

# REORIENTED TO CHRIST

## SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST



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Ephesians 6:1-9  
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*Ephesians 6:1-9*

I want to start off this morning by asking you a question: What are three of the roles you play? Keep your answer at a high level. I am not looking for “assistant manufacturing line engineer level 4.” For example, think more along the lines of “wife” or “student.”

Today is our second to last week in a series on the book of Ephesians that we have subtitled “The Mystery of Christ.” The word “mystery” appears throughout this book, and it always has something to do with unity.

Today we are looking at the second half of a passage in Ephesians that most scholars call a “household code.” This was a common, first-century literary form that addressed several roles that people occupied in society. They typically focused on marriage, family, and profession. The apostle Paul uses this literary form as a way to apply the gospel to the day-to-day life of Jesus followers. Last week we heard about wives and husbands.

This morning we will see Paul addressing four roles: children, fathers, bondservants, and masters. Each of these roles is offered similar instruction to what you might find in first-century culture with one major difference. It’s the same thing that we saw in the instructions to husbands and wives. Christ transforms these roles from the inside out.

This morning we’ll see how we can be reoriented to Christ in every area of our life.

We will apply Paul’s instructions to the particular roles he mentions, but we can also go further. We will see how the kind of reorientation that Paul suggests can happen in any area of our lives.

As we read these words, it’s helpful to think about why these passages were written. Christianity was a new movement in the first-century Roman world. Romans hated forces which destabilized society. This was one of the things that made their empire strong and long-lasting. Anything that threatened to disrupt the peace was crushed and eliminated.

The message of Jesus was radical. Equality among people. Forgiveness for sins. Love towards everyone. These principles, if applied too extremely, could disrupt society. So at least part of the reason for these instructions is to demonstrate how Christianity could fit within the social structures of Rome without completely disrupting society.

These commands don’t call for mass revolution or dramatic cultural upheaval; they do something far more powerful. They transform the internal reality behind each of these roles in a way that will gradually work its way to the surface and cause slow but deep cultural transformation.

To summarize one commentator, “Masters would be happy that their bondservants were obeying them without realizing that they had been completely replaced by Christ as the one in charge of their slaves.” (NIVAC)<sup>1</sup>

This is what we’ll see in all these different roles. For followers of Jesus, every aspect of our lives is transformed by the presence of Christ.

### Family

Our passage begins with the household. The household was the center of life in the first-century Greco-Roman world. It would consist of a family and also be surrounded by servants and others affiliated with the household. The household acted as an economic entity as well. In short, most of what we would think of as family and professional life happened in the household.

At the top was the husband and father. The household was his domain, and he had almost complete authority over everything that happened within those walls. When a child was born, he decided whether the infant would be kept or abandoned. Fathers could and did sell their children. Most children began contributing to the economic life of the household before age 10. Fathers could work them harshly and discipline them physically. Sexual exploitation was common.

This does not necessarily describe how a Jewish household might operate in the Roman world. But this is the cultural reality in which Ephesians was written. Let's read the first part of this passage which addresses the parental relationship.

#### **Ephesians 6:1-4:**

**Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.**

The behavior prescribed here is not that different from what would be expected in first-century culture. Children were expected to obey. And even though fathers had complete authority over their household, there was general encouragement to be kind and fair with that authority.

The radical part of these instructions is that the Lord is at the center. Children are addressed directly, which is unique because they are treated as responsible moral agents. Their obedience is instructed, not forced. And the basis is "in the Lord."

In the same way, fathers are reoriented so that the goal of their parenting is not a functioning household or a thriving business or contribution to society; rather, the relationship of their children with the Lord. That is totally different from what a typical first-century father would have as his priority.

The word used there for "bring them up" is the same word translated as "nourish" in the instructions to husbands. Imagine this man living in Ephesus. He is in charge of this extended household. He has almost limitless power. But he is told to nourish his wife and his children. That is a very different kind of attitude than what his culture might expect of him.

