

One in Society

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[0 : 00] Good to see you this morning. I was saying to the first group who were in earlier, some of you may be visitors. I feel a bit like a visitor.

I myself and a few others are helping start a new church on the south of the city. So we don't get here in the morning very often. So it's nice to be here in the morning.

We do welcome you and we pray that God will bless his word to us. Now, as was read, we're going to spend a bit of time this morning looking at really the penultimate section or chunk of Ephesians. So you turn back to that passage, please. Ephesians chapter 6, we're going to be focusing from verse 5 to 9. Now, we've been studying Ephesians for a while.

And what we've always maintained while we've been looking through this letter is that there is a core to what Paul is trying to say that has to do with the huge work of God throughout all time.

[1 : 02] And because of his purposes, that radically changes the world and radically changes us if we are in Christ. And the core of that message is found.

And I'm going to go back into chapter 1 just for a minute, just to look at that. In that chapter 1, I'm going to read from verse 7. We read these words. In him, that's in Christ Jesus, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of his will according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ.

And then we read these words in verse 10. As a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

So there we read of this wonderful work of salvation that is God's work that results in all his people being brought together under the Lordship of Jesus.

The unity of his people, the complete oneness of his people, where there is no longer any human-made hierarchy or division.

[2 : 24] We are one in Christ Jesus with all of the blessings and the privileges that that affords, with all of the knowledge of being those who are known by God and brought into his family.

What a great work of God that is. So when we come to our passage for today, if you like, we have a subject that means that things really get real.

This is really where, if you like, the rubber hits the road in terms of how this has worked out. The second half of Ephesians is really where Paul outworks all of these great gospel theological truths that we can read about in the first half.

So if you've been here for the last couple of weeks, we've been thinking about things like marriage. How does this great gospel work out or be evidenced in and amongst the marriage relationship? How is this worked out amongst parents and children? But then we take this great idea, this great truth of the gospel and the unity amongst all believers and we come to the issue of slavery, as it's rendered in the ESV of these bond servants.

[3 : 43] How will this possibly be worked out in this society where the institution where this is possible is still so much a part of society?

Paul wrote into a context where, I read a writer who he wrote about an estimation that was made that within the empire there were up to 6 million people in this state of being bond servants or slaves.

So in other words, what that means is it was deeply ingrained as part of how society worked. It was just a part of life. Many people, even within the church, would have had slaves, servants, or been slaves or servants.

So this is a fundamental aspect of what the culture looked like. What was it like for these people? Well, we know something of what their life was like because it's been so well documented because

of the horror of what so many people experienced.

So we can read about it, we can watch films about it. These people, these bond servants or slaves, had effectively no legal standing.

[5 : 04] In many ways they could be seen as nobodies. Now imagine how that feels. By God's grace, we know that this institution, for the most part, is eradicated in our culture.

And we give thanks for that. Can you imagine what it would feel like to be nothing? That was the experience of these people. So they had no real legal standing.

And in fact, and we'll come back to this, the very fact that they're mentioned and addressed in this letter is remarkable. It's significant. They, along with masters, are addressed as Paul writes to the church family.

Now also for these people, they would be kept in line, if you like, by any means. So those who were masters didn't always treat their slaves as if they were nothing or as if they were a piece of dirt, but they could and they often did.

And a discipline could be enforced brutally. So Seneca was a Roman writer and he was a philosopher and various other things, but he wrote these words about the conditions of slaves.

[6 : 18] Now picture this. This is about what it was like for them at the dinner table. So imagine the scene, the slaves are there waiting on any order that could be given, any command that they would have to fulfill.

And here's what Seneca writes about their condition. The slightest murmur is repressed by the rod. Even a chance, sound, a cough, a sneeze, or a hiccup is visited with the lash.

There is a grievous penalty for the slightest breach of silence. All night long they must stand about, hungry and dumb.

So we've heard of this. This is the awful condition that these people face. Now this is the awful condition that some throughout the world and maybe even in our own country still face.

But we know that by and large in our society this condition, this institution has been abolished. And we give thanks for that. So how do we relate to this passage?

[7 : 28] How do we learn from this passage? I think there's an important thing to say just in establishing something as we begin to enter into this passage. And that is that we must consider not just the institution of something like slavery, which in many ways is the outworking of what is a deeper heart-sin problem.

