

“GOD’S WORD TO WORKERS & BOSSES” **(Ephesians 6:5-9)**

In the past three weeks, in our study of the book of Ephesians, we have been looking at God’s order and design for earthly relationships, and so far, we’ve talked about God’s word to wives and husbands, God’s word to parents and children, and today we come to a passage on God’s word to workers and bosses. When John F. Kennedy was running for president in 1960, he wanted to connect with common working people, especially since he came from a privileged upbringing. While he was campaigning in West Virginia he met with a group of coal miners, and as he was posing for a picture with them in front of a mine shaft, one of the miners said, “Is it true that you’re the son of one of the richest men in the country?” Kennedy said, “I guess that would be true.” “Is it true that you’ve never wanted for anything and that you’ve always had pretty much anything you ever wanted?” Kennedy chuckled and said, “Well, I suppose that’s true.” “Is it true that you’ve never done a day’s work with your hands in all your life?” Kennedy slowly nodded his head, bracing for the next question. “Well, let me tell you something,” the miner said, “you haven’t missed a thing!”

Many people would agree with the coal miner. Work is often seen as something we have to do, but don’t want to do. We wear t-shirts that say, “A bad day fishing is better than a good day’s work.” When surveyed, 70-80% of people say they either hate their job or find no fulfillment in what they’re doing. And in the past couple of years it’s seemed like many people have stopped working altogether.

Our attitude towards work is not all that surprising when we read in third chapter of Genesis that a curse is attached to work. Work was originally designed by God to be a blessing – to build and create and be part of making God’s creation flourish. But when Adam and Eve sinned, God cursed the ground. Instead of yielding an easy harvest, man would have to contend with thorns and thistles and sweat just to have something to eat. In Ecclesiastes Solomon speaks of the curse of work and says, “What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 2:22-23).

Jesus came to reverse the curse and redeem all that the fall took away, including our work. Even though our work will continue to be a struggle while we live in a sinful world, God wants us to view it as a blessing and be the best workers we can be. This brings us to Ephesians 6 where the Apostle Paul gives instructions to both workers as well as to bosses who have authority over them, and as we’ll talk about in a moment, he gives these commands to slaves and masters.

Beginning in verse 5 he writes... “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him” (vs 5-9).

The first thing that catches our attention in these verses is that Paul’s words are addressed to slaves and masters. Does this mean the Bible condones slavery? Critics of the Bible love to use verses like this to attack the Bible, so how are we explain this? It’s natural for us to read these verses with a 21st century mindset and think of slavery in America prior to the Civil War. In the southern states the three classic elements of slavery were all in play – there was the buying and selling of human beings against their will; there was racism where blacks were considered as something less than whites; and there was economic oppression – American slaves had no share in the work they did.

The Bible clearly condemns this kind of slavery as wicked and evil – the buying and selling of human beings is a sin; racism is a sin – the Bible says that every human being is made in the image of God and salvation is offered to everyone. Economic oppression is also a sin – Jesus talked often about fairness and justice in economic matters.

It's important to see that when we come to a passage like this one, we have to understand slavery in the context of the first century Roman world. In Paul's day slavery was widespread, but most of it did not involve slave trade and racism or economic oppression. Slaves came from all races, from all cultures, and from all social classes. One Bible scholar estimates that in a city like Ephesus, up to one-third of the population were slaves, and many of these slaves were no part of the church at Ephesus.

The most common form of slavery in the first century was that of being an indentured servant. An indentured servant was someone who, because a financial setback or economic hardship, would sign a contract with a wealthier person, agreeing to work a set amount of time – perhaps seven years or more – in exchange for food and shelter. At the end of their contract, they would be set free, and sometimes they found a way to buy themselves out of slavery before the contract ended. The kind of slavery Paul is talking about here is a very different kind of slavery than we think of.

In the first century, as with much of human history, slavery was an accepted institution, and there was no such thing as civil rights. Some say, “Why doesn't the Bible not just outright condemn slavery and call for its abolishment?” God's strategy for the early church was not to overthrow the Roman government or its institutions, but to preach the gospel and win the lost to Christ. The gospel taught people that in Christ, there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male or female, but all have equal dignity and value and worth in the sight of God. The gospel taught people to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and to love your neighbor as yourself – and if we do this, we will not enslave people. The gospel also taught that Jesus Himself became a slave in order to set free all who have been enslaved to sin.

