

This Great Mystery

Session 10. Children, Fathers, Slaves, Masters

The masters have a Master, and with him there is no partiality.

What We Found

Paul addressed children and slaves directly, before their fathers and masters, something the moral handbooks of his world never did. Being spoken to at all was a dignity, and it made the least powerful people in the house full moral agents whose obedience and work could be offered to Christ himself. The commandment he quotes to children carries a promise, and Paul quietly widens it from the promised land to the whole earth: covenant membership, opened to the nations, starting at the age of obedience. Fathers, who held nearly absolute power under Roman law, got a boundary and a job: do not provoke, and form your children in the Lord.

Then verse 9. Masters are told to do the same to their slaves, the very good-willed, from-the-heart service slaves were commanded, and to give up threatening, the one tool that made slavery run. One word, *kyrios*, does the heavy lifting: the earthly masters have a Master in heaven, and with him there is no *prosopolempsia*, no receiving of faces, no partiality. Every premise slavery rested on is denied inside five verses, and the Church grew that seed to full height: St. Gregory of Nyssa attacking slaveholding itself by the fourth century, and the Catechism today forbidding the enslavement of human beings outright. Ephesians keeps flattening the walls the world calls permanent, Jew and Gentile, husband and wife, parent and child, master and slave, because the mystery we unsealed last week, Christ and the Church as one body, cannot have one member owning another.

Voices of the Church

St. John Chrysostom, d. 407

Preaching on this very passage to the parents of Antioch and Constantinople, Chrysostom presses verse 4 hard. In substance he tells fathers: you spare no expense to have your son taught rhetoric and set up in a career, yet you give no thought to the discipline and instruction of the Lord; you are shaping an orator and neglecting a soul. Raise the child first for Christ, he urges, train him like an athlete for God, for a child formed in holiness is a greater legacy than any estate, and everything else you give him will follow rightly from that.

Homilies on Ephesians and his treatise on the right way for parents to bring up their children. Summary of St. John Chrysostom's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. Most of us are not parents yet, but all of us are deciding right now what we believe formation is for.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, d. c. 395

Preaching on Ecclesiastes' line 'I bought male and female slaves,' Gregory turns on the slaveholder in the congregation. In substance he asks: you have bought a human being; tell me the price. God made this creature in his own image and appointed him ruler over the earth; who is so arrogant as to think himself the owner of God's image? What pile of coins did you decide was equal to a human nature? You have condemned to slavery one whose nature is free, and you have set a price on someone God made priceless.

Homilies on Ecclesiastes, Homily 4. Summary of St. Gregory of Nyssa's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. This is what the seed in verse 9 grew into within three centuries: a bishop attacking not cruel masters but the owning of persons itself.

St. Josephine Bakhita, d. 1947

Kidnapped in Sudan at about seven years old, sold and resold, beaten and scarred, she was so traumatized that she forgot her own name; her captors called her Bakhita, 'fortunate.' Sold at last into a household in Italy, she came to know a different kind of master. In the Venetian dialect she called God il Paron, the Master, and Benedict XVI recounts her discovery in substance: above all the masters who had owned and abused her there was a different Master, the living Lord, and this Master had himself been flogged, and this Master loved her, awaited her, and called her his own. Knowing that Master, she said, she was truly free, and she spent the rest of her life as a Canossian sister telling others they had the same Master.

Her canonization testimony, as recounted by Benedict XVI in Spe Salvi 3. Summary of St. Josephine Bakhita's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. Bakhita read verse 9 from underneath, and the word she chose for God is the exact wordplay of the verse: the masters have a Master, and hers was good.

Live It This Week

Practices

1. Honor your father and your mother concretely this week: one call, one letter, one real thank-you for something specific. If that relationship is wounded, your honoring can be a single guarded prayer for them from whatever distance is safe; that counts, fully.
2. Pick your most invisible task of the week, the dishes, the data entry, the shift no one sees, and do it deliberately 'as to the Lord and not to men.' Once, on purpose, with attention.
3. Find the one place you hold power over someone and rule by low-grade threat, the sharp tone, the silence, the hanging deadline, and forbear it for seven days. Replace it once with the good-willed service you would want from above you.
4. Pray one decade of the Rosary this week for the millions still enslaved today, trafficked and in forced labor, and for their masters' conversion. St. Josephine Bakhita, pray for us.

Scripture Memory

Ephesians 6:9

"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."

Ephesians 6:9

Go Further in the Catechism

- CCC 2214-2217. filial honor; obedience belongs to childhood, respect endures for life
- CCC 2222-2223. parents must respect and form their children as children of God
- CCC 1934-1935. all persons share one dignity; discrimination is incompatible with God's design
- CCC 2414. the enslavement of human beings is forbidden by the seventh commandment

Before next session. Read Ephesians 6:10-24 before we meet again: the last stretch of the letter, and the reason Paul has kept glancing upward all along.