

Before the Face of God

By [Rev. Mark Nelsen](#)

As we continue our series through Ephesians, we now come to chapter six, verses five to nine. This is, arguably, one of the most immediately applicable passages we've encountered in the last several weeks. So join with me as we read God's Word this morning—

Ephesians 6:5-9:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ—not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. Masters, do the same to them, and 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 is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, as we hear Your Word read and contemplate it in our minds, we pray that Your Spirit would imprint it on our hearts and draw out the truths You want us to know—who You are, and how we are to respond. In Jesus' holy name, amen.

Children, have you ever watched a bird build a nest? We just came out of spring, and you could see birds flying with little twigs in their beaks. Sometimes you can even follow them. We found a nest in the back and watched the little bird build it. Or have you ever seen a squirrel eating an acorn? When a squirrel is munching away, he usually doesn't notice us watching. But what happens when we get too close to that squirrel, or to a bird perched on the fence? They get scared. As soon as they realize we're watching, they run or fly away. They didn't know we were there, even though we were watching the whole time.

Did you know that God, your Father, sees everything we do? He sees all things and knows all things. He watches us even when we don't know He's watching. God sees you, even when your parents don't, even when your brother or sister doesn't. God is always watching.

Now, why does a squirrel run when you get too close? Why does a bird fly away? Because it thinks you might hurt it. It's afraid of you because you're bigger and you're a threat. But the beautiful thing about God is this: He is not a threat to you. He is not watching to pounce on you or catch you doing something wrong. He watches you with love.

So when people aren't watching you—when your friends don't see what you're doing—God sees, and He knows. But unlike the squirrel, we cannot run from God. What if I go into the bathroom? No—He is everywhere. And He doesn't want you to run from Him. He wants you to run to Him.

How do we know that? Because He gave His only Son to die on the cross for you. He loves you so much that He opened the door for you to run to Him, even when you've done something wrong, even when you haven't treated your brother or sister well, even when you haven't obeyed your parents. He is a good Heavenly Father who wants you to run to Him, not away from Him like a frightened squirrel.

Let's pray for our children.

Heavenly Father, we pray for these little ones. Work in them through these short messages, through Your Word, through this service, and through their parents. Help them know that while You see everything, You see them with love—and You have shown that love in Your Son, Jesus Christ. We pray for them, for their parents, and for this church. In Jesus' holy name, amen.

Now, I said this is one of the most applicable passages for all of us in the last four or five weeks because it encompasses everyone here. But you may be thinking, "Wait a second—did you not hear what you just read? Slaves and masters?" I did. And we're going to get to that.

Let me begin with a common objection. You may have heard this before:

"So you're telling me you believe in a Bible—and in a God—who says men are the heads of their homes, who condemns homosexuality, but who affirms slavery and tells slaves to obey their masters? How can you condemn slavery when your own Bible seems to support it?"

What would you say to that?

This is a common objection. It's also a common internal struggle for many Christians, especially given our own history in America. How do we handle what the Bible says about slavery? And why does it matter to us today, when—thankfully—we no longer have slavery as a social institution in the way it once existed?

Many believers, when confronted with this question, begin picking and choosing what parts of the Bible they want to believe or apply. And once you start doing that, the foundation crumbles—both for the individual and for the church.

So today's sermon will feel like a half-sermon followed by a full sermon. It won't flow exactly like the others, but don't worry—I've got my watch working. We won't go over.

First, we're going to look briefly at slavery in the Bible so we have a grounding. Then we'll look at what this passage says to us specifically.

Slavery in the Bible was a social institution in which one person owned another—not just their labor for eight hours a day, but the whole person. This is not the same as an employee-employer relationship. We often read this passage and immediately jump to that, but that's not what Paul is addressing.

Slavery in the ancient world came about through conquest, through poverty, through birth, and through man-stealing—and I use that word because that is the Bible's own term.

There were no bankruptcy laws in antiquity. If you lost everything, and there were no Publixes on the corner and no community resource centers to help you feed your children, what did you do? Families would sell themselves into slavery simply to survive. It was a hard world.