Over time, as the gospel was preached and accepted around the world, slavery began to disappear. Within 150 years of Paul writing Ephesians, slavery had become virtually non-existent in the Roman Empire. In A.D. 314, slavery was finally abolished altogether by Emperor Constantine after he became a Christian. The abolishment of slavery was accomplished through the power of the gospel – it was accomplished not by political change but by changing the heart.

Most of us here this morning are not slaves – you may feel like a slave – but this passage applies to us in the sense of being an employee working under a boss, or being an employer who has people working for them. These verses tell us how we as people who have been changed by gospel of Christ are to conduct ourselves on the job. Paul starts with workers and gives three things we are to take to work with us, along with two motivations for doing our job.

The first attitude you should take to work with you is your **obedience**. Paul says, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear.” Some bosses are great to work for and some are not so great, but when you choose to work for someone, you choose to submit to their authority. As we have been learning the past four weeks, all of our relationships involve submitting to authority. Wives are to submit to their husbands, and husbands are to submit to the Lord and love their wives. Children are to submit to their parents. Citizens are to submit to their governing authorities. Members of the church are to submit to their leaders. Without submission you have anarchy.

The same is true in the workplace. Submission doesn't mean that your boss is a better person than you, it doesn't mean that you might be a better boss than your boss, and it doesn't mean that you can't work your way up the ladder and become a boss yourself someday.

Submission means that you recognize that as long as you are working for someone, whether they are nice or not nice, do what they want you to do and do it to the best of your ability. Don't take a bad attitude with you to work. Show up with a Christ-like attitude that shows honor and respect for those you work for.

The second thing you should take to work with you is your **heart**. The word "heart" is mentioned three times in these verses... "Obey your masters with sincerity of heart... do the will of God from your heart... serve wholeheartedly." Colossians 3:23 says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart." Whatever task you have been given – even if you don't like the task – do it with all of your heart. Jim Elliot said, "Wherever you are, be all there." As long as you're there, you might as well give it all you have. Your boss deserves the best of who you are, and if you want to get on his or her good side and if you want to perhaps get a raise or promotion, give it all your energy and enthusiasm.

It's important to remember that God views every job – even the jobs that don't seem significant – He views every job as contributing to His plan for creation. When I was in high school, I worked on farms digging ditches in the spring and hauling hay in the summer. It was not fun work – the only fun was being with my friends, and that was it. There was no purpose or meaning for these jobs other than getting a paycheck. But in the big picture, my job allowed the irrigation ditch to flow and supply water to the fields, which caused the hay and alfalfa to grow, which feed the dairy cows, which produced milk, which supplied a job for the truck driver who pick up the milk, and the people who work at the processing plant, and those who stock it on the grocery shelves, and those who sell it to you so you can put milk on your cereal. Without me, you'd have no milk or cheese or ice cream. There are no meaningless jobs in God's design. Every job contributes to the flourishing of God's creation, and even if your job is a stepping stone to another job, do it with all your heart.

The third thing you should take to work with you is your **integrity**. Verse 6 says, "Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart." Its human nature to work a little bit harder when you know the boss is watching, but when they're not around the temptation is to cut corners and not work as hard. The world may do this, but as Christians we are to work as though God was our boss and watching everything we do. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught that integrity is who you are when no one is looking – whether it's praying or fasting or giving to the poor – the true test of character is what you do when no one is around.

In many jobs, the boss is not always around to supervise and must hire people he can trust. When I was finishing up college, I worked afternoons at a feed store. My boss was gone 90% of the time and would leave me in charge. I was the only one who kept track of the inventory and the only one who knew how much cash was in the register. Not only that, but he told me to keep track of my hours and then pay myself at the end of the week with the cash in the register. With no one looking, it would have been very easy for me to fudge on my hours and pay myself a little more than I had worked, but I had an acute awareness that even if my boss didn't know what I'd done, the Lord would know. And because of the trust my boss had placed in me, it never crossed my mind to steal from him.

