

God's Word for the Workplace

EPHESIANS 6:5-9

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Over the last several weeks, we have been looking together at Paul's inspired advice for various relationships in the New Testament book of Ephesians. We've looked at how we interact with each other in the church (in Chapters 4 and 5), we have looked at the relationship between husbands and wives (in the last half of Chapter 5), and then over the past two weeks we have looked at the relationship between parents and their children (in the opening words of Chapter 6). This morning we continue in this series on Ephesians by look at the relationship between slaves and masters in Ephesians 6:5-9 (p. 1833). And at first, we might be tempted to think: There is no way that a passage on slaves and masters has any real-world application to our situation here in Madison, Wisconsin, in the year 2014. And probably the reason why we hesitate is that our view of slavery has perhaps been very closely tied to the atrocity of slavery here in the United States through the mid-1800's, where men and women and even children were basically kidnapped from their homes in Africa and were brought here, where they were separated from their families and forced to work under some incredibly harsh conditions.

From history, though, we know that the situation in the ancient Roman world was quite different. There were certainly some harsh conditions, and some slaves were brought in from far-off lands that were conquered by the Romans, but there were also a good number of other reasons why someone might end up in a slave and master relationship. Often, when Rome would conquer a far-off land, they would leave the common laborers, and they would bring back many of the doctors, and lawyers, and architects, and engineers, and professors, and these men and women would then be called upon not for common labor, but to manage households, to practice medicine, to tutor children, and to serve in whatever professional capacity they had held back home. Often, in fact, slaves were far more educated than their owners. And so the owner, for example, might have been the one to go out and work in the field, as the PhD slave stayed behind to teach the children and basically run the household. Slaves in this category had the legal authority to own property, even owning other slaves if they chose to do so, and on top of this, they had the ability to save money to eventually purchase their own freedom.

Others became slaves in the ancient Roman Empire because they got into debt and had to sign a contract to work for a particular length of time until that debt was paid. I would compare this to what happens with Visa and MasterCard today – perhaps we get in over our heads financially, and the fine print pretty much says that we will work and work and work until that debt is paid. Jesus, in fact, referred to this several times where

slaves owed money and had to work until the debt was paid. Others were sentenced into slavery by a judge and were ordered to work for a certain length of time as a punishment for some kind of crime.

We know from early church history that many of the first Christians were slaves. In fact, we have writings from shortly after the close of the New Testament that some of the early Lord's Day collections went for purchasing the freedom of a brother or sister out of slavery. Some have wondered: Why didn't Paul just condemn slavery? Why didn't Paul just tell these Christians to run away? Why did Paul not encourage slaves to go after some kind of a political solution? My understanding is that God had a different plan, and that is: Instead of encouraging some kind of revolt that would have been devastating to the early church (and the slaves themselves), God instead chose to work on people's hearts, one at a time. Because you know, when you live by the Golden Rule, the concept of owning another human being suddenly becomes very unappealing! When I start treating people the way I want to be treated, setting those slaves free suddenly becomes a no-brainer! And that is exactly what Paul encouraged. We think of the book of Philemon, a book written by Paul to a slave-owner. Apparently, a slave had escaped from Philemon over in Asia Minor and had made his way to Paul in Rome. His name was Onesimus, and when he found Paul, he was baptized into Christ. At that point, instead of telling this slave to make a run for it, Paul sent the slave back to Philemon with a message. In one of the most diplomatic pieces of writing we will ever read, Paul urged Philemon, ***"that you would have [Onesimus] back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, [as] a beloved brother."*** And so we find, then, that Paul did address the end of slavery – one relationship at a time.

For the time being, though, Paul had some inspired words for slaves and masters. And when we think about it, I believe we will be able to see some lessons that still apply to us today – not necessarily as slaves and masters, but as employees and employers. And there are also lessons here for those who are self-employed, and for those who are retired or even unemployed or under-employed (as we are seeing more and more of in our current economy). In fact, I might even say that there are some lessons here for those of you who are students in school as you do work in your classes. Is there a right way to work, even in a difficult situation, even when it doesn't seem fair? Is there a way for employers or supervisors to manage in a Godly way, even while still making a profit (which, of course, is the whole point of being an employer) – is it possible to do this in a way that is pleasing to God? If you will, please look with me at Ephesians 6:5-9, the inspired words of the apostle Paul,

⁵ Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷ With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, ⁸ knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

⁹ And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

- I. Again, as we look at this little paragraph, I want us to divide our thoughts as we have for the past several weeks, starting with **PAUL'S ADVICE TO THOSE WHO ARE SLAVES.**

And again, hopefully we are not actually slaves today, although we might feel like it sometimes; however, for roughly 40-60 hours every week, most of us have for all practical purposes sold ourselves, we have sold our time to do something for another person. And again, for students, I would point out that going to school is your job.

