

December 31, 2023

HONORING CHRIST IN OUR WORK

Ephesians 6:5-9

(15 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

As a pastor, one of the most intimidating moments you can face is when someone sees the text you're going to preach on and says, "I'm really looking forward to this text because I've spent my whole life studying this section of Scripture" or "I'm so excited about this text; it's my favorite in the whole Bible," or the like. Immediately you think to yourself, "You've been dwelling on this text and rejoicing in it for your entire life, and I've been studying it since Monday. You should probably prepare to be disappointed." And so it is with great relief that I start this sermon by announcing that no one has come to me in the days leading up to this one with the announcement, "That is my favorite text in all of Scripture!" No one has expressed his or her excitement about the text we're looking at this morning. The verses we're looking at this morning are no one's life verses. In fact, the prevailing thought may well be, how in the world does this text apply to any of us?

For the past three sermons there have been segments of the congregation that may feel like they're getting left behind. We've addressed those who are married, those who are parents, and children. And it was true each Sunday that there were people here who very well could have thought, "This text isn't directly addressing me." I don't think it would have been a large number, since many unmarried people in our congregation would like to get married, and so Ephesians 5:22-33 is instructive for them. And most of us, either have children or have living parents, and so portions of Ephesians 6:1-4 were particularly applicable to them. But there have perhaps been a few who felt the text didn't speak directly to them.

But if you felt that way about marriage and parenting, then no doubt you feel that way about a text addressing slaves. Now, I don't want to make light of the reality of slavery in our world because as I understand it, with sex trafficking and the like, there are reports that there are more people enslaved in the world today than at any time in our history. But I think I'm on safe ground to say that no one in our congregation this morning is currently laboring as a slave; nor does anyone in our congregation have slaves. And yet we're taking the time to look at a text of Scripture that is addressed to two groups that fit no one here today—slaves and masters. So what do we do?

Well, I think our way forward is to recognize a key truth. But before we get there, let me explain briefly about slavery in the Roman Empire at the time that Paul would've written this text. In the first century over one third of those in the Roman Empire would have been slaves.¹ But it was a good bit different than the slavery experienced in prior centuries in our country. For one, most

¹ This note and those following about slavery in the Roman Empire come from Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 419-22.

of the individuals who found themselves in slavery were in that position as prisoners of war or descendants of prisoners of war. Their people had been conquered by Rome in battle and instead of killing them, they were brought into the empire to serve as slaves. And while that made up a majority of those enslaved, others might be enslaved for economic reasons. They were in debt and instead of going to prison, worked off their debts as slaves. In that particular situation, one might even see a note of grace in it. But, finally, there were indeed others who were abandoned in infancy or who were captured by slave traders. But it seemed that this latter category was a great minority. The majority fell into these first two categories. Moreover, racial factors seemed to play no role as to who was enslaved. Slaves were composed of people from virtually every nation, language, and tribe. Every race would be found among the slave population in the Roman Empire.

Finally, two other factors set apart slavery in the Roman Empire from how we might think of it in our own country. Many slaves would be able to purchase their freedom. It wasn't uncommon for them to receive a sum of money for their work from their masters which could eventually be used to purchase their freedom. So it wasn't a situation of life-long ownership. And, finally, slaves could serve as doctors, teachers, accountants, and in all roles of society. Masters would often pay to train and educate their slaves, thinking that everyone benefits with this investment. In other words, the situation of slavery in first century Rome may well have as many commonalities with employment in our day as it would have with slavery in our country two-plus centuries ago.

And I think this is helpful for us to recognize, not so that we can act like this text isn't about slavery but so that we can recognize that this text has much to say to us in our current context as we live as employees and employers in our day. Paul wrote this text to the Ephesian believers because he knew that the economy in that day was largely built upon slavery and many of them would find themselves in that system. And I'm tempted to say that if he wrote this letter to the church in a situation like ours in the present-day United States, he would write about how we operate within our jobs, and it would sound just like this because I think pretty much everything he says (if not everything) is directly applicable to us.

Moreover, it's crucial for us to think of how we faithfully live as Christians in the workplace because so many of us spend so much time there. Every day has twenty-four hours, and let's estimate that we sleep for eight of them. Now, we have sixteen hours to consider. What do we do with those others sixteen? Well, for many of us, we spend eight to twelve in our jobs. We're going to work. Again, some may be more on the eight hour end of the scale, but others may be more toward the twelve hour end of the scale. But even if we only consider ourselves as working eight hours a day, that's half of our waking hours. That is, half of the hours that we're awake each day we're not reading our Bibles or praying; we're at work, working. So when Paul begins this second half of the book of Ephesians, telling us how to walk worthy of the calling that we've received in Christ (4:1), doesn't it make sense that we should consider how to walk in a God-honoring way as we work at our jobs? Indeed it does, and that's why Paul wrote Ephesians 6:5-9.

