

Employers and Employees

by Ray C. Stedman

It is a remarkable coincidence – not at all planned – that in our study of the relationships of the Christian the consideration of employers and employees has fallen on Labor Day. I have experienced this phenomenon at other times when the Holy Spirit has led in such a way that the study of an appropriate text has fallen on a very appropriate day.

The apostle begins this section with the word *slaves* rather than *employees*, and it is, of course true that in the 1st century the relationship was that of slaves and masters. At the time the apostle wrote this letter it has been estimated that one-half of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves and many of them were Christians. The Christian message did not come first to the upper or higher classes; it came among the working people and even among slaves. Many of these slaves were highly educated people who had been captured in the war and brought to other parts of the empire and made slaves. They were not unintelligent, but they were slaves, literally in bondage to others. It was among these that the Christian message found its initial reception.

There were also among them some who were in the category of masters who were likewise Christians. As they came together in worship, as the Christian community, they were taught from the Scriptures that in Christ there is neither bond nor free. There is no slavery in Christ, there is no race, there are no sexual distinctions. The Christians all met together as brothers in Jesus Christ. They found that the ground is absolutely level at the foot of the cross.

But, of course, when they went back to their homes, and to their work, the question arose: “Well, what about us now? Are we to continue this relationship as brothers in our work? Does this mean that we are to be free from any bondage, or

responsibility, to another Christian?” This question soon came up and had to be settled, and this is what the apostle is doing here. He is settling this question and declaring the great principles that apply for all time in the relationship of an employer to an employee.

I do not think it is difficult for us to see that the same principles prevail in the question of management and labor. It is true that employees are no longer slaves. In most of the world, slavery has been eliminated. But it is also true that, in seeking employment, we voluntarily sell our bodies and minds to another for a limited period of time. We work out a mutually agreeable relationship, and, within the limits of that agreement, we are slaves to those to whom we sell our time and our freedom. So the issues are exactly the same. The question is, “How should we conduct ourselves toward those to whom we have responsibilities of obedience in the realm of work?”

Here again we are made continually aware of the terrible failure that exists in our day. Periodically, as we know from recent experience, the whole nation is made to suffer because of the quarrels and divisions that exist between capital and labor. Strikes paralyze the nation from time to time, and wreak havoc in our economy. Further, this strife between labor and management is frequently the scene of violence, and even murder. Newspapers are continually reporting the trouble, strife, misery, and bitterness that occurs in this area.

What is wrong? Why is there such strife? As we have seen in the other relationships previously discussed, strife is always a symptom of the violation of a fundamental order. It is evidence that something has gone wrong and there is a failure to observe the simple principles that resolve conflict.

Those principles, remember, were given to us in one sentence. As the apostle said earlier “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” {Eph 5:21 RSV}. That is the whole key.

Now Paul applies this to the world of capital and labor, and he begins with the workers, the employees:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ; not in the way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. {Eph 6:5-8 RSV}

In this very illuminating passage, the apostle deals with three things:

- First, there is activity which is required by this relationship.
- Second, there is an attitude in which that activity is to be performed. And,
- Third, there is an awareness of a fundamental principle at work that keeps this whole relationship from degenerating into tyranny.

This is what we desperately need to hear today. I suggest that there is nothing more important to consider in the realm of economics or of human relationships in the world of capital and labor than this great section of Scripture. Here we have set before us the principles which, if observed, would resolve these great conflicts that tear our nation apart from time to time.

Now let us examine them more closely.

First, there is an activity required on the part of employees, and it is put in one word – obedience. “Be obedient to those who are your earthly masters.” This is the same Greek word that occurs in Chapter 6, Verse 1, with regard to children. “Children, obey your parents.” We looked at that before. It means to follow orders. It is a military term, and it means that Christian employees are

under obligation to those who hire them to do what they say. It is really very simple. Do what the boss says, obey him.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about this section of Scripture is what is not said, especially in view of what is being so widely said today. You will notice that in this very delicate, sensitive area of the relationships of slaves to masters, or, as in our day, of employees to employers, there is not one word said about strikes or pickets or sit-downs or stand-ups or lay-ins or any other activity along that line. Not a word is said about how to protest unfair conditions. No advice is given on how to organize in order to bring pressure on the right places. This is such a far cry from some of the propaganda that many churches are putting forth today in this respect.

I strongly suspect that if the Apostle Paul were writing to churches today he would be regarded as one totally out of touch with practical matters. He probably would be rejected as one who did not know how to get involved in the problem.