A. So with this in mind, as we look at verse 5, we find that we are to behave in this context with DILIGENT OBEDIENCE.

We are to work. We are to work hard at whatever we are called upon to do – whether we are slaves, or students, or self-employed, working for a small or family-owned business, or even working for a huge multi-national corporation. If somebody is in a position of authority over us, we are to obey to the best of our ability, as long as what we are told to do does not violate the word of God in some other way. But what if our supervisor is a real hassle to work for? What if my awesome efforts at work are never recognized? What if I'm worth a lot more than I'm being paid? What if I seem to be trapped in a dead-end job? I would say: Remember, this passage was written to SLAVES!

And so as Christians, it seems one of the main ideas in this passage is that if we are being paid to work, we are to be some of the hardest working people any supervisor has ever seen. We are to be diligent. We are to actually do the job we are being paid to do. As Christians, we are not to be the ones standing around wasting time. We are not to be the ones who are always daydreaming, constantly socializing, or even sleeping. We are not to be the ones always whining and undermining morale. We are not to be the ones checking in on Facebook all day when we are being paid to do something else. Where the situation allows, we are to be the first ones to show up and the last ones to leave. As Christians, we are not to be the ones who are always showing up late. As you know, my wife is a supervisor over several employees with our local school district. Those under her are making upwards of \$12-13 per hour, but even with what seems to me to be a pretty good wage, the main struggle comes in finding people who can simply show up on time. Just showing up on time seems to be a huge struggle these days. As Christians, though, we are to be the ones who show up when we are expected to show up. And that's even before we start working.

Several weeks ago, Clint Oppermann had an article in *Think* magazine with the title, "Stealing from God." And in that article, he pointed to a recent study that found that 64% of all employees visit non-work related websites on a daily basis. That might not seem too bad, after all, maybe it was just a quick visit over a lunch break or something; however, the study also found that more than 60% wasted at least an hour a day surfing the web as they were being paid to do something else! The study went on to point out that younger workers are the worst offenders, with some Gen X'ers and Millennials wasting between 1.6 to 2 hours per day on the web. Do we realize what that means? If I'm being paid \$20 an hour to do my job, but I use a total of 2 hours of my workday to surf the web, I am effectively stealing \$40 every day from my employer. From God's point of view, that's the same as forging a check or reaching in to the register or taking home a good chunk of the product every day. It is stealing. And so, to the best of our ability, we are to be assets, not liabilities to the bottom line. To the best of our ability, we are to do our jobs in a way that blesses those who are higher up in that organizational chart.

In the Bible, we think of young men like Joseph, a young man who was yanked away from his family and worked for a pagan ruler who pretty much hated God, and yet Joseph worked hard and became a blessing to his supervisors. You might remember how God blessed Potiphar's house where Joseph served as a slave. Later on, imprisoned on false charges, Joseph went to work in the prison, where God blessed everything he did. And after that, Joseph excelled as second in command only to Pharaoh, preparing the land of Egypt for a disastrous famine. In all of these roles, Joseph was an asset, never a liability. At work, our goal (like Joseph) is to do our work willingly, without needing to be harassed or pestered into getting it done; instead, we are to go above and beyond.

You know, it seems to me that if some people would put as much effort into their work as they put into their excuses, they would excel beyond their wildest dreams. Maybe you read the story in the newspaper a few years ago where a high school English teacher motivated his students to write by having them forge an excuse note from their parents. The paper said that the kids just went all out on that assignment! They were overflowing with amazing creativity. They came up with all kinds of unique excuses. They put their hearts into it. They wrote, and wrote, and wrote...and only when they were done did they realize that they had been tricked into writing by writing excuses for not writing! It was probably their best work! As Christians at work or school, though, we are to be diligent, not making excuses, but doing what we are asked to do with respectful obedience.