Therefore, this morning I'm going to walk through some key principles for how we work in such a way that Christ is honored in our jobs both because everything Paul says is directly applicable and because we desperately need to consider this. And the first note I want to begin with is that we should work as if we're working for Christ.

Work as if you're working for Christ

Paul begins our text saying, "Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ" (v. 5). Now, if Paul can tell slaves, who have no choice as to who their masters are, that they need to serve their masters as they would Christ, then how much more would he say this to you and me? Here's what I mean. You and I have chosen where we work. No one forced us to do this in a way that a slave might be forced into slave labor if he were a prisoner of war. We've chosen to work for the people whom we've chosen to work for. We do not have to work at the place we work. We've agreed to work there in exchange for a paycheck.

But, Paul tells us, if we're going to work for someone, then we're obligated to work for them as we would work for Jesus himself. That's the strength of the words "as you would Christ." John Stott has summed it up well, saying, "It is possible for the housewife to cook a meal as if Jesus Christ were going to eat it, or to spring-clean the house as if Jesus Christ were to be the honoured guest. It is possible for teachers to educate children, for doctors to help clients, shop assistants to serve customers, accountants to audit books and secretaries to type letters as if in each case they were serving Jesus Christ."² That does seem to be the picture here. And for those of you who are self-employed, just work as if Jesus were your boss because indeed that's how he'd have you work.

And, again, if our response is, "But my boss is tough," remember that Paul wrote this to people who were enslaved and had masters who owned them. I have trouble believing Paul would demand less of us. We can work hard, with a genuine heart, for a boss who is tough because we're not ultimately working for him; we're working to serve the Lord. This is the first note and everything else flows out of this. Work as if working for Jesus. Second, work with a good heart and desire to do well.

Work with a good heart and desire to do well

Paul mentions the heart or will multiple times in our text. We see it in verse 5 as he tells us to work with "a sincere heart" and in verse 6 as he tells us to do "the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man."

Just last week we noted that children aren't obeying and honoring their parents if they do what they're told but stop around, pout, or complain while they're doing it, Paul wants us to know

² John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 252.

that the same thing goes for us in our work. You and I should not do our work with a bad attitude. The Lord wants us to work with “a good will” from the heart and with a sincere heart. And there’s no reason we shouldn’t. After all, we’re working as unto the Lord.

Now, Paul gives us a bit of a contrast here to get a clearer picture of what he means as working from the heart and rendering service with a good will when he says, “not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers” (v. 6). We all know what it’s like to put our heads down and get to work when the boss comes in. In those situations, we want to send the message that we’re working hard, but really we’re just working hard when we’re seen, just to please him when his eyes are on us. Again, Paul tells us that this must not be how we labor. We don’t labor faithfully just when someone’s eyes are on us. We labor with our hearts, rendering service in good will, and serving just as if we’re serving Christ. This means that you work hard and do good work, even when your boss isn’t around, even when no one is looking over your shoulder.

It should be obvious at this point that in light of what the Bible teaches, Christians should be the best employees on the planet. Let’s make that true here in Jackson. May that reputation spread and help open doors for gospel conversation. And this brings us to our third element. Work, knowing that the Lord will reward you.

Work, knowing that the Lord will reward you

The hard thing about what I’ve been suggesting is that others around you at your work place may well do everything I’ve said not to do. You may put your head down and get to work, working hard, while everyone around you is being lazy. But then the boss walks in, everyone gets themselves to work, and there’s nothing that differentiates you in his eyes. They may get paid as much as you if not more and even be promoted over you.

I remember one summer when I got hired to do some data entry at a computer company. I was the new guy, and there was a girl that worked alongside of me doing the same task. The difference was that she’d worked there the summer prior, and so she was making a good bit more money than me, which was fine. She had more work experience. But I realized pretty quickly that she had mastered how to waste time at work, while I was just getting at my work. Honestly, I do a lot of things poorly, but entering data into a computer in an organized way—well I was made for that kind of work. I mean, I feel like the creation of the spreadsheet should be marked with a national holiday.

And sure enough, while she’d barely put a dent in her data entry workload, I was through. What I mean is that I finished everything that was supposed to take me the whole summer in the first few weeks. I went to my boss, told him I was done, and he was surprised, telling me to go on home and that he’d have something new for me to do the next day.

Now, you might be thinking, “Well, at least you got to go home early,” but I was an hourly worker, trying to earn money for the next semester of school. And it got worse the next day

when I showed up and was given a few tasks to do before being told that there was nothing left for me to do and he couldn't keep me on for the rest of the summer.

I wanted to say, "Let *her* go. Why are you even paying her? She wastes time. I'm proven to you I'm a good worker." But I said none of that. I just drove home and thought, "I need to find another summer job soon."

