

For Example: Boss | Luke Knight

Ephesians 6:5-9 | August 7, 2022

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. 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.

My first job was in a small grocery store stocking shelves and packing bags with the same precision the experts at NASA arrange the contents of a space shuttle. With a green smock and black dress pants, I felt accomplished, even big. The only problem was that the boss was much bigger. You avoided him, if you were smart, but now and then you'd get stuck in an aisle with all his dominance and imposing tattoos. He was seven feet tall and seemed to enjoy using his massive frame to intimidate scattering herds of grocery boys. He scowled at us, mostly, grinning malevolently on occasion to signal that he relished our dread. You didn't expect help from the boss, much less a "good job". You only hoped to keep your head down, blend into your surroundings, and survive another day on the lower end of the food chain. In my final throws of boyhood that first job was a foretaste of a world run by the big on the backs of the small.

Our world has a tightly controlled pecking order. Great social and economic structures direct who has what and what goes where, from wealth and opportunity to medicine and water. So far as we can tell it's always been this way. The Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Aztecs. Even pre-history hints at power trends emerging among the first humans. For the vast majority of our history, most humans understood exactly their place on the food chain, doing their best to manage what little control they have, grocery boys included.

By the time Paul wrote to the Christians in and around Ephesus, the pecking order of the ancient near east was meticulously fine-tuned. Though it ranged from culture to culture, there was effectively a great caste system in place almost everywhere. You were where you were because you were meant to be there. There might be a little upward or downward social mobility, but for most people where you were born in society was where you stayed. Those very few at the top of the food chain did okay, and the rest kept the great system going, many literally working themselves to death. The ancient world kept moving under the ancient system of slavery. And it wasn't just one group or another tied up in this, as most everyone was involved to some degree across civilizations, though some were more nefarious than others. If you want a closer look at the Greco-Roman world Jesus and Paul grew up in, consider reading Mary Beard's award-winning *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, and you'll find that the Lycus valley in AD60 in modern day Turkey, was very different from the Fraser Valley, AD 2022. And I can't technically recommend Robert Eggers' recent Viking epic *The Northman* to you, as it's far too violent, but that's another historical snapshot of what northern Europe looked like prior to Christian influence. We glamourize gladiators and Vikings today, but the terrible brutality of their worlds is beyond many of us to imagine.

In Paul's day the ancients wouldn't have thought of slavery as a *detached* system. It was the unquestioned underpinning of social construction, everything entirely reliant on the social and economic pyramids in place. One historian notes that imagining the ancient world *without* slavery would be like trying to imagine our world today without the combustion engine. Yet sitting at a vast

historical distance, some have criticized Paul and other biblical writers for not teaching against slavery overtly. But this makes the all too familiar mistake of reading present day assumptions into history, ancient or otherwise. Ancient writers were not detached from history, but lived and wrote within it, just as we live and write within our time. Which is one reason we should be careful about judging our ancestors too harshly. Hindsight, especially distant hindsight, is always 20/20. If we're quick to condemn our ancestors, the gap can be closed swiftly by asking who made *ourt*-shirts, and how. Oppression is alive and well today, we've simply outsourced it at a distance, the slave quarters now in another country, rather than across the courtyard. A lot has changed, of course, but in many ways the world still does turn on exploitation.

So Paul may not have abolished slavery with one fell swoop of the quill, but he certainly got the ball rolling, a ball which was at a standstill until the first Christians started pushing. As Kirsten noted a few weeks ago, Paul address three relationship dynamics in Ephesians: wives and husbands, slaves and masters, children and parents. She pointed out that even in his structure, Paul upends expectations, addressing and prioritizing the group with less power *first* when the custom would have been the opposite. As Kirsten mentioned about Paul's words to women, slaves might have been *even more* surprised to be addressed in the letter at all. When Paul does write about slave and master relationships, he says something even more subversive than a suggestion to abolish slavery altogether (which, to stress again, would have been nonsensical to his first listeners). So he doesn't throw out the system, because a system isn't the only problem when violence, injustice or wrongdoing is at play. One system will always replace another, and every system is to varying degrees inhumane. Besides, humans make systems, so if real change is going to come it needs to come via human renewal not just system overhaul. Paul's instruction is far more infectious: Christians should operate *differently* within the various systems in which they find themselves, over which they have very little control. In short, Paul doesn't fiddle with the plumbing, he tampers with the water supply.

