

**Masters are admonished to furnish their servants with some particular things.** That’s what the word “treat” here means. It means “to furnish” or “to cause to experience”. That is, to provide them what they need, and what they need, in the admonishment of the Lord, is justice and equality from those in power over them. Therefore, the role of masters is not simply to rule, but in Christ it is actually upended, for it practically means to serve; to use one’s resources and power and position in order for the ones under their authority to obtain these two things: fairness (righteousness) and equality.

This concept of “justice” and "equality" (ἰσος, from the root which is used in “isosceles” and “isometric”) has the idea of an equal quality (equal sides, equal measure), and is the same root word that Paul uses in referring to Jesus in Philippians 2, who "did not count equality with God something to be clung to", and Peter uses in 2 Peter 1:1, referring to the faith of his readers when he writes, "to those receiving an equal faith as us in the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ."

**This equality, given the context, is the equality of *honor and belonging*.** It is the important objective assessment that all who have power and authority in this world must express and maintain with those who serve under their authority. Because it is inherent in the nature of humanity to define one’s honor by their role. It is easy for a person in a vulnerable or needy position to be crushed by those in power, who give the impression or make it explicit that the weaker person is worthless or less significant or shameful. It is an issue that I addressed between husbands and wives and children and parents, whereby we struggle to value a submissive role as equally honorable or important as a powerful one. Yet, what we saw is that God, Himself, exists in both roles, as authority and servant, the Son serving the Father in mutual interdependence and honor. So, Paul is not abolishing the existence of the roles in which authority and submission exist. He does not reject such relationships. Rather, he reorders power and position away from the value system of the

world and upends them, showing that those in authority, masters, are also servants, those with power must furnish those vulnerable to them with whatever needs and resources that the Chief Master, the Lord Jesus, assigns to them. Each person must be treated, then, as having equal honor regardless of their position or power in this world. Such equality checks the imbalance of power from becoming an abuse of power, a weapon to be wielded for oneself as the means of using people as tools for one's own personal gain.

**This truth, that all people are to be servants of the Lord, means that all authority is to be invested for the glory and purpose and flourishing of the whole community of Christ,** not the individual who has earthly authority, and the whole is to thrive for the glory of the One who holds all things together, God alone.

This pattern of servanthood is expressed by the ending phrase of Colossians 4:2, "knowing that you, too, have a master in the heavens."

The "knowing" of the command to furnish their servants with justice and equity is parallel to the "knowing" of the servants who were previously admonished to obey those in authority over them. The servants were to submit to their masters "knowing" that they will receive a reward of the inheritance from Christ Jesus. Masters are to "furnish justice and equality" to the servants *knowing* that they, too, have a master in heaven, or, to put the same thing in a different verbiage, they are also servants of the Master. All shepherds are sheep, too.

**Therefore, what is revealed here about power and authority is that such power and authority is not without the context of submission inherent within it.** Every power must be submissive to the Lord. Every authority must work for God's purposes by God's means. Any departure from these two aspects, purpose and means, are not merely faults or weaknesses, but utter contempt for Christ and a dangerous openness to the world's means of power, which James calls demonic..

Instead, look at how the apostles describe their authority and how they use it: Peter claims that his readers have the same faith, the same righteousness, from the same relationship with Christ Jesus as the apostles do (2 Peter 1:1); Paul and Apollos are both powerful and authoritative apostles, but they "reckon themselves servants" in 1 Corinthians 4; and see how Paul requests that Philemon and his wife Apphia release of their brother and slave, Onesimus, by stating, "though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you...for my child Onesimus...sending my very heart...I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord..." (Philemon 1:8-14, partial)

**The Christian master is always a servant first.** This does not deny that there are roles of authority, but this admonition is about how we use that power. Jesus told his disciples that they should use their authority differently than the world, not "lording it over others like the nations do", but instead serving one another (Luke 22:25-27). The greatest in the kingdom of heaven is not the one who is served, but the one who serves. Jesus showed his disciples how to use their power and authority when he arose to wash their feet (John 13), when he used his riches to become poor so that you and I might gain the wealth of being accepted by God (2 Cor 8:9), and the most poignantly in the incarnation itself, whereby the eternal Son of God did not cling to His rightful honor as God, but instead took the form of a servant, dying a shameful death as an accused and wrongfully condemned criminal, and who fully and finally entrusted Himself only to His Father (John 2:24-25; Luke 22:42), who looked upon such obedience, such servanthood, such other-giving and self-sacrificing serving love as the most honorable and worthy actions that a human being can perform and so highly exalted Him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that every knee in heaven and upon the earth and under the earth should bow at its mention and agree that He is the true master over all, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:5-11)