I didn't have this text in mind, but I could say that I was trying to do it, and I ended up losing in the whole matter. That girl beside me successfully wasted enough time to get paid all summer. I'm sure of it. And she got paid more than me for being way less productive. So what do you tell yourself in these situations, when no one is noticing, no one is rewarding you, and you may even suffer in the process? Well, Paul tells us.

In verses 7-8 Paul says that we should render service with a good will "as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free." What do you do in those moments of working hard as unto the Lord, seeing that no one is noticing? You tell yourself that the Lord sees and knows.

But actually that's saying too little. It's not just that the Lord sees and knows. Paul tells us that he promises to reward us for whatever good we do. In other words, if you work as unto the Lord, it may be that your boss doesn't notice. It may be that your boss doesn't reward you or promote you. But God sees every good thing you do, counts it as being done unto him, and he will grant you a reward.

Imagine that you worked in an environment like the one I just described but somehow survived all summer, and right at the end of the summer, when you're really tempted to give into bitterness, a man you don't know walks into the office and says to you, "I need you to come to my office for a second." You do. And he proceeds to tell you that a camera has been recording everything going on when those in the office thought no one was looking. And he is the owner of the business who merely monitors what's going on. He's seen your hard work, and he's blessing you with a bonus bigger than what you'd made the whole summer. Wouldn't that be amazing? Wouldn't that motivate you to work hard? Well, Paul tells us there's something better. The Lord sees and he promises us that he'll bless us—which will be greater than any bonus you could get. That's what verses 7-8 are telling us. So work, knowing you'll be rewarded.

And, finally, there's a word for those of us who have employees under us. We're to do all the same toward our employees that they're commanded toward us, and we're not to threaten as a form of motivation.

Treat employees the same way and don't threaten them

Now, this one is a bit trickier to apply when we get to the second part, but I'll see if I can flesh it out. First, Paul says to masters, "Masters, do the same to them" (v. 9). In other words,

everything that Paul has said about how slaves should work toward their masters, he says masters should do toward their slaves.

What this means is that just as an employee should work as if he's working for Jesus, so we should be the kind of employer that seeks to honor the Lord in how he manages or oversees those who work for him. We should ensure, first, that we're honoring Christ in what we do and that we're honest and genuine with them. We should be truthful and sincere. And employers too should recognize that even if their employees do not value their godly attitude toward them, the Lord who sees all will reward godly employers as well. So the first place Paul starts is just by telling those who are employers to respond to your employees even as Paul has commanded them. But then he gives a negative exhortation. Paul writes, "And stop threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him" (v. 9).

As I've mentioned, the parallel here is a bit more difficult. Although there were a number of differences between slavery in ancient Rome and slavery in the U.S. a couple centuries ago, it was the case that masters in the time of the Roman Empire would occasionally harm their slaves. They could threaten and follow through with physical punishment. Now, it didn't happen as often as one might think simply because a slave was an asset, and you didn't want to injure one who could do work for you. Nevertheless, it did occasionally happen, and so Paul tells these believing masters in Ephesus that they should stop threatening their slaves.

The parallel, then, is difficult because an employer is probably not going to find himself tempted to threaten physical violence to his employees because, well, you just can't do that. But I think we can apply it by saying that the way that a believing employer should motivate his employees is not by means of making threats. In other words, Paul seems to be saying that our approach with our employees shouldn't be constantly threatening them by saying, "Do good work or I'll fire you." Now it is proper to remove someone from being employed who isn't doing good work or compromising ethical standards or what have you. But the approach of simply using threats to motivate employees seems out of step with how believers relate to one another. Instead of threatening, a believing employer should be able to interact with his believing employee with the fruit of the Spirit on full display. You should be able to challenge a believing employee who's not doing good work by holding up texts like the one we're looking at this morning instead of simply threatening. Again, the key is that you want to deal with them in such a way that Christ is honored. Christ's honor must be our main priority, not the bottom line.

And Paul's reminder as to why threatening shouldn't be our tactic is because all of us have an ultimate Master to whom we'll give an account. And we should deal with others as we'd want to be dealt with by him and in light of how he so gently deals with and encourages us.

Many of us spend at least a third of our lives (and some much more) at work. But, sadly, it can be common for us not to give a second thought as to how to honor Christ there. Moreover, when we do, we may think that we honor Christ by witnessing to our co-worker or not making sleazy jokes or the like, and those things are certainly good. But we can also honor Christ just by

working as if we're working for him. And the one who does that will find that his ultimate master is watching him and will reward him. Doesn't this sound just like our gracious God? The one who redeemed us by giving his Son to live, die, and rise for us commands us to obey him, and then he promises to bless us in it. If his grace doesn't sound too good to be true, we've not accurately heard it. So let's give him thanks for it now as we come to the table. Amen.