Perhaps someone is saying, “Well, this is obviously totally inadequate advice. It is not intended to cover the whole situation, it is only dealing with a part of it, and a very small part, at that.” But, if you look at the whole context, you will see that Paul is dealing with a far more acute problem than that of labor-capital relationships. He is dealing with the most sensitive and hate-filled relationship that ever existed in humanity, the institution of slavery. If ever there was an opportunity for the apostles, and even for the Lord, to have spoken out against an entrenched evil, an evil obviously apparent in society, it was against the institution of slavery. But the amazing thing is that

- The New Testament says nothing to encourage slaves to rise up and revolt against their masters.
- It says not one word to incite rebellion or overthrow the yoke.
- Not a thing is said about organizing these downtrodden people who occupied half of the population of the Roman Empire to overthrow their masters.

- No appeal is made to the masters to meet with these slaves and work out a way to free them, and
- No pressure is brought upon them to accomplish this in a civic way.

Yet the interesting thing, as we look back upon twenty centuries of history, is that slavery has been largely eliminated in the world, and the force that did it was Christianity. But it was by another principle, not by direct attack. As we have ample evidence of today, direct attack only serves to perpetuate strife and violence and even to increase it. The black backlash creates a white backlash, and the white backlash, in turn, creates a counter black backlash, and so it goes.

This is also true in the realm of capital and labor. The very attempts we make to solve these problems by direct methods only perpetuate the problem. We are so close to the situation that we cannot see that we are only serving to stimulate more violence. Christianity allays violence, but it does it by an entirely different principle. The wonderful lesson of history is that even an evil institution like slavery can be eliminated, and, in large parts of the world, has been eliminated without violence. It is true that there has been plenty of violence over slavery in the past, but it was because of an incomplete application of the very principles the apostle is bringing out to us here.

Some of you remember that one section of Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* begins with these words:

While that great body [the Roman Empire] was invaded by open violence or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the capital.

That is how Christianity threw slavery out of the Roman Empire. It was not by direct appeal. And today, unless we wake up to the fact that the methods we are employing to solve these problems only perpetuate them, we are in for a greater siege of violence than we have ever seen before. The modern method only causes the power structures to

shift from one side to the other, in ceaseless cycles. First power is on the side of the labor, then it is on the side of management, then it is back on the side of labor.

Across the centuries the conflict rages back and forth, the power structure moving from one side to the other and merely perpetuating the conflict.

Now, there is a better way, and the apostle puts his finger on it. It is a way that takes faith, because it does not look like it is the way. But in the realm of history, wherever it has been tried, it has always worked. It is the way that Paul specifically states: "Employees (slaves), be obedient to those who are your earthly masters." That is the activity.

Now, with that activity goes a very essential attitude. Paul has two things to say about that attitude, and the second is so important that he finds a way to say it four times over in the brief compass of this passage.

- The first thing is this: Be obedient "with fear and trembling." The fear and trembling is not to be directed toward the boss! He may be an ogre, he may be an unjust man, but no Christian is ever exhorted to be a trembling, spineless, chinless individual toward the boss. He is not to be "a mouse studying to be a rat." The fear and trembling that is mentioned is to be directed toward himself. It is a healthy recognition of the danger of a Christian going along with the philosophy of those around, and acting as they do, thus destroying the possibility of God working through him and the power of God being released in that situation. It is fear and trembling lest we abort the greatest force of all in these situations of strife and difficulty.

Paul speaks thus of himself as he writes to the Corinthians: "When I came among you I came in fear and trembling," {cf, 1 Cor 2:3}. Why? "Lest I come in the wisdom of the world" {cf, 1 Cor 2:4}, he says – lest I come to you reflecting the philosophies, the ideas, and the dominant attitudes of those around and merely titillate your minds with the mental acrobatics that you Greeks so love to hear. No, he says, I came in fear and trembling lest I succumb to that and thus rob you of the great and transforming manifestations of the power of Jesus Christ at work. He writes also to the Philippians, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," {Phil 2:12 RSV}.

Why? Because it is God that works in you, “both to will and to do of his good pleasure,” {Phil 2:13b KJV}. Be afraid lest you fail to reckon on that and turn to these empty cisterns, these false forces that are so dominant in the thinking of those around you. Therefore, that is the first thing. Face this relationship with fear and trembling, lest you fail to trust in a living God.

- Second, and this is the important thing which he says four different ways,
 1. Obey “in singleness of heart, as to Christ.” What does “singleness of heart” mean? It means without divided loyalty, freedom from the tension that is created by conflicting loyalties. In other words, settle it once and for all in your mind that you are not there merely to please the boss, you are there to please the Lord. You are to carry your relationship of concern for the Lord to your work as well as to your church. You are to work as unto Christ, and your supreme concern is your loyalty to him. If you are trying to please two different forces, those around you and the Lord, you will be torn apart with a conflicting tension that never lets up. So he says, obey “in singleness of heart, as to Christ.”
 2. Then Paul expresses the same idea negatively, “not in the way of eye-service, as men-pleasers...”
 3. Then positively, “... but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.”
 4. Once again, Paul says, “rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men.”