**If we are to be good servants of Christ, it is imperative, wherever we have power and authority, to first recognize how our use of this power shapes the lives of those**

**around us.** Susan Mikesic wrote, **“I’m trying to imagine ethics without an awareness of power. That would be like trying not to step on anyone’s toes, without an awareness of one’s feet.”**

**For, every relationship where there is an authority and a submitter contains a power differential which can be used honorably or wickedly.** A power differential is a relationship where one person or party possesses, either explicitly or implicitly, greater authority than the other. There is an imbalance of power which makes the less powerful person more vulnerable to influence or actions of the powerful, or authoritative, person.

**Some possible relationships of which there are power differentials are:** Employer and employee, Teacher and Student, Clergy and Congregant, Law Enforcement Officer and Civilian, Coach and player, Group leader and attendee, Doctor and patient, Parent and child, Husband and Wife. Within these relationships there is an expertise or authority that creates an inequality of power in the relationship. In some of them there are implicit consequences. For example, if student disobeys a teacher’s order, there may be consequences to her grade, or her receiving of a scholarship, etc. This is a power differential, and shows the power that person in authority possesses over a person in submission. The stronger the authority, the greater the possible consequences to the submitter, the greater the power differential and the greater the opportunity for influence, for good or for bad.

These power differentials are different than influence, although every power differential is rooted in influence. The primary difference is the issue of authority. For example, friends influence each other, siblings influence each other, coworkers influence each other, but none of these are relationships where there is a clear authority and submission role. Rather, power differentials are present where clear lines of authority and submission are present, as the above relationships illustrate.

In the light of such relationships, which in and of themselves are not wrong, **we must heed Christ Jesus’ call to shape the manner in which we exercise power.** Because the

gospel, in its equalizing nature, transforms the way that we use our position, our influence, our authority, and our power.

We must stop and ask ourselves the question, “What am I using my authority *for*?” And the only God-honoring, appropriate, virtuous goal of any power or influence which we have is that which is consistent with the goals of Christ Jesus. This is that which glorifies God, as God defines it and prescribes it, in the manner and means which God ordains, in the holiness which reflects His character and values according to His Word.

As servants, we must then ask ourselves the question, “*How* am I trying to reach these goals? Am I working to accomplish God’s goals in God’s way?” The manner by which we use our power or position is not open to any interpretation, and the ends do not justify the means in any case, but the means and manner of the exercise of our power must be in-line with the manner and means which God has ordained. Love, not coercion, for example. Compassion, not fury. Truth, not deception. Every power and authority must be exercised in the light, exposed for all to see, not hidden in the dark where hearts can be hardened by the deceptiveness of sin.

How often do we stop to consider our influence? How often do we expose the *means* of our influence to others to evaluate? Do we biblically reflect on what our intentions are for those under our authority, those vulnerable to our power? Too often we simply assume that our influence should be used to accomplish *our* goals, or *our* business' goals, or *our* nation's goals, or what we simply assume to be the best merely based upon the fact that it is *I* who assumes it, but Christ says that the “how” we work matters to an equal degree as to the “what” of our purposes.

This is such an important aspect of our use of power, that I do not believe that I can overstate it. We are inundated with stories of people who abuse their power, who manipulate people to act against their own consciences out of fear. This **abuse of power**,

**the abuse of people, the self-centered manipulation of those under authority by those in authority happens because true purposes are kept in the dark, because they are hidden from the eyes of others.** In fact, the primary difference between manipulation and using good influence well is the question of whether or not the agenda of the powerful one is known by the vulnerable and the means of that influence is expressed, evaluated, and agreed upon. Hidden agendas are manipulative. Expressed and exposed agendas are key components of growth. Therefore, our agendas with one another should always be expressed, not only to those whom we are helping, but also to others to evaluate and correct where necessary. We must walk in the light. The truth is so often related to the light in the Scriptures because it is fearless, because it does not fear evaluation or judgment by those who belong to Christ Jesus.

Husbands who abuse their wives do so in the dark. They intimidate their wives into not talking about such things with others, manipulating them using the deceptions of intimacy and threatening to shame them. It should not be! The Church is the people of God who are redeemed to the truth, to walk in the light, to expose the deeds of darkness, not to walk in them.