Slavery could be a horrible experience—and often was—but not always. It depended entirely on the master. Some slaves were more educated than their owners. They held positions of great responsibility. Think of Joseph in Potiphar's house—second in command, higher in authority than many free men.

So slavery, in the biblical world, was a social institution that existed in a fallen world. The Bible does not condone it—meaning approve of it—and it does not condemn it as a social institution. It acknowledges it as part of the world into which God speaks His redeeming Word.

That needs to be clear for those who read and believe the Bible: the problem is not with Scripture's understanding of slavery. Let me show this briefly from just a couple of verses in Exodus 21 and throughout the Old Testament.

In Exodus 21—right after the Ten Commandments, as Israel is being formed as a nation—God gives laws for slaves. In fact, even in the Ten Commandments themselves, God grants slaves the right to rest on the Sabbath. And in the very next chapter, He gives detailed instructions on how slaves are to be treated—and how they must not be treated.

There, in verse 16, we read: “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” Man-stealing is explicitly prohibited by God. And that form of slavery—kidnapping, trafficking, the slave trade we know from American history—is condemned by Scripture. It is forbidden.

So the Bible does not condemn slavery as a social institution, nor does it approve it. It recognizes its existence in a fallen world and regulates it in ways no other ancient law code ever did—granting slaves rights and protections unheard of in the surrounding cultures.

In 1 Corinthians, in Ephesians, in Colossians 3, Paul speaks to slaves and masters. In 1 Timothy 1, he again condemns man-stealing, placing it alongside sins like murder, practicing homosexuality, lying, and perjury—things contrary to sound doctrine. So Scripture recognizes and regulates slavery; it does not endorse the sinful abuses associated with it.

Here’s where we often miss the mark: the Bible’s primary purpose is not to transform culture directly. God’s Word transforms hearts. Transformed hearts then go out and transform culture. That’s exactly what happened in the abolition of slavery—transformed individuals, shaped by the gospel, reshaped the world around them.

The Bible is primarily concerned with our relationship to God and how we live that out in a fallen world.

I have a friend who was enslaved in the modern sense. He flew from the Philippines to Abu Dhabi for work. They took his passport. He worked sixteen hours a day in a hotel for three or four years. That is a form of modern slavery. How is a Christian to live in that situation? Paul speaks to that here as well.

If you still wrestle with the question, “Why doesn’t God just condemn slavery outright?” consider another example: divorce. Divorce is not part of God’s good creation. Yet God recognizes its existence in a fallen world and regulates it so His people can live out godliness within broken structures. The same principle applies here.

Think of Jesus’ illustrations of the kingdom in Matthew 13. The kingdom is like yeast worked into dough. A little yeast transforms the whole loaf slowly, quietly, steadily. That is what happened with slavery. The yeast began with Christ, and we are now living in the cultural transformation that grew from transformed hearts.

So we don’t need to be afraid when people bring this up—or when doubts arise in our own minds. We can look at the cultural realities of then and now and say, “This is what Paul was addressing. What principles does God give us here?”

There is much more that could be said, but the key point is this: God recognizes and regulates a social institution that was not part of creation so that the gospel can continue to advance.

Think about this: what would have happened if Jesus or Paul had made the abolition of slavery their mission? “We are here to end slavery. Everyone must be free.” How far would they have gotten? They had a hard enough time doing what they were doing without directly opposing Caesar. If they had launched a political revolution, they would have been crushed immediately. The gospel would not have spread.

So this passage is not a problem for us. We can read it with clarity about the cultural context and ask, “What principles apply to us today?”

In reality, the closest modern parallel is the military. When you join the military, you don’t give eight hours of your day—you give your life. That’s why I struggled at the academy. My pride and arrogance resisted submitting to people I didn’t think deserved my respect. This passage confronted me. It exposed my failure to live out the gospel in that setting.

The next closest relationship is employer-employee. But even there, we hire out our time and labor—we do not give our lives. So this is not a one-to-one comparison.

What we can take from this passage is the main idea: the Spirit transforms our relationship to God—from enemies to sons and daughters. And being Spirit-filled means our identity, our perspective, our attitudes, and our actions are different from the world around us as we live *coram Deo*.