If these words are counter-cultural in the first century, what about today?

It's fair to say that family life in our culture is very different from that in the first century. So how do we apply these words to us?

Instead of focusing on the behavior, I want to encourage us to figure out how Christ is present in every interaction within our homes—whether picking up Legos, driving children to soccer practice, taking out the trash, or absent-mindedly saying "uh-huh." If you are a follower of Jesus, then your home can be transformed by the presence of Christ. Find Christ at home.

When I was a child, I started a journal called my "parenting notebook." Whenever my parents did something that I considered a gross violation of human decency, I would record it in my notebook under the category of "Things I'll never do as a parent." One of my biggest regrets in life is that I no longer have that notebook. I would love to read it!

I do remember one thing I wrote down, though. One time I was lying on the couch when we were getting ready to watch TV as a family. My mom came into the room, and she told me to move because she wanted to lie on the couch. I think I went straight to my notebook and wrote, "I will never tell my children to move off the couch." That's a promise that I break most days.

How does Christ show up when I ask my children to get off the couch so that I can sit there?

It is mostly in everything that happens beneath the surface. The external interactions are not what is in view here—it's the presence of Christ within, underneath, throughout, and behind all those interactions. It happens slowly. Christ transforms us from within. He is there when we are tempted to react with anger, disappointment, disrespect, dominance, or withdrawal.

What does it look like for children today to obey the Lord? How does a child respond inside when their parents ask them to help out? As children, how do you relate to your siblings? For adult children, how do you support your aging parents? What if, in all those situations, finding the presence of Christ is more important than any of the actual decisions?

What does it look like for parents to nourish their children? The goal here is the "discipline and instruction of the Lord." Is that our greatest hope as parents? We want to prepare our kids educationally, socially, professionally, and physically for all that being an adult involves. What about spiritually?

What if, as parents, our first and primary concern for our children were about their spiritual lives? What would that even look like?

Most of these changes are subtle. But over time, we are transformed by them. As we see Christ in the middle of our family relationships, the whole culture of our family shifts.

Christ transforms the home, but he also transforms the workplace. Let's look at that next.

## Work

This is the second half of our passage this morning, but the third pair in the overall household code from Ephesians. This one addresses bondservants and masters.

### Ephesians 6:5-9:

**Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, 6 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. 9 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.**

First, let's address the elephant in the room and talk about slavery. The word translated here as "bondservants" is rendered as "slaves" in other translations, which is a fair translation. This passage addresses a situation we would define as slavery. Right away, that raises questions. The biggest is why the apostle didn't try to abolish or even just criticize slavery.

It is critical to understand two big ideas. First, the economic institution of slavery in the first century was nothing like what scholars call "chattel slavery" practiced in the US and other parts of the world in the 18th and 19th centuries. For more detail on this point, you can read this article on bible.org.<sup>2</sup>

Second, these words do not affirm or defend any version of slavery. Nowhere does the New Testament validate the economic structure of slavery. In general, the authors of the New Testament don't try to reform cultural institutions. Instead, they give Jesus followers a new way of living within those institutions. Gradually, as that new way takes root, the institutions end up getting transformed from the inside out.

Much more could be said, but let's turn our attention to how to understand these words in our day.

Notice that these instructions are basically given broadly to everyone engaged in work. At the end of the instruction to bondservants, the apostle Paul broadens the application for free workers as well. When he gets to masters, his words are mind-blowing: "Masters, do the same to them." That would have created shock waves in the first century.

Notice that the same dynamic we saw in marriage and parenting is here as well. Christ is inserted as a third character into the relationship between bondservants and their masters. Bondservants obey as they would Christ. Masters are reminded that in the kingdom of God, they are equal to the people under the authority on earth.

The main exhortation has to do with how these two people treat each other. Bondservants and masters, bosses and employees, teachers and students, and the like. Let's look at some of the phrases the apostle Paul uses.