Christian pastors who act one way in private and another in public are not walking in the truth. They who use intimidation and threat, who demand their way and threaten others, demean others, who minimize the significance of those whom they ought to be serving, are anathema, a bane to the Church of Jesus Christ. Such behavior must be brought into the light, tested and examined by the Scriptures to ascertain whether or not such goals, purposes, means, and manners are consistent with those of Christ Jesus. Such exposure in the light would protect the vulnerable from wicked men, masquerading as messengers of the light, but who are actually wolves in sheep's clothing, using and consuming God's people for their own appetites. Such men exist, my friends, whom the apostles warned us about early in the Church's existence. Jude calls them "hidden reefs...shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds, fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild sea

waves, casting up the foam of their shame; wayward stars for whom the utter depths of eternal darkness have been reserved." (Jude 1:12-13) Peter writes "they will exploit you with deceptive words...those who indulge their fleshly lusts and despise authority. Bold and self-serving... like irrational animals...they blaspheme about matters of which they are ignorant....They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions when they feast together with you, having eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; luring vulnerable souls; having hearts which have trained for coveting, these cursed children!" (2 Peter 2)

**Though we are a redeemed people, it is also true that sin is still present and capable of deceiving any of us, hardening any of our hearts, and doing great harm to many.**

This very possibility is why husbands, fathers, and masters must always be cognizant and admonished as to "how" we use our power. Therefore, we are not to be deceived. We are to walk in the light, and this is all the more important where our power and influence can do great damage to the vulnerable and the "weak-willed" among us. We are called to protect and provide for them, to grant them what they need to thrive in faith upon Jesus Christ, to entrust themselves to Him and to His Words alone, and to do so not for our own gain, but for His purposes and according to His means.

**So, how should we, then, live like this? How shall we go about making sure that our authority, where we have it, and our influence, where it exists, is being used in a God-honoring and Christ-exalting way?**

I love how Paul and Apollos relate this equalizing admonition to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 4:1-4. "This is how one should regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Now, it is sought in stewards that one be found faithful. So for me, it is a minor matter that I am examined by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even examine myself for judgement. For I am not aware of anything against me, but I am not acquitted because of this. The one who examines me for judgement is the Lord."

Look at how Paul refers to himself and Apollos, powerful apostles of the Lord and leaders and teachers in the Church. **He says that they should be “reckoned as servants”.** That is accounting language. Valuation language. Paul identifies as an underling of Christ and tells others that they should also identify him as such.

In fact, this word, servant, is not the word for slave, but the word for an “under-rower”, the one on the boat who sits with the rest of the rowers and simply pulls on an oar. He is not steering the ship. He is not even looking in the forward direction. He is looking at the helmsman, the captain, the Christ. The power that he exerts is not for his own boat, his own direction, and the means which that power is exerted is assigned to him in a seat on the starboard side.

He further extrapolates this servanthood with the word “steward.” A steward was one who was assigned by the house master to oversee the household. In a sense, it was the butler of the house, who oversaw, organized, and made the household thrive through his leadership. That is how Paul viewed his authority. He had authority in the house, but it was not his house. He is still a servant who answers to His master.

The butler could not serve his own purposes, but only the purposes of the master of the house. Or, like my Edward Jones agent. He cannot use my money to serve his own goals or purposes. To do so would be fraud worthy of prison time. Therefore, *how* a butler manages a household results effects the condition of the house. How a money manager manages your money effects your retirement future. Therefore, the means by which we exercise any authority which we have has tremendous power for the thriving or the degradation of those under our care. We begin to use our power rightly when we begin to identify as servants of Christ and refuse to serve ourselves. Paul sees his authority as only properly described by faithfulness to the Lord and to His ways, “it is necessary for a steward to be *faithful*.”

The goal of the servant is not power, comfort, reputation, wisdom, or eloquence, or rhetoric, or success, but *faithfulness* to the One who owns the house. Faithfulness, a trustworthy administration of the gospel (mysteries of God), in the true sense of the word: "worthy of the trust that has been placed in their care."

**And this is difficult because we hate to *identify* ourselves like this.** We may say that we serve, as an action, but we are hesitant to *define* ourselves as *servants*, underlings. This is because we think too highly of power. We think that such a definition is beneath us, belittles us, but we fail to see that God defines Himself as a servant. Even though He is the only, the unique, eternal One, He humbled Himself to take the form of a servant (Phil 2).