We have to go there. We have to recognise what is that problem. And we have to then say, is there any trace of that problem in my heart?

Here's what I mean just a little bit more. What is it that is it the root of the sin of slavery, or the way that a slave master will treat a slave?

Well, there are many things obviously. But fundamentally it has to do with the belief that they are over and better than a slave. That they have the right to treat that person not as a human, but as any way they feel like.

Now that may exist at an institutional level of it, as I've said, but it may also exist in a moment in time between two human beings. One human being treats another as if they were nothing.

[8 : 49] One human being treats another as if they mattered nothing. As if they weren't made in the image of God. As if they weren't anything to them. It is the belief or the desire that their wish, whatever they want in that moment, should be fulfilled at any cost.

That they are all that matters. And that the other matters nothing. It's about power and the abuse of power. And what we have to be able to do is recognize that this was addressed in a specific context.

And then say, so the root of that problem doesn't just exist in a moment of time, doesn't just exist in one or other culture. It exists across the board as a potential which can come to fruition in any human at any time.

How does this sin of power, the misuse of power, or the desire to usurp power in a wrong way affect any one of us? So just to say that at the outset and to address the issue of the heart, the Bible always requires us to do this.

The Gospel always addresses the deeper issues that exist within our own hearts. How does the Gospel change things then? And we'll start to look at that as we enter into this passage.

[10 : 14] Just to say first of all though, I think in many cases in society we hear about and we know horror, the inhumanity of man to another man. But there is also often, I think, a desire for better.

Isn't that true?

You know, often if we read history or if we read novels, plays, nowadays and we see films, we hear about a human expression for creating a better society where people are treated as equals.

So you know, on the one hand in humanity we have the real darkness of sin and its effect, but often I think there's a yearning in different cultures for better, that we treat each other better.

For a way of creating a fairer society where these divisions, hostilities and oppressions don't exist. When I was at university I read a novel called *The Blithedale Romance*, so this was written by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

And it was kind of based out of his own experience. He went to a place called Brook Farm. It was essentially an attempt to create a kind of utopian society, a very rural American society, where they wanted to have these principles of fairness, of goodness, of honesty, of integrity.

[11:35] But it failed. It didn't last. It doesn't exist today. You may think of a song. So John Lennon sang a song many years ago now called *Imagine*. What was it about?

It was about the desire to have across the board a better, more fair society. But I don't think we have that society yet. I don't think his song has come to fruition.

People still quote that song as an ideal, not as a reality. It's some kind of ideal anyway. And a couple of further examples to go back again to Seneca. Seneca's very interesting.

I quoted from him briefly just to describe the conditions that slaves faced. But he actually, in himself, in his own writings, desired and campaigned for better conditions for slaves.

He says this. He suggests the masters should associate with your slave on kindly or even on affable terms. He says, let him talk with you, plan with you and live with you.

[12:48] And finally, again, going back to something that we have at the root of our culture, which is the universal declaration of human rights, which establishes the fact that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, which is good when we uphold this document. But then it goes on to say this.

All humans are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood or sisterhood.

Now all of this is to the good except what's the problem with this? The problem with this, if you like, is to go back to that wording in the declaration. Humans should act towards one another in this way. And the problem is, of course, is that so very often we can't. So slavery still exists, even at times in our country.

You may have seen the story this week of migrant workers being kept as slaves almost in a Highland hotel. You know, we think, well, how is this possible?

[14:00] Now, obviously, that's an extreme and a terrible example. But isn't it the case that so very often you may have experienced the feeling that somebody has dealt with you not with dignity, not with the sense that they hold you as equals.

And then we have to ask the question in seek the honesty of our hearts. Have you ever treated anybody else as if they had no dignity? And again, in that moment, have you ever spoken to anybody as if they were nothing, as if you thought yourself above them, as if in somehow you had maybe because of the position of power you hold or because of a sense of innate superiority, you are over that person.

The desire for greater equality and for better life falls down because it relies on humans to make that progress. But we're sinful and we can't do it.

Here's how the gospel changes things. Here's how Jesus has changed things. Paul says in another of his letters in Galatians, he says these words, famous words, you maybe have heard these before.