First, look carefully at our reading and see that to the Christian slave Paul gives honour by taking their lives seriously. His instruction is to serve with respect and sincerity. *You slaves, he writes, aren't working for your masters, really. You're humans working in the world in which God has set you, and all your efforts are as worship to your creator. Do your work as worship, remembering who really owns you and the care with which your creator handles you. Your "heavenly master" sees your honest work, all the elbow grease, which will count for something when it feels as though it all means nothing.* Imagine hearing that as a slave in the Lycus valley, and then someone carrying this letter fleshing it out in practical terms for your little house church community. Imagine someone saying to you: *you're not worth less than your master; all your work means something to God; your life is not for nothing; your children's lives are not for nothing.* Did someone have to go get the stable boy because the letter carrier insisted everyone hear? Was the recently trafficked laundry girl confused that she was invited to listen to a very special letter with words just for her? And again, as with wives and husbands, notice how much more instruction is shared with slaves than masters. They get more screen time, more attention than masters, a not so subtle note to all listening that the water supply was changing. God was just as interested in the categorical "non-people" of the ancient world as he was the head of a household or governor of a region. In these first Jesus community, and really for the first time ever in recorded western history, the laundry girl mattered.

Second, look carefully at what Paul says to the masters and owners, something equally astonishing: "and masters, treat your slaves in the same way..." What way? With respect and sincerity. Why? *Because you masters aren't really a little higher on the food chain after all; both your slave and you have the same master in heaven. And this heavenly master doesn't play favourites.* Again, imagine being master and slave in the same room for the reading of this letter. I wonder if there were any awkward stolen glances as everyone listening could feel the social economies shift in the very house in which they sat. It seems this issue of favoritism was taken seriously across the first Christian communities as we find similar, even more specific instruction in places like the book of James. James writes that if someone turns up to a Christian gathering in a designer clothes, and a

servant in tow, don't give them a better seat in the house than the one who turns up in rags, followed only by a bad smell. God doesn't play favourites, so don't play those kinds of games with one another either.

In a few words Paul levels the entire playing field under the implications of Jesus and his gospel, with letters like Ephesians changing the very course of history. It's nearly impossible to sum up the ripple effects. The gospel ate away at the systems it was deposited into, life by life, community by community, century by century, till it eventually spurred on the various abolitionist movements of the last two centuries. You could even argue that Paul's words are behind every good HR policy today, every mental health campaign in the workplace; not to mention weekends, vacation days, reasonable working conditions - it all pays homage to the practical conclusions Paul draws from Jesus and his good news for all people everywhere. Paul was pointing to one simple reality. All these silly pecking orders are really just a way to organize things, and they often turn insidious. There is one God who has made everyone equal, who has dignified every human being who bears his image, so remember that in every interaction, from custodian to CEO. Everyone's on equal footing in God's eyes, so don't be so silly as to pretend you're better than one another. The world was being reconciled and reordered under Jesus' life, death and resurrection - the shifts were, and still are, tectonic.

Equal footing. Of course not always equitable footing. Today we're talking more than ever about the gaps between our philosophies of equality and the reality of inequity. So there is still a massive amount of change the gospel can and should bring to our world today. That's where we come in as Christian workers, bosses or leaders. Paul's words are still subversive, but it still takes folks like Kevin, general manager of McDonald's in Walnut Grove, to continue Jesus' great legacy of reconciliation and unity, one Happy Meal at a time. It takes those of us in privileged places to remember not everyone's had the same societal advantages, as a matter of history. *In short, it takes us loving our neighbour as we love ourselves.* Nearly all of us are a kind of boss in some way. By that I mean we have a level of influence over someone around us. It might be as a volunteer at a day camp, or in the home, or in the workplace, even with a friend. *We all hold sway* in some way or another *over one another.* The question for the Christian is, what to do with that sway? How will we wield the power we grip?