Four times the idea is put forth: never work for men, you Christians, work only for God. You can work under a man’s direction, but remember that you are working unto the Lord, that your daily task is work that he has given you to do, and you do it unto him. What a glory this gives to every task. If you approach your work like this you will never have another dull day. You will never be bored

stiff with the routine and humdrum of what you have to do if you recognize that you are doing it with the eye of the Lord upon you, with a desire for his approval, and with the recognition that one day it will be made open and clear to all whether you did it as unto the Lord or unto men.

Now, what are the signs of the failure to do this? Paul picks them out for us. What are the indications that you are not doing this?

- The first sign is eye-service. Do you know what that means? That means working only when the boss is watching. When he turns his back, you quit working. That is eye-service.

Some years ago I read an account of a foreman in Africa who had several African nationals under him. He found that they were afflicted with this disease of eye-service; they only worked when he watched them. But this particular foreman was the proud possessor of a glass eye and he found that he could take his eye out of the socket and lay it on a stump where it could “watch” the men and they would go right on working, whether he was there or not. But one day he came back to find them all lounging around. He had placed the eye on the stump, but one of the men had found a way to sneak around behind and had come up behind the eye and put his hat over it so that it no longer *see* them.

It is that attitude that so widely pervades our society today, the idea of working only when the boss is watching. If you are a Christian, this is absolutely forbidden if you want to be faithful to your Lord. Remember, the eye that watches you is not a human eye. Therefore, the first sign of a divided loyalty is eye-service.

- The second sign of failure in this respect is men-pleasing. Notice how the apostle is putting his finger on the attitudes that are found so frequently in this relationship of labor and capital.

Men-pleasing! What is it? It is toadying to the boss, apple polishing, or perhaps some other terms that are not as publicly presentable. It is playing office politics, buttering up the boss. It reveals a double heart, the lack of a single eye. It reveals that we are trying to get

on by making men happy but disregarding what God thinks. These are the signs of failure.

Christians are called away from these things. No Christian has any business engaging in these types of activity if he wants to be faithful to his Lord because, for one thing, they do not work. They do not accomplish a thing. They seem to accomplish something, but in the end they do not because there is another factor at work, as we will see in a moment. The Christian is saved from all this if he remembers that what he does is the will of God. Did you notice that phrase? Paul says that we are to obey our earthly masters in singleness of heart, “doing the will of God from the heart.” What is the will of God? Your work! The very work you are doing, where you are doing it, with the people you must work with, under the present circumstances and conditions under which you have to work – that is God’s choice for you, that is the will of God. So the attitude that accompanies the activity of obedience must be a fearfulness of trusting the flesh and a faithfulness in doing all things, as serving the Lord who is ever present.

One other factor is added by way of motivation. There is to be an awareness, Paul says, of an unseen but powerful fact: “knowing whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is slave or free.” That is a principle that is always at work in any situation facing a Christian.

“Knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.” It does not make any difference what your status in life is. When work is done unto Christ, he undertakes to correct the conditions that make for unhappiness, or else to make recompense on another level. Notice that he does not promise always to correct the condition, because God’s will is that Christians must sometimes live as his Son lived, under very difficult and contrary conditions, and manifest his grace anyhow. But God does promise that he will recompense any conditions like this.

All of us know that many poor homes that have had little of material gain have been so filled with merry hearts as to be the envy of every rich man in the neighborhood. They are poor homes, but homes where happiness dwells. It does not take wealth to be happy.

The other day I was struck by a plea that was made in the newspaper for a family in East Palo Alto. I was interested to observe that the basis from which this plea for help was made was that this family was living in a home that had no running water, no electricity, only an outside toilet, and they had to heat the house with a coal stove. As I read, it suddenly dawned on me that this was an exact description of the home where I grew up in Montana, a home in which we were wonderfully happy.

Now, I understand that there is human need in these areas, and I certainly am not speaking against relieving such need – by all means, we must. But the marks of real need are not these things. The need exists, but not because there is a lack along these lines. The fact that we may be materially deprived is in no way a hindrance to being wonderfully happy. Oh, there is need, I know, for elementary supplies of food and shelter, and Christian compassion can do none else but seek to supply these to all. But granted these, material gain does not contribute at all to happiness, one way or another. Our happiness is built on other ground entirely. Therefore, remember that even though God calls you to live on a lesser income than someone else, he is quite prepared to make this up in other ways that will make you the envy of those who have nothing but wealth.