In Galatians chapter 3, Paul says this, there is now. Now, this is a result of all that Jesus, all that God has done and has purposed in his plan of salvation. He says there is now neither slave nor free. And he goes on, you are Gentile and gives a few other examples.

[15:33] And there's the difference. You see what Paul says? There is now no slave or free. Because Jesus has purchased for his people freedom.

He has purchased forgiveness. He has purchased the right for slave or free or whoever in Christ to be one, to be his child, to be his brother, sister, to be his son or daughter.

So that it's not possible for people any longer to think that they are over the other or to oppress the other. If they are in Christ, it's anomalous. It doesn't make sense.

In the gospel is this new state, this new condition where men and women, boys and girls as believers are united in Christ.

This goes back again to the verse I read in chapter 1, the grand purpose of all that God is seeking to do in uniting a people under the Lordship of Jesus. For himself. This is the gospel. You know that's the gospel means good news. This is good news.

[16:51] This is the dramatic societal change that we can't effect. We can't work out. And so what we do with a verse like that, then when we move into our passage here, is we start to see how Paul, applying that truth of what has happened in the gospel, how does that look as Paul says to these people that he's writing to in Ephesus?

Well, what is that truth? How is it evident among you? How should it be evident among you? And what does it look like in practice? And that's something that we're going to go on and see just now. Now what I want to do is just look at two things because what the passage does is it splits this into speaking directly, first of all, to those who are in subordination, the slaves, and then it speaks to those who are their masters.

And what we have to do while we're thinking about the subjects, again, in applying it more deeply and more broadly, is think not just about the positions here, don't just think about master slave, but think more broadly about the whole issue of power structures.

Isn't that so often the problem amongst human beings? Either the abusive power or somebody trying to cement power and cling onto it for dear life because of what it means to them, what they think it gives them, or the craving for power and position.

[18:12] So really underneath again what we're talking about here is power and subordination. What does it look like to have power and how should you live?

Because again Paul isn't trying to change the administration of society, he's dealing with the underlying heart problem. What does it look like to have power? What does it look like also because this is a balanced passage to be those who are under the authority of others?

So first of all he speaks to slaves. Now what we have to recognise here is the change that has come about and what will change things for the slaves is that they're now no longer just under the master ship or the rule of their earthly masters, they're under the rule of Christ.

Jesus is now their master, Jesus is now their Lord. And this is what Paul brings out in this passage, he says, you know, things are different now. And this affects both of course doesn't it?

The master-slave relationship is no longer the ultimate. Slaves no longer just look up to their masters. Masters can't say that they are the ultimate because Jesus is Lord.

[19:34] Now just to take a step back for a minute, you may think at this stage or you may know somebody who will think at this stage. Well I immediately have a problem with this because you're still talking about master-servant relationships.

Immediately you may think well this doesn't go far enough in order for a true equality, we need to abolish power structures. Just get rid of them. Paul isn't going far enough here.

Why is he talking about the Lordship of Jesus? I don't want anybody to be Lord over me. The potential for oppression is always there. But you see what we need to recognize first of all and what we know from other passages and Ephesians is this.

Jesus as Lord is a good Lord. See that's the fundamental thing that we need to be able to understand. Who is this one who is now our Lord? Who is the one who because of the Gospel is our Master?

Who is the one who is the ultimate? Jesus the good shepherd. See go back a couple of weeks ago we were looking at wives and husbands. Again how does this play out in the marriage relationship?

[20:47] What do we learn about how husbands are able to love their wives based on the Lordship or the headship of Jesus? In chapter 5 verse 25 it says this.

Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. So what does that mean?

But that Jesus the Lord is the Lord who first of all served in love his desperately needy people. And he gave himself for them so that they, you, maybe if you are in him, forgiven, known by him, brought into his family.

So that you're safe, freed from your sin. All of these things are yours in Christ. That is the Lordship of Jesus and to follow him is a joy.

It is freedom to know his good Lordship and headship and leading in all of your life. So to understand that first of all then means that those who are bond servants in this church, in Ephesus, have a completely different perspective because we're told in verse 5 that those who are slaves aren't just trying to overthrow their masters and push against all the boundaries and get rid of all the power structures.