Coram Deo—Latin for “before the face of God.” It applies to every area of life. This passage touches employees and employers, husbands and wives, parents and children, retirees and students. It touches everyone because it teaches that Christians ultimately live before their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in the presence of God.

So how does a slave begin to obey “with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ”? How does someone in the lowest, most humiliating social position—someone who does not even own himself—begin to obey with sincerity and good will?

Paul’s answer is this: the Spirit transforms their identity.

Christians have been bought with a price. They are a new creation. Their identity is no longer found in social status, skills, or desires. Identity is the foundation. When you are born again, you are united to Christ, and His identity

becomes yours. There is no longer Greek or Jew, slave or free, male or female—we are all one in Christ.

Remember what we said about children: Paul speaks directly to them. He doesn't say, "Parents, tell your kids later." He addresses them as full members of the church. Here, Paul speaks directly to slaves. That alone is radical. They are sitting in the same room as freedmen and masters, side by side. Their identity is already being reshaped—not by their social condition, but by their union with Christ.

This is the beauty of the gospel. It is not American. It is not tied to one culture or set of preferences. If I go to China or Japan, I don't have to teach them English or give them a suit and tie before sharing the gospel. The gospel doesn't erase nature; it assumes it and transforms it. Slaves do not have to become free to be free in Christ. That is a powerful message.

And ultimately, as Paul has already taught, the deeper truth is this: we are all slaves to sin. We are not free, no matter how much we want to think we are. We sin because we are sinners. Jesus came because we were enslaved and needed to be set free. We talked about this earlier today—our relationship with God is broken because of Adam. And you might say, "Well, I would have done something different." No, you wouldn't have. You would have walked faster than Adam to that tree. You might have pushed Eve out of the way.

It is in us. We have a broken relationship with God, and we will stand before Him to give an account of our lives. The good will not outweigh the bad. What matters is this: Who is our Master and Lord? Whom do we serve? Not whom do we serve perfectly, but whom do we serve—whether rich or poor, slave or free, educated or uneducated.

Paul tells us earlier in chapter two that we are, by nature, children of wrath and slaves to sin. But God. But God comes in, sending His Son. In Ephesians 2, Paul tells us that Christ lived the life we could never live. In Galatians 4, he says, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law." Jesus entered the fallen realm, under the forces of this slavery to sin, and walked through it to redeem us.

That word redeem—redemption, ransom, buy back—comes straight from the slave market of the ancient world. It means to purchase someone out of bondage. And that is exactly what God has done for you and me. In Christ, we are no longer slaves to sin but freedmen—slaves to righteousness. Our old master is gone. We have a new Lord.

There is no in-between. There is no, "I don't want to be a slave to sin, but I don't want to be a slave to God either, so I'll just be free and be my own person."

That is the world's rubbish. The Bible teaches no such thing. It is black or white. You are either a slave to sin or you are in Christ. And in Christ, you have been bought and ransomed.

I once used an illustration—an imperfect one, but helpful. Think of a dog abused by its owner. It runs away, but it always returns because that's all it has ever known. Then a neighbor buys the dog, brings it home, feeds it, treats it like the other dogs. But the dog still runs back across the street because the old life is familiar. It doesn't have to. It has a new home. It has been bought. But it keeps returning to the old master.

That is the story of my walk—and I suspect of most of ours. We run back to the slavery we were rescued from. But God continues to come to us, reminding us of our identity in Christ: that we are new, that we do not have to go back, that He has made us new. We are to put off the old self and put on the new. We are not identified by our skills, our sins, our desires, or our status, but by Christ and Christ alone.

And this is how slaves could obey their masters. It is also the starting point for wives living out submission when their husbands are not worthy of it, and for husbands loving their wives sacrificially when they are not worthy of it. It is the same for employees and employers as we fulfill our duties toward one another.

This transformed identity leads to a transformed perspective. Who you are shapes how you think. If you tell yourself a lie, it will shape your thinking. Paul is showing the slaves—and us—that because we are in Christ, our perspective shifts. “You are no longer slaves,” he says. “You are slaves of Christ.” Your Master is the same Master as your earthly master's Master. Your identity is rooted in Him.