"with fear and trembling" // "eye-service" // "people-pleasers" // "sincere heart" // "service with a good will"

The first one is a bit confusing: "with fear and trembling." That sounds terrible. But we need to realize that this phrase is a first-century idiom. It means something slightly different than what the words communicate. It is like the phrase "through thick and thin" means good and bad times, or "don't beat a dead horse" means to leave the issue alone. Who would actually beat a dead horse?

"With fear and trembling" means to treat the other person with respect and humility. It's used throughout the New Testament to indicate a posture of humbleness.

The apostle Paul says not to work for "eye-service" or to be "people-pleasers." We'd call this person a "brown-noser" or "yes-man."

The contrast to this is to obey with a "sincere heart." That word for "sincere" also means "simple." You don't say one thing and mean another. There is no hidden agenda. You are not angling or manipulated. We might say, "what you see is what you get."

Then there is "rendering service with a good will," which refers to attitude. You are part of the team. You contribute. There is enthusiasm and engagement.

Respect. Honesty. Integrity. Simplicity. Enthusiasm. Engagement.

Those are all great words for how you should be at work. You can find them in pretty much any book on the topic of work. They show up in onboarding manuals and company values. But unless your workplace, school or volunteer agency looks like this, you know that these words are not enough.

The real power in these words is, once again, found in the presence of Christ.

"as you would Christ" // as bondservants of Christ"  
// "will of God" // "as to the Lord" // "receive back from the Lord" // "their master and yours"

It's the presence of Christ in and through all of these interactions that makes everything completely different. Just as we found Christ at home, we can find Christ at work.

Sometimes that means finding Christ in our work.

When I was in college, I participated in several Christian groups. I often felt like those groups sent me a subtle message: Don't focus on your studies because that can become an idolatry. Instead, do ministry and lead stuff with us. Eventually, I felt like my schoolwork was earthly and ministry was more spiritual.

Then I went to a PBC Men's Retreat, and I heard a speaker. I don't remember what he said or who he was. But I remember him talking to these men about their work. He knew that they spent the majority of their time doing professional work, and he seemed to think that was okay. He wasn't telling them to ignore their work. He was helping them to figure out how to do their work as a Christian.

If that resonates with you, great! Because this year, at our PBC Men's Retreat, we are going to focus on that topic. We will be thinking about our vocation—whether it's school, work, retirement or anything else— and asking how we find Christ there. I will do some of the teaching, as will Steve Zeisler and Mayo Adigun, one of our young adults. We will also hear from people sharing stories about their journeys to find Christ at work.

If you're not a man or cannot make the retreat, there will be other opportunities in the fall that we are working on through the new Leadership Institute. Stay tuned or contact me if you want to be part of something.

Let me make one application for how you might find Christ at work. The last phrase really struck me, "there is no partiality with him." The apostle Paul tells masters to remember that they all have the same master. That simple idea can completely change your workplace as you look for Christ there. The simple truth is that every workplace, home, school, and institution in this country has deep structures of partiality.

When I worked as a Product Manager for Oracle designing software, we would often be in meetings with representatives from different sides of the development process. There was always a divide between the developers, who wrote the software, and the Quality Assurance (QA) team, who tested the software and found problems with it. The developers generally had higher levels of education. How can you not expect some tension when the whole job of the QA department is to tell others what they did wrong?

Our QA manager at the time was a bit tricky to interact with. He had conflict with many people, but he and I had a good relationship. One time he came up to me and thanked me. I asked him why and he said, "because you always ask for my opinion in meetings."

You can find this same dynamic in many places. There's a healthcare divide between doctors and nurses. There's a restaurant divide between food servers and preparers. There's an education divide between administrators and teachers. There's a government divide between elected officials and appointed officials. It happens everywhere.

Finding Christ at work could look like seeing him in unlikely places like those who would otherwise be forgotten or ignored. Or it could look like recognizing him in the people who have authority instead of badmouthing and disrespecting them. When you start to look for him, you will find Christ everywhere at work.