[22 : 23] But he says no. In the situation that you are in, obey as you would obey Christ. Because you now have a master who is your loving master, the Lord who loves you with an everlasting love and who will lead you into all goodness, who is wise and who knows your every need.

But it also means practically, what's the practical difference that this makes for these people? It means that in verse 6 they don't just have to do their work well in order to get human recognition. Now again, take this into your realm, if you like. Apply this to wherever you live or work. So often isn't it the case that we do what we do well, maybe because we just have a sense of a good work ethic.

Fine. But often it can be the case that we do what we do well so that somebody else will see and give us the credit that we think we deserve. Now we maybe do deserve that credit, but often then we're frustrated because people don't see what we do well.

And you maybe feel that at the moment in your work, you're undervalued, nobody cares. Or in your relationship or your family or whatever it is. And so the temptation is just to do more, to get noticed, to get recognized.

[23 : 49] We understand that that can be the way that we work, because we desire to be recognized for who we are and what we've done. But Jesus says to these people in this situation, do your work well anyway, as if you were serving the Lord.

If nobody notices, know this that Jesus notices. And what's the significance of that? Well he goes on in verse 8 to say this, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he's a bond servant or free.

So it means that although we understand why we seek to be affirmed in the here and now, if we're not, we're able to deal with it. Because our good Lord knows and will one day reward.

So we have our reward now, if we are in Christ, if these believers are in Christ, then they're changed. Their state is changed. Their co-heirs with Christ, they're given a new dignity that they were never afforded under the previous regime.

But equally there is a day when they will be with their Lord who will say, I know, I know that time when you felt like you were discarded or ignored or passed over or whatever it was.

[25 : 11] And their good Lord will at that time give them that sense of recognition. So it changes, their state is changed and so the way that they should live and work is changed.

And there is then that sense of peace. Even though their circumstances may still not be as they should be or want them to be, there is that sense of peace within the existing relationship.

Because of the lordship of Jesus. That is the difference that Paul is saying to these people that he's writing to should exist.

But the thing is that this is also possible for them because Paul then goes on and writes to their masters. So this isn't a letter that says, OK, all you people who are subservient, behave yourselves, just make sure that you're doing what you should be doing.

This isn't a letter that allows those who maybe have the potential to oppress to carry on oppressing. Because what Paul then does is he applies the lordship of Jesus to the masters.

[26 : 21] To the ones who had the ability to oppress, who in society's eyes were privileged to the point where they could treat their slaves any way they wanted.

And Paul says, no, no longer. That is not possible. It's an anomaly because you're all one in Jesus because of the gospel.

So what we read then in verse nine is this. Masters do the same to them. Stop your threatening knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven and that there is no partiality with him.

This levels the whole thing. This means that this church that we're being written to, again, slave and master are addressed as if you like ethical equals.

Now, again, that wasn't possible under the previous regime or situation. The slaves have been addressed as responsible people to receive this message and to act on it.

[27 : 27] And the masters are told that they're not exempt from having to deal with and face the lordship of Christ. Now, this should be something that they embrace because Paul is writing to the church, the church who have come to know the gospel and the changes that that makes as a result. But it's reinforced here. And so he says to the masters that their master is in heaven and he sees or shows no partiality.

So that when the Lord Jesus looks at slave and master at those in power or those in subservience, he sees not their position of power, but he sees his children.

And so how then can a master carry on feeling over, above, superior to, free to do anything or treat the slave any way they want? It's not possible anymore.

It takes away from the master what had been given to them by society the potential to abuse. And this should, again, work its way out in the way that they live and in the way that they practice the administration of their household and the way that they give tasks to their slaves and all the rest of it.

[28 : 54] He says this, stop threatening them. Stop threatening them. Why would you carry on threatening them, treating them as subhuman, treating them as if you can lead them by fear and by victimization when you have been led by the grace and the forgiveness and the mercy of your Lord Jesus?

How can you do that any longer? It's not possible. And so you see that the change that we've been seeing at work, Ephesians has outlined this great purpose of God from before all time.

And in the second half of the book, it's working that out in the local situation. It's working that out in a very distinct situation where this institution still prevailed.

