

EPHESIANS

WEEK FIFTEEN

• STUDY ONE •

BACKSTORY

There were several million slaves in the Roman Empire so their role was significant in Ephesian society. Because many slaves and owners had become believers, the early church had to deal straightforwardly with the question of master/slave relations.

Paul's statement neither condemns nor condones slavery. Instead it tells masters and slaves how to live together in ways that would honor God. Servants should give their best effort in all they were required to do. This showed respect for their master, and also provided an amazing example of one's relationship with Christ. At the same time masters are explicitly told not to be abusive to those who served them. God sees masters as no better than those they command, and He is the ultimate Master of both.

SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 6:5-9

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸ because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. ⁹ 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.

DISCUSSION

Recently, I watched the movie “The Help” for at least the third time. I have also read the book. The historical fiction film and novel recount the story of young white woman and aspiring journalist Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan focusing on her relationship with two black maids, Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, during the Civil Rights Movement in 1963 Jackson, Mississippi. In an attempt to become a legitimate journalist and writer, Skeeter decides to write a book from the point of view of the maids—referred to as “the help”—exposing the racism they are often faced with as they work for white families.

In one particularly infuriating scene, a white woman insists that “the help” should have separate restroom facilities because of her fear that the maids carry diseases that could spread to her children. She insists “the help” should be considered “separate but equal”, but when her maid uses the indoor family restroom instead of going to the designated outhouse during a hurricane, the maid is unceremoniously fired and sent out into the storm anyway.

We would like to think we would never treat anyone like this, yet if we are honest with ourselves, we all harbor prejudices that cause us to look down on others and treat them as inferior. We also often resist following the lead of others who oversee us in the workplace – we don’t like being told what to do or how to do it, especially when we feel singled out or disrespected. These verses from Ephesians are a sobering reminder that in God’s eyes – our Master’s eyes – we are all equal. There is no favoritism with him.

In the gospel of John, chapter 13, we read the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. This was a task reserved for the lowliest servant or slave and no one would have expected the 'teacher', 'Lord' – the rabbi - to do this. We read in John 13 beginning at verse 12-

John 13: 12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

REFLECTION

Jesus removed any notions that those who are servants are "separate" or of any less value than anyone else, no matter what their social standing was in the culture of that time. We need to examine our own hearts and reevaluate all of our relationships; whether in the workplace or wherever we lead or are led. Are we serving wholeheartedly as unto the Lord, even when we are in the position of leadership?

Make me a servant
Humble and meek
Lord let me lift up
Those who are weak
And may the prayer
Of my heart always be
Make me a servant
Make me a servant
Make me a servant today.

EPHESIANS

WEEK FIFTEEN

• STUDY TWO •

BACKSTORY

Our family recently celebrated my youngest son Adam's 17th birthday on March 23rd. At a worship service close to Adam's 13th birthday, our pastor at that time gave a message based on Colossians 3:23. As the pastor referenced the text, Adam leaned over to me and said, "I like that verse. The numbers (3:23) are my birthday!" Adam referenced the verse when giving his testimony to the congregation and it has been a favorite verse of his and mine ever since.

SCRIPTURE

Colossians 3:23

²³ Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.

DISCUSSION

Speaking of birthdays, it is my birthday as I am writing this on April 11, 2018. Here is how the day is unfolding – I awakened with an upset stomach that continues to churn as the day goes on, I have to go to a class to learn how to respond in the event of an active shooter in the workplace, I need to teach a class this evening when I'd rather be going out for dinner to celebrate my birthday and I just received an email reminding me I signed up several weeks ago to deliver a meal for a friend who is battling a life-threatening illness. I must confess to having a less than stellar attitude about all of the above.

As I indulge in my “birthday blues”, I remember a tour I went on a week ago in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee at the Titanic Museum, which commemorates the infamous sinking of what had been deemed an unsinkable ship. This ship was sailing the Atlantic Ocean on my birthdate, April 11, 106 years ago. Those traveling were unaware that just a few days later the Titanic would be lying in pieces at the bottom of the ocean.

As I toured the museum, two stories impacted me deeply. One was that of a pastor, John Porter who was traveling, along with his six year old daughter and his sister, from Scotland to America to lead evangelistic meetings in the Chicago area. After ensuring that his daughter and sister were on lifeboats, John Porter refused to stay with them and climbed back onto the sinking Titanic. He approached numerous people asking them if they were saved and urging them to accept Christ quoting Acts 16: 31: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” When John Porter slipped into the icy waters, he continued to ask others already in the water to give their lives to the Lord. Survivors of the disaster recounted becoming believers because of the testimony of John Porter that continued until he slipped under the water and perished. The other story was that of the eight musicians aboard the Titanic who were hired to entertain the travelers by roaming the decks and dining halls. The musicians were

offered room on the lifeboats but all eight refused, instead playing songs of comfort to calm the panicking travelers as the Titanic continued to sink. The final song the musicians played before they all slipped into the water to their death was “Nearer My God to Thee”. Survivor Lawrence Beesley later shared these words: “Many brave things were done that night, but none were more brave than those done by men playing minute after minute as the ship settled quietly lower and lower in the sea.” As I reconsider the words of Colossians 3:23 (“...work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.”) and also of Ephesians 5: 7 (“Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people.”), I find myself re-examining my attitude toward the work God is calling me to do today. I am deeply grateful for another year of life and for each new day God gives. None of us know if or when we may be confronted with the kind of adversity faced by those on the Titanic, but whether what we face is enormous or ordinary, whether it will be recorded in history or no-one will ever find out about it, God calls us to serve Him with all of our heart, with motives that are pure and for His purposes.

REFLECTION

In the same sermon Adam heard on Colossians 3:23, the pastor quoted C.S. Lewis and Adam recorded these words in his journal: “ “True humility isn’t thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less.” – C.S. Lewis. This isn’t my goal for the school year as much as it is for my life. I would like to think of others more and myself less.” C.S. Lewis’ words mirror Jesus’ instruction to his disciples in John 13:15 where He reminds them – and all of us - He has given us an example to follow by serving others. It is in serving others that we will walk most closely to our Lord and Savior, blessed as we do as He did. (John 13: 17)

Nearer, my God, to thee,
Nearer to thee!
E’en though it be a cross
That raiseth me.
Still all my song shall be
Nearer, my God, to thee,
Nearer, my God, to thee,
Nearer to thee!