This doctrine of our *essential servanthood* is what builds unity, justice, equality: there is no more important individual than another in the Body of Christ – grace precludes it.

**Why, do you think, is it so difficult to define ourselves as servants and stewards?** Is it not because we implicitly believe that we must be *impressive* and that our impression upon the world is what changes the world? We live in a culture of impression. We manage how we appear to people so that we are perceived to be strong. We want to be seen as powerful, not weak; capable, not incapable; attractive, not unattractive; wise, not foolish; smart, not ignorant; important, not insignificant; needed, not unnecessary. I don't merely want to be a good father, I want to be an impressive father. I don't merely want to be a good husband, I want to be an impressive husband; an impressive pastor, an impressive artist, an impressive friend, etc.

And day we live our lives in a relational courtroom, presenting evidence intended to impress those around us. Sometimes we have good evidence, and we feel confident that the verdict people will place on us is "impressive", meaningful, significant, important...accepted. Sometimes we lack good evidence, we failed to be impressive and instead presented evidence

that can reveal that we are not great, and we fear the verdict that people will place on us is “unimpressive”, foolish, worthless, insignificant, hopeless...unacceptable.

When we believe this, we find ourselves hardened in heart, acting like masters instead of servants. We abuse those below us to impress ourselves, to impress them, to impress others. We feel that we have to use power coercively, to prove our impressiveness through sheer force of our will, either aggressively, or passively through manipulation and deceptive control. Or, still thinking of ourselves too much, we have to defend against any criticism with unrelenting force, blame-shifting, or seeking to destroy the reputation of the one who called us into question.

**But the gospel had freed Paul from such abuse of power.** How does it do this? Look at what he says: It is the Lord’s judgement that matters.

Look at how Paul describes this courtroom scene. It’s not how they might judge him. Others being impressed with him doesn’t matter. He is freed from people-pleasing and the fear of man. It’s not even how he judges himself. He is not seeking to prove to himself how great he is, either. What he thinks of his own impressiveness doesn’t matter. It is only what Christ judges that matters.

It is what Christ Jesus judges concerning his faithfulness to his calling. He told the Galatians, “Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

The Gospel of Jesus Christ changes everything, because if it’s only the Lord’s opinion that matters, and his judgement is concerning faithfulness, then we must recognize that at the foundation of our belonging, what makes us acceptable to God, what makes us belong in God’s presence, is not that we are impressive, but that Jesus is impressive *for us*.

**He went into the courtroom for us, taking our guilty failure upon Himself and granting us His evidence of faithfulness.** He impressed the Father with His obedient

faith, even to the point of death, and so God raised Him, and us with Him by faith, to beautiful glory. Now, we can accept criticism without being devastated by it or rejecting it outright. Now we can use our power for the sake of Christ and others, and not to impress anyone.

We can be humble servants because “My sins are so great and unimpressive that Jesus had to die for me.” And also confident servants because “God loves me so much that Jesus DID die for me.” I can only boast in Jesus Christ, crucified for me. I cannot boast in my own strength. I’m not impressive. He is impressive. I am a *beloved* servant of a *sacrificially loving* Master. We can be perceived and judged as “underlings” without fear or shame, for Jesus Christ is not a harsh master, but loves us and shares His eternal inheritance with us!

**So now, for the believer in Jesus Christ, we can use whatever influence that we have without a need to be *impressive*.** We can now work without fear and with deep humility. You see, it is only this Gospel of God’s self-sacrificial generosity that brings true humility, the ability to see ourselves *essentially* as servants and stewards, for God’s love is set upon us as servants whom he also has made to be sons and daughters.

When we are boasting in the Cross as that which impresses God, we can love others for their sakes and not as some evidentiary exhibit of our own worthiness. We can be faithful, even when people may ignore us, mock us, or hate us. For now when God looks at you he sees one who is infinitely valuable and lovely, for you are in Jesus. How can you worry about not being respected? How can you worry when people get in the way of achieving your goals? Where is the power of wrath? It is demolished by the Cross! Where is the power of fear? It has been cast out by His perfect love. When I grasp in my soul that Christ is all I need, then I will be a faithful servant who uses my power to serve His purposes, by His means, instead of serving my own.

Therefore, **do everything in your power to grasp, deeply in your soul, the supremacy and the sufficiency of Jesus** for you. Make that what you seek, not power, and you will find the rest which your impression-seeking heart craves.