But of course what Paul says here, he doesn't tackle if you like the structures of society at this point. He doesn't seek to dismantle the institution. But what he says utterly undercuts the abusive power that was at the heart of the master-slave relationship and in many ways lays the foundation for the abolition of slavery that was to come.

Paul is outlining the change that comes about with the heart of the community because of the gospel, because of the Lordship of Jesus, because of how he brings change in a person's heart and then in a community, in a society, on a fellowships.

[30 : 33] Gathering together. And I think what we need to think about just in finishing as we tie this together is we've seen something of the way this works out in their culture.

But again, bring this back to your own heart, the way you think about people who are over you, or the way you think about people that are under you.

And I want to leave one word with you and that is the word satisfaction. Often, again, we've been thinking about power structures. What is the problem with power structures?

It is that we get our ultimate satisfaction from the feeling that power gives us over another. We either have that power and we'll do anything to hold on to it, because having that power over another gives us status, gives us a sense of meaning, gives us a sense of privilege, gives us a feeling that we can do whatever we want.

Not having power, feeling subordinate, and maybe being abused or overlooked with that, gives us a great sense of dissatisfaction, naturally.

[31 : 45] But also, again, with that come problems, because what we can do as a result is crave power for power's sake. If I had that position, there I would be satisfied.

That is what I need, either because then I can get my revenge, either because then we think people will see us for the status that we really deserve, or because then we think it will get us what we want. Now, that is how it played out in this culture amongst this institution of slavery, but apply that to your in-situation.

And we have to ask the question, does the Lordship of Jesus, the fact that he is king, the fact that he has saved us, shown us who we really are, transformed us and is transforming us, does that affect you on a daily basis, in terms of your own satisfaction?

Now, this isn't to say that you can't aspire to get promotion. It isn't to say that you can't work hard and try and do well. That's not what it's about. But when these things are difficult, when we feel like we maybe can't make progress, when we are stuck in a particular position, or when we have a position, and the temptation is that becomes our idol, as we were praying about, is the satisfaction of knowing Jesus as Lord, what rules our heart on a day-to-day basis.

What motivates us to treat somebody in a particular way, because we have been treated with such grace and forgiveness. Have we been treated with such grace and forgiveness? Is the question that we have to ask, first of all.

[33 : 28] If we have, then how can we go on treating others as if they don't matter, as if we are superior? So we work that out at a personal level, and then of course we have to work that out at a societal level.

As you, and as I go back home, we go back to the workplace, tomorrow or whenever. How will you treat those who have power over you? How will you treat those that you have power over?

It's very dangerous for us to be complacent, because we think we've eradicated an institution, if we then allow the roots of that sin and that behaviour to drive us in the way that we treat other people. And we become hypocrites. And just in closing, let me just leave you with this verse. In 1 Peter it says this, it reminds us of the importance, knowing the Gospel, if we know the Gospel of how we then evidence that Gospel when we go back out into the world.

How do we show those that we live amongst, that because of the Lordship of Jesus, we are at peace, wherever we are at, where satisfied, and we know His grace. In 1 Peter we read this, keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

[35 : 01] Let me pray. Father God, we recognise your grace and your mercy.

We thank you for the Gospel that is written about all through this letter, and is the focal point of your whole word, and is seen in the person of the Lord Jesus.

We praise you for Him today. Be with anyone here today who doesn't know Him, who's maybe seeking Him and who doesn't know how to find Him. Lord, we pray that you would call that person to yourself.

If there are folks here today who have struggled to know you for a long time, Lord, then reveal yourself to them. If we have known you for a long time, and yet our love has grown cold, then we pray that the Gospel would again be foundational and beautiful in our sight, that we would see your love and your mercy, and that it would remind us again of all that you have done for us.

We do pray that you would help us to work the principles that we read of and see in these passages. We would work these principles out in our lives, as we have been changed by the Gospel, Lord, help us to reflect very carefully on how it is that we live, how it is that we speak to others, and how it is that we see ourselves and others in the light of the unity that we have as believers, because of the Gospel.

[36 : 32] So teach us, we pray, to be a family of your people, and teach us, we pray, to be those who live out the Gospel in the communities amongst which we live and work.

In Jesus' name, amen.