sup> Lynn H. Cohick, Women in the World of the Earliest Christians (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2009), 259.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 263.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 260.

<sup>7</sup> So said Aristotle. John R. W. Stott, The Message of Ephesians (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 251.

<sup>8</sup> My rendering of the Latin phrase, *pater familias*.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Wright, Paul for Everyone: The Prison Epistles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 70.

<sup>10</sup> A slave's legal testimony was only considered reliable after they had been tortured. Cohick, 260.

<sup>11</sup> Cohick, 260 and Stott, 251.

<sup>12</sup> Cohick, 257.

<sup>13</sup> Stott writes, “The institution of slavery was a fact of Mediterranean economic life so completely accepted as a part of the labour structure of the time that one cannot correctly speak of the slave ‘problem’ in antiquity.” (250).

These instructions are the code.

Some hacker writes a virus. He sneaks it into your computer, maybe through an email. Small, unnoticed, it infiltrates the program. It rewrites the code that tells the computer what to do. This can break down the whole system.

Folks back then knew nothing about viruses.<sup>14</sup> They did know about yeast. Jesus said God's Kingdom is like yeast. A tiny amount can change the whole dough. The Kingdom starts like a tiny mustard seed. It grows into a giant plant.<sup>15</sup> The good news of Jesus is like a computer virus. It spreads, rewrites the code, messes up the whole system. For good!

#### IV

The slavery system was strong and entrenched. What Paul does is sneak in a virus. It starts messing with how the system works.

Suppose Persis hears this, as someone read Paul's letter aloud in worship. He speaks to this slave, standing at the back of the room, first!<sup>16</sup> "*Slaves, obey your earthly masters.*" Nothing shocking there! Besides, if she stopped obeying, she will in real danger. But Paul starts rewriting the reason why she obeys. No longer is it because of fear or coercion. Now she works for Jesus.<sup>17</sup> She is no longer about pleasing her earthly masters, Zosas and Nostimos. Her work now has dignity, because her true Lord Jesus dignifies her.<sup>18</sup>

Now, there has got to be more. The Master's heart needs changing. So Paul turns to Zosas and Nostimos, who are sitting up front. "*Do the same to your slaves.*" He's just told Persis how to serve. Now he tells them to do the same. That's wild!

It's part of a bigger picture. The Spirit of God fills all of us who are in the Jesus-community.

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<sup>14</sup> Computer viruses, or biological viruses which were not discovered until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 13.31-33. Jesus uses the image of yeast causing the whole loaf to rise, to give a positive message. The metaphor was commonly used to describe something negative, how a small problem and infect the whole community. See, for example, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 5.6-8 and Galatians 5.7-9.

<sup>16</sup> Paul addresses slaves "first and directly . . . [this] reflects the social reality in the church in which they are seen and treated as moral agents in their own right." Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians* (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2002), 272.

<sup>17</sup> "In each of the four verses addressed to slaves Jesus Christ is mentioned. . . . The Christ-centredness of this instruction is very striking. The slave's perspective has changed. His horizons have broadened. He has been liberated from the slavery of 'men-pleasing' into the freedom of serving Christ." Stott, 252.

<sup>18</sup> "Christian slaves are not to serve for appearance's sake, or to be motivated by the need to please their human masters. Such would be the greatest temptation for those whose welfare, even survival, depended on the good will of their masters. Their servitude is rather to be one marked by wholehearted service to Christ." Yoder Neufeld, 273.

The Holy Spirit shapes us into servants. No matter what our station. No matter how the world defines significance and status. We serve each other. Slaves, obey your masters. Masters, do the same for your slaves. This is neighbour stuff. Love your neighbour, as if they were you. Zosas and Nostimos, Persis your slave is your neighbour. Paul is inviting her to come and sit up front with them.

*“Stop threatening,”* Paul orders them. Take away even the possibility of violence.

*“You both have one Master,”* he says. Before Jesus, you are both the same.

If the Spirit works this within Zosas and Nostimos, are they ever going to be the same toward Persis again?<sup>19</sup>

The slavery structure remains in place. Not good! But how long can it last, as the virus of this good news spreads? If we take what Paul says here seriously, can slavery have any future among Christians? Tragically, it did. Too many continued the heresy of dehumanization. They did not submit to Jesus, their Master.

Take it seriously, however, and the thinking that holds up slavery, collapses. Slavery shrivels. It dies.<sup>20</sup> If we are equal under Jesus, if we are sisters and brothers in the Messiah . . . how could I own you? How could I diminish you? Or anyone?<sup>21</sup>

## V

Now, this has no relevance for us. We are not slaves nor masters. Thanks God! Our workplaces treat everyone with dignity and respect. No one is dehumanized. Our work is never drudgery. We never overwork. Right? Uh, no.

I learned this next stuff from a sermon by Timothy Keller.<sup>22</sup> Since he is not here, you're stuck with me!

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<sup>19</sup> “The fact that masters are to begin imitating their faithful slaves immediately suggests that at least in the church, slaves should not have to wait for judgement day for the good they do to be rewarded.” Yoder Neufeld, 274.

<sup>20</sup> F. F. Bruce says this brings *“us into an atmosphere in which the institution [of slavery] could only wilt and die.”* He is commenting specifically on Philemon. *Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). Tom Yoder Neufeld makes a similar point when he writes that Paul’s teachings are “profoundly destabilizing to relationships of structural inequality.” Yoder Neufeld, 274.

<sup>21</sup> Stott, 258f.

<sup>22</sup> “Our Work and Our Character” preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church (New York) on October 17, 2010. <http://sermons2.redeemer.com/sermons/our-work-and-our-character>

Paul says to workers, *“Give service with a good will, as if you were serving the Master himself and not human beings.”* Then he says to bosses, *“You do the same.”*

Paul puts both on the same level. He knows we are all under Jesus. In Jesus, there is no favouritism. As followers of Jesus, we are to treat the school cleaner with the same honour that we treat the director, our trash collector with the same dignity we give our doctor, the person who flips a burger with the same esteem as the CEO.

We serve the Messiah. What if we do our work — whether we get paid for it or not — with Jesus as our boss?

Sometimes, we are tempted to work as little as we can get away with. Just putting in time. When the boss isn't watching, we slack. However, what if Jesus is our supervisor?

Sometimes, we are tempted to work too much. We overwork to please our bosses, to be noticed, to move up the ladder. We let our “earthly masters” define us and drive us. However, if our true accountability is to Jesus, does our work pattern change?

Who are you working for?

You are a student. What if you studied, not for marks or your parents, but for your true Master?

You work. If Jesus is your true Master, how does that change . . .

- . . . how you care for children?
- . . . how you design and build things?
- . . . how you deliver services?
- . . . how you are with clients and customers?
- . . . how you are with competitors?
- . . . how you manage funds?
- . . . how you supervise employees?
- . . . how you are toward your earthly boss?

Who are you working for? Who are serving?

Your true Master served you. He is your only Master who will die for you. No other boss will. He did.

Thanks be to God.