The book of Daniel in the Old Testament tells the story of a powerful Babylonian king who gets so high on himself that he uses the Israelite temple instruments, cups, for his drinking games. It's a kind of spit in God's face, as if to say, he's the king of the castle and the Israelite God holds no sway in his court. But during the massive feast a ghostly hand appears, writing on the wall, spelling out the king's doom. It's where we get the phrase "the writing is on the wall". Soon after the king is dethroned and killed by the invading Persian empire. The whole episode is about getting drunk on your own power, crossing boundaries you think you can cross, but then immediately discovering you're in much deeper water than you thought. It's not difficult to see the major themes at play in the story, how those in authority can be easily fooled into believing they're somehow the centre of the universe. The higher you rise in office, the harder it is to remember that you're not the king of the castle, especially if you get isolated with an inner circle of your own design and no one feels they can speak truth to power. So there is a very obvious warning here for anyone in a position of power to remember that even if we don't feel answerable to *anyone*, we all are answerable to the same *someone*. Thankfully, if you're in a position of influence, there's an growing dialogue today around a "literacy of power" (R. Williams). But that literacy needs to increase if we're to get healthier as family units, as churches, as any kind of community. Do I have a good "literacy of power" as husband, as a father, as an employer, as patron at a restaurant? Am I aware of my own influence, and am I aware I'm responsible for the use of that influence when it comes to how I treat the insurance agent over the phone, or the spouse I've pledged to love, or the child I've been given to raise? I am *answerable*, especially when no one is looking.

This is Paul's point to the masters, the bosses, he writes to, and to us today. Not only are we to consider one another with dignity, sincerity and respect, but we should be mindful that we are all *answerable* to a figure beyond us. Not a point-tallying God, watching and waiting for us to step out of line in order to dock us pay. Rather a God who has set an example through Jesus for us now to follow. A life to live up to, a walk to come into step with through breath of the Holy Spirit.

An old joke goes that a wife asked her husband, "what's worse, ignorance or arrogance?" to which the husband replied, "I don't know, and I don't care." As I said earlier, each of us could make a case for being a kind of leader or boss. We all hold a kind of sway over someone else, in a formal or informal setting. What is our literacy of power? If we don't understand the power dynamics we're tied up with we're doomed to stunt our own growth and damage those around us. The easiest way of identifying someone who doesn't have a good literacy of power is to see how carelessly they throw their weight around. They either don't know (a kind of ignorance) or they don't care (arrogance). So we start with knowing, and that moves us into caring. Knowing, or giving attention to God's authority, which we are all under. Being students, then, of our own authority, which we exorcize over one another in various ways. And as Paul has built his case in Ephesians, for the Christian that "knowing" all starts with the profound experience of Jesus and his example. Jesus' literacy of power and use of power informs and shapes our own.

There's a very popular phrase today compelling us "do the work" to understand the inequitable world in which we live. But we'll never be able to do *enough work to solve it all*, isolating this system or that on the way to a utopia built of our own sweat and learning. We need to do our part, of course, but we need in the end as Christians, the example of Jesus and the fullness of the Spirit to shape us rightly. The Spirit will always do more and better work in me than I can do for myself. With that comes less of an anxious scrutinizing ourselves out of all existence. It's more like paying attention to the often-contrasting character of Jesus, and coming into step with him. See how Jesus treats the little children, the sick, the despised rich person, the person of different ethnicity. See how Jesus treats his friends, washing their feet as the ultimate picture of what God is like. God's not so big for his britches that he won't stoop to scrub between the toes. That's the inspiring cosmic and intimate example we have *in Christ*. And that is how things slowly change around us, life by life, a steady maturing into his likeness, one happy meal or grocery bag at a time.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What have been your shaping experiences of hierarchal relationships?
2. Share a time you've seen power misused, or a time you've seen power handled well?
3. What is challenging about handling power well?
4. What does discipleship to Jesus tell us about power and how does that discipleship help us handle power well?
5. What is one way you can seek to better understand your power, or handle your power this week?