- B. As we move on in this passage, we also find some inspired words from God concerning our attitude: Not only are we to obey, but WE ARE TO DO OUR WORK WITH SINCERITY OF HEART, AS TO CHRIST – not just when the boss is watching, not just to get on the good side with a supervisor, but we are to do our work as if we are working for God himself.**

And with this, we find that God places a high value on work itself. No matter what we do for a living, if we are faithful Christians, our work honors God. We work, as for the Lord. Going back to the Old Testament, we think about Daniel who was taken away from home as a young man and forced to work as a government bureaucrat. Through everything, Daniel stayed faithful to God, even to the point of being thrown in the den of lions. And over in Daniel 6:20, the king comes early in the morning to see whether Daniel has survived, and the king calls out, ***“Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you constantly serve, been able to deliver you from the lions?”*** How interesting, that Daniel, working in a completely pagan government position, for a pagan king, in a pagan nation, was actually working for God. And the king could see it. In that position, Daniel was exactly where God wanted him to be.

Some of you might be familiar with what Martin Luther once said about the importance of work. He said, “The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays – not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps, but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.” With some of our members in mind, I would add to that: God loves a clean weld, God loves a more efficient battery, God loves a well-running furnace, God loves clean laundry, God loves well-packaged cheese, God loves a well-written lease, God loves clean and healthy air in our buildings, God loves good meals delivered hot and on time, God loves our local grocery stores well stocked with ice-cold food, God loves a well-designed septic system, God loves it when little children are taught and well cared-for, God loves it when the elderly are cared for professionally and with compassion, God loves clean computers free of viruses, God loves some good ice cream. Just a moment ago, I quoted Martin Luther. Allow me to quote another Martin Luther – Martin Luther King, Jr. – Mr. King once said, “If a man is called to be a street-sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or as Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, ‘Here lived a great street-sweeper who did his job well.’” Amen to that.

At work, then, we are to work eagerly, with the same enthusiasm as if the Lord God himself were our personal supervisor. Maintain the database as if the Lord himself were standing by your side. Package that cheese as if Jesus himself were about to stop by for a sample. Lead that classroom as if the Lord God were standing in the doorway, because He is! We are to do our work with sincerity, as if we are working for the Lord himself.

- C. **And speaking of the Lord seeing what we do, I would point out one more motivating factor here, and it comes in verse 8 – we are to work, “...KNOWING THAT WHATEVER GOOD THING EACH ONE DOES, THIS HE WILL RECEIVE BACK FROM THE LORD, WHETHER SLAVE OR FREE.”**

In other words, God is the one who will ultimately reward our hard work on the job. And with this, it seems as if Paul is addressing some common questions here: What if your supervisor doesn't notice how hard you're working? What if your co-workers make fun of you for working as hard as you are? What if your co-workers pressure you to do less, because after all, it's not in the contract, and by going above and beyond you are making the rest of them look bad? What if people take advantage of you by taking credit for something you have done? What if you end up being the only one washing the dishes (or whatever), because the rest of them are outside taking a smoke break? There are so many similar concerns, but it seems that Paul's advice to slaves is: Do not worry about it! Those things are out of your hands! As Christians, our job is to work hard and to let God sort it out in the end. Paul, then, is telling us to keep ourselves focused on something beyond the paycheck. We are to look out into the far distant future, knowing that God will ultimately bring our reward. There is a time when God will settle all scores. And what I love about verse 8 is that Paul officially ties this in with work in general, not just with slavery. Notice how he says, “*...whether slave or free.*” We may be slaves, or we may have a choice about where we work (as most of us do today), but in either situation, the Lord is paying attention. There is nothing we can do that God does not notice.

- II. **At this point, we move on with A BRIEF WORD TO MASTERS, or in our case, to employers, or managers, or supervisors – a word to those in positions of leadership.**
- A. **And what I love, first of all, in this verse, is that Paul pretty much says: MASTERS, ALL OF THE ABOVE! With the opening line in verse 9, Paul is saying: Everything I have said to slaves also applies to you!**

In other words, those in supervisory positions are to treat those under them as they would like to be treated if they were in the same situation. Ask the question, “What kind of boss would I want?” figure that out, and then go do it. “Do the same things to them,” Paul says. Respect their time. Respect their families. Lead with humility. Be positive. Lead with enthusiasm. Be fair. Encourage. Be constructive with discipline. Pay a decent and competitive wage, perhaps even allowing employees to share in the profits. Maintain reasonable expectations. Put a priority on workplace safety. There are so many things we might include here, but the point is: Those in leadership are to lead just as they would like to be led.