## Finding Christ in culture

Before we wrap up, I want to add some comments about this section of Scripture as a whole. In the last two weeks, we've seen the apostle Paul address some first-century cultural structures in a way that is very consistent with first-century forms. He uses the common cultural structure of a household code to communicate. That brings up the general question of how followers of Jesus live within the particular culture in which they find themselves.



I see the apostle doing two distinct things. First, he helps followers of Jesus to function well within the bounds of their current setting. He does not either defend that setting or suggest it should be revolutionized. He doesn't try to end slavery or liberate women. He gives guidance for operating within culture.

Second, he does so in a way that puts Christ at the center. Because of the presence of Christ, the culture is slowly but strongly transformed. Values become different. Relationships change. Things that used to be okay do not seem as okay anymore. Not because the rules have changed, but because the culture is shifting.

Think back to the roles you thought of earlier and consider how the presence of Christ might transform each of those roles. Our goal is not just to find Christ at home or to find him at work. We can find Christ everywhere.

We've seen some powerful themes. Power dynamics. Attitude. Appearance versus reality. Anger. Control. Respecting each other. Trusting in God for the paycheck. Abusing power with threats. Do any of these apply to your roles?

Studying this book with the other Palo Alto pastors has been really helpful. I thought one of the examples which came up in our discussion could be helpful for us as an example. Our friends at Lord's Grace Christian Church talked about the dynamics between recent Chinese immigrants and their children.

Often, people immigrating from China perceive the US as a Christian culture. A family moving here wants to preserve some aspects of their culture—let's call it Eastern culture. Their children growing up here are caught up in the local culture—let's call it Western culture. But for a Christian family, how does Christ fit in?

Should the children obey their parents in maintaining an Eastern culture? Should the parents defer to their kids who experience more of a Western culture? Or is there another culture that's a Christian culture which should replace both of them? In these kinds of culture wars, it can seem like everyone loses.

These passages don't suggest that our goal is to create a Christian culture. In fact, this is one of the most powerful things about following Jesus. Christ can be embodied within any culture. Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern.

Our job is not to establish a Christian culture but to take kingdom values and infuse them within the culture we find ourselves. There is no Christian culture. There are a diversity of cultures, each of which can be transformed by Christ in different ways. Culture is always shifting and changing and adapting. Christ stays the same, but he infuses culture dynamically.

The result is a beautiful tapestry of unique cultures, each expressing the person of Jesus and the values of the kingdom in different ways. The details are different, but the shape is the same.

Or, as I said earlier, find Christ everywhere.

## Conclusion

As we wrap up, let's go back to some of the roles that we play in our world.

This is what happens when we find Christ in our families and our homes. Those places are changed by the different ways we act within them. And that becomes a witness to the world—a quiet, compelling witness of invitation.

When we are reoriented toward Christ, our culture shifts in that direction as well. We are not told to demand change, use political power, or enact legislation. We simply follow Christ in all of these quiet day-to-day ways. And the kingdom of God advances.

But not without conflict. As we wrap up our series in Ephesians next week, we will see how there are forces in the world which would prevent us from finding Christ everywhere. But we will also see how God gives us the tools we need to fight that battle.

Over the past two weeks, we have looked at marriage, family, and professional life. We have seen the apostle Paul try to reorient all those relationships to have Christ at the center. As we move into worship, then, it makes sense to celebrate the ritual that Jesus gave us to experience his presence among us.

The Lord's table is an ordinary event—a meal—that has been transformed by the presence of Christ. As we take the bread and the cup, we physically experience a reminder of Christ within us. So let us come to the table and ask God to help us be reoriented in everything to Christ.

## Endnotes

1. Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan Academic, July 7, 1996).
2. Daniel B Wallace, "Some Initial Reflections on Slavery in the New Testament," *Bible.org*, <https://bible.org/article/some-initial-reflections-slavery-new-testament>.