So what do we do? Because our identity is in Christ, we live before the face of God. He is our ultimate Master and Lord. He is the One we serve in every relationship.

Paul uses several phrases here: “Obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling.” Fear and trembling is not terror of punishment. It is the reverent awe of not wanting to disappoint someone you love. It is the trembling of affection, not dread. He is saying, “Serve with a reverent heart—not because you fear your earthly master, but because you love your heavenly One.”

He also says, “with a sincere heart... not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers... doing the will of God.” Eye-service means working only when someone is watching. Paul says, “Don't do that. Your perspective is higher. God is the One you are pleasing.” Don't be on TikTok until the boss walks in and then scramble to look busy. God sees. And He is the One you serve.

Ultimately, Paul is saying that your work—your calling in life, whether husband, wife, child, parent, student, employee, employer, or retiree—is a calling to worship God. This is foundational. It is not something extra. It is the arena in which God has placed you to shine for Him.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul speaks to a church where people are coming to Christ from all sorts of situations—husbands and wives at different times, slaves whose masters are unbelievers. He says, “Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.” Were you a slave when called? Don’t be concerned about it. If you can gain your freedom, do so. But if you were called as a slave, you are a freedman in the Lord.

So with our identity in Christ, our perspective looks beyond the earthly to the heavenly. God is at work in all things. There are no mistakes.

This applies to the wife whose husband is not loving her well. How does she live out God’s command? By lifting her eyes beyond the earthly to the heavenly. Peter says she may win him without a word. The same applies to the husband, the parent, the employee whose boss is impossible, the worker who feels unseen or undervalued. How do we live out obedience? By raising our eyes to Christ.

This is the foundation of it all. In 1 Peter 2, Peter says to slaves, “Obey your masters with all respect, not only the good and gentle but also the unjust.” Why? “For this is a gracious thing, when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.” And then he points to Christ—our example. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten. He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly. He bore our sins in His body on the tree so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.

Yes, my friends, the Spirit transforms our identity, our perspective, and then our attitudes and actions. We are no longer slaves of the world.

This idea of *coram Deo*—living before the face of God—applies to every area of life. It changes everything. Many of us grew up thinking God watches everything we do so He can squash us like a little lovebug because we can never fully please Him. But that guilt is not from God—unless the Spirit is convicting you to come to Him. For those in Christ, God does not look on you with judgment. The judgment fell on Christ. There is no judgment left—only love. Sometimes it is a hard love, but it is love.

This attitude and action applies everywhere: as a pilot, not just doing the bare minimum to get home; as a teacher, not just getting through the day, but reflecting God to your students; as a waitress—yes, even as a waitress—can you glorify God in that work? Absolutely.

Can you live and work to the glory of God as a waitress in a restaurant? Yes. As a janitor in a school? Yes. Because your work is ultimately not for the school or the restaurant, but for God—His glory and your good. You, my friends, are called to live *coram Deo*—before the face of God, in the presence of God—because that is the reality in which we live. And this is not a God waiting to crush you, but a God who loves you, who is your heavenly Father. You live for Him, not for man.

So as you live out your identity in Christ this week, ask yourself:

What lies am I believing about who I am?

What “neighbor” am I running back to—the sin that once enslaved me?

Am I correcting my perspective daily?

Where am I trying to please man instead of God?

And then: Am I adjusting my attitudes and actions?

Where is my heart in what I’m doing?

Is it flowing out of my identity and perspective in Christ, or out of selfishness and a desire to please people?

God calls slaves to this radical life of obedience because Christ was obedient—and because they had been radically transformed. And in Christ, you have that same identity and that same transformation. You are Spirit-filled so that you can live Spirit-filled.

Heavenly Father, I pray that You continue to work in us through Your Word. Shape our identities in You, our perspectives, our attitudes, and our actions. Help us reflect who You are to the world, and honor and glorify You in all things. We ask this in Jesus’ holy name. Amen.

This article was based upon a verbatim transcript of a sermon delivered by Rev. Mark Nelsen. It has been lightly edited in Copilot, as well as the theological staff at Third Millennium Ministries.

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