Now, note that these relationships always have a certain reciprocity about them. We are to be subject one to another, so there is a word now for the employer as well.

Masters, do the same to them, and forbear threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. {Eph 6:9 RSV}

Here are the same three-fold divisions that we found in the word to the employees. Here, too, there is to be an activity required by the relationship, an attitude which accompanies it, and an awareness of a hidden fact. The activity is “do the same to them.” That is an amazing thing to say. What did he say to employees? “Be obedient to your masters.” What does he say to the employers? “Do the same to them.” Are employers to obey their employees? Yes, certainly – but not by doing

their work for them, for that would be reversing their roles. What the apostle means here is for the employers to hear the suggestions of their employees. Listen to them, adjust their complaints, and pay attention to what is wrong. Obey them in the sense that you hear what is wrong and give serious consideration as to how to change it so as to make their conditions right.

In the parallel passage in the letter to the Colossians the apostle puts it this way: "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly," {Col 4:1a RSV}. That is what this means.

Treat them justly and fairly. You Christian bosses have no right to treat employees as chattel. They are not existing for your enrichment. You have no right merely to extract money from them, to exploit them, to use the sweat of their brow only that you may become richer. No Christian master has the right to think this way. Treat them as people with problems, and listen to their problems, do something about them. This is his exhortation.

The attitude that is to accompany this action is put in this negative way: "Forebear threatening." Why does Paul say that? Because the primary cause of employee unhappiness is to have constantly hanging over their heads a sword of Damocles, a threat of dismissal or of some kind of retribution such as the cutting of wages, in order to motivate them to better work. This does nothing but create resentment, bitterness, and incipient rebellion in the employees' hearts. It is absolutely wrong. It creates more problems than it solves. The relationship of Christian employers to their employees must not be that of threatening. It does not mean that they cannot discharge someone who is unqualified, but they are not to be constantly holding over them some kind of threat. This is wrong in the eyes of God, and Christian masters will answer to God in these things. Their basic relationship must not be one of fear, but one of mutual respect for their employees.

Again Paul mentions a hidden factor that makes all this of extreme importance: "knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him."

When Paul says Christ is in heaven it does not mean he is in outer space. Most of us, I am afraid, think of something remote in this respect. But heaven is that invisible spiritual kingdom that surrounds us on all sides. It means that he who is both their Master and ours, as employers, is watching

us. He is right here in the situation and he is dealing with us without partiality.

He is not impressed by our Cadillacs, or by our status in society, or by the fact that others bow down to us, or run our errands for us. He is totally unimpressed by this. He will deal in utter honesty with us, as men before him, regardless of our social standing. Remember that he is the one who said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me," {Matt 25:40b KJV}. Also, "inasmuch as ye have not done it unto these, ye have not done it unto me," {cf, Matt 25:45 KJV}. He is the one who says, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Do good to those who despitefully use you," {cf, Matt 5:44}. Therefore the whole of life is to be lived with the awareness of the Lord's watching eye.

What a far cry this is from the common attitude that Christians frequently take –

- That, "we are not to mix religion and business,"
- That, "church is one thing and business is another,"
- That, "we can be kind and gracious and tender toward one another in church, but don't get in my way in business or I'll run right over you."

This is absolutely wrong. Anyone who takes that stand will find that God, who sees all things, has a remarkable way of adjusting the situation. Happiness drains away from a home where reliance is put upon status and wealth, and that home becomes an empty, hollow shell, having all the outward things that contribute to luxury and ease, but having nothing within, a hollow place. But God has a wonderful way of taking a home where there is not very much materially, but there is trust in him, and filling it with joy, and peace, and a glory of relationship and happiness with one another.

Now, that does not mean that all the poor are happy and all the rich are sad. Of course not. It all depends upon how honestly and faithfully we live our lives in the light of his searching eye, and the awareness of his unchangeable faithfulness to us.

May God help us to face life on this basis.

I am confident that, if Christians begin to live like this in their business, it will do far more to eliminate the strife that periodically paralyzes our nation than anything else that can be done. The problem is that Christians have not been doing this. Christians have gone along with the philosophy of the world, treating their bosses, or their employees, like everybody else does. As a result, there has been no salt in society and it has become corrupt. That is what we are living with now.

May God give us grace to face our own individual responsibility in this respect.

Prayer:

Our Father, how searching these words can be as your living Spirit takes them and probes the depths of our individual hearts. We live before you. There is no area of our life that is not subject to your gaze and to your judgment. Surely the time has come when judgment must begin at the house of God. Grant to us that we correct what is wrong in our own lives in the light of this word. In Christ's name, Amen.

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