Now, before we dismiss verse 9 as only applying to CEO's or owners, I hope we realize that many of us may fit in here in a way that some of us may not realize. You may not be the big boss, but I would imagine that many of us here this morning might be called upon to maybe lead a team at some point. And even though you are not “in charge,” maybe you are called upon to teach or mentor a new employee. You may not be at the top, but maybe you have some kind of leadership position over those with less seniority. And so maybe all of us have more influence than we realize. I know that when I serve as a Chief Inspector for elections held in the City of Madison, I am put in a leadership position over the 15 or 16 fellow inspectors who are assigned to my polling place. They serve under me for a very long and sometimes very stressful 15 or 16-hour day. We are called upon to pretty much be experts in election law for one or two days a year and deal with the stressed out public, all while representing the City of Madison as we are sworn to uphold the constitution. Verse 9 applies to me!

Some of you might employ a baby sitter from time to time. Or maybe you hire somebody to come into your home to fix the plumbing or clean the carpets. Verse 9 applies to those situations. Some of us go out to eat at a place where someone serves us our food. Do we think verse 9 applies? We even call them “servers!” Do any of us think that servers enjoy being ordered around? “Gimme a coffee!” I’ve heard that said before. Is that how we would like to be treated if we were on the receiving end of that? Do we realize that most restaurant servers make a minimum wage of \$2.33 per hour? As they serve and as we tip them for their service, we need to keep verse 9 in mind, treating them with justice and fairness, trying to see things from their point of view. The Christian in that situation will not be barking out orders but will treat his or her “servant” with the utmost of respect, knowing that we also have a Master in heaven.

Several weeks ago, I ran across a Facebook page for flight attendants to post pictures of some of the gross stuff that passengers do on airplanes. If you want to look for it, the page is “Passenger Shaming,” and it is hosted by a former cop and paramedic now serving as a flight attendant. And there are some horror stories on there about how rude people can be toward flight attendants. As Christians, if we take verse 9 to heart, we will hopefully never end up on the Passenger Shaming website, but we will treat the crew with the utmost of respect.

B. Just briefly, I should note one specific here, as Paul tells Christian masters (or managers) to “GIVE UP THREATENING.”

And again, it gets back to the Golden Rule here. Paul isn’t saying that we can never correct a problem. I had to correct several issues with my staff during the long day we had this past Tuesday, misunderstandings that some my people had with election law, but we handled those situations and moved forward. Teach, and train, and move on. I have had to suggest to the city clerk that certain poll workers need to be dismissed from future service. They have listened to my advice. But there is no place for a Christian to manage by constantly issuing threats. By the way, the opposite of threats here seems to be encouragement. I know that many of us eat at Culver’s after worship sometimes. Did you know that on the bottom of your receipt, there is a website and an 800-number where you can fill out a survey and get a free scoop of custard for doing that? In that survey, there is a place where you can give positive feedback about a particular employee. When I eat at Culver’s, the person who takes my order is pretty much my servant, right? I am the king or master in that situation. Wouldn’t it be good, then, to make a mental note of that person’s name and write a comment when I fill out that survey? I have talked to the owner down there about those surveys, and they read every single one. Those comments make it back, by way of encouragement.

C. And then finally, Paul closes this section with a reminder for masters (or managers), that as they lead and as they direct, THEY ALSO HAVE A MASTER IN HEAVEN WHO SHOWS NO PARTIALITY.

Similar to that lesson up above, masters also have a Master! And our Master in heaven will someday be our Judge.

Conclusion:

And this seems to be the point of this whole passage: All of us are accountable to somebody, and ultimately, all of us are accountable to God. We started this study two months ago, back on September 7, by looking together at all of our spiritual blessings *“in Christ.”* And now we have brought it down to a very practical level. With everything we do, we as Christians are accountable to God. We are responsible for setting an example for those around us to follow. We will someday answer to God. In fact, all people will answer to God someday

– every human being who has ever lived will be called before God in judgment, and on that day, the Bible tells us that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. At that point, we will face God in judgment and answer for everything we have ever done, everything we have ever said, everything we have ever thought, and at that point our lives will be compared to the perfect life of Jesus Christ. And without perfection, the sentence will be an eternal existence in torment, separated from God forever. Unless, of course, our sins have been covered by the sacrifice of God’s own Son. But by then, it will be too late to make a decision. The time to make that decision is now.

The good news is that Jesus died in our place, that he was buried, and that he was raised up on the first day of the week. We obey the good news by turning away from sin, by allowing ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and by being raised up to live the Christian life. If you have any questions about God’s plan, we would love to study the Bible with you – just let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, we can fill up the baptistery downstairs, and you can be born into God’s family within the hour. If you are ready to make that decision, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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