It is estimated that employee theft is responsible for a loss of \$50 billion a year, as workers help themselves to everything from paper clips to computer parts. All the costs from these thefts gets passed on to you and me as consumers. Some employees steal from their employers by arriving late or leaving early, or by not being honest with their time cards. Other people may do this, but God calls believers to be people of integrity.

The point is that being saved and transformed by Christ changes how we live. I read about a hotel maid who accepted Christ and was asked what differences she had noticed since she gave her life to Christ. She said, “Now I sweep under the rugs.” Take your integrity with you to work.

Notice also in these verses two motivations for being a good worker. First, **work to please the Lord.** Verse 5 says, “Obey your masters as you would obey Christ.” Verse 7 says, “Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people.” It’s the same motivation Paul gives for wives submitting to their husbands and children obeying their parents. You do it for the Lord, out of reverence to Him. It doesn’t matter if the person in authority over you is nice or easy to obey, you obey and serve them wholeheartedly because it’s the right thing to do. If you work for someone who is cranky and demanding, you look beyond him or her and say, “I’ll do the best job possible because ultimately I am serving the Lord and not them.” You work as though Jesus was your boss.

The second motivation for doing a good job is to **reap a positive reward.** Verse 8 says, “Because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.” Even if your boss is not watching, God is watching and He rewards diligent workers. The reward for diligent work is sometimes reaped on earth, but is ultimately reaped in eternity. The immediate reward is that hard-working, honest people generally find work because employers desperately look for people they can trust, and the more trust you build, the greater responsibilities you will be given, along with a greater compensation.

There’s a great true story to illustrate that. A number of years ago, an elderly man and his wife arrived by train in the city of Chicago. It was a stormy night and their train had been delayed. It wasn’t until after midnight that they finally arrived at a downtown hotel where they hoped had a vacancy. The young clerk on duty that night was named George Boldt and he explained that because there were three different conventions in town, their hotel was full, but he would be glad to check around with some other hotels. But after several calls, it was clear that there were no empty rooms to be found.

The young clerk said to the couple, “I can’t send nice people like you out into the rain on a night like this. If you’d like, you can sleep in my room in the basement. It’s not much, but it’s clean and I don’t need it tonight because I’m on duty.” The couple gladly accepted his offer. The next morning the man tried to pay George personally, but the young clerk refused. Then the man said to George Boldt, “You’re the kind of man who ought to be the boss of the best hotel in America. Maybe one day I’ll build one for you.” The young clerk only smiled and said, “I was just glad to be of service.”

Sometime later George Boldt received a letter from the gentleman he had helped. In the letter the man invited George to New York and included a train ticket. He went and when he arrived in New York, and the older gentleman took him to the corner of 5th Avenue and 54th street in Manhattan and said, “This is the hotel I have built for you to manage.” The old man’s name was William Waldorf Astor, and George Boldt became the first manager of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. Today a portrait of George Boldt hangs in the lobby of the hotel as a tribute to a clerk who showed integrity on the job. The point of the story is: you never know who is watching you. If you are a diligent and consistent worker, you will be rewarded.

But let’s say this doesn’t happen. You work hard and do not get the promotion you want or the salary increase you think you deserve. What do you do? You keep working hard and remember that your ultimate reward comes from God. He is a boss that sees everything you do, and will reward you in due time. Often times it is here on earth, but ultimately you will be rewarded in heaven.

My dad, who was a pastor, used to have a plaque in his office someone gave him. On the plaque was a drawing of a pastor tending his sheep, and under the drawing it said, “The pay is not great, but the retirement plan is out of this world.” That’s a great line. If you are working for God, you will be able to leave promotions and salaries in His hands because you know your ultimate reward is in heaven.

In verse 9 Paul turns the tables and addresses masters – those in authority over workers... “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.” Given there were so many slaves in the first century, it would not be unusual for masters and slaves to sit together in church, and masters needed to regard their slaves as brothers in the Lord and treat them in a Christlike way.

Paul says, “Masters, treat your slaves with respect – don’t threaten them, but treat them fairly and justly.” This way of thinking was unheard of in first century Roman culture where slaves had little, if any, rights and were often treated cruelly. Christianity not only elevated women and children, it elevated slaves – it took those who were oppressed and disrespected and gave them a new dignity and status in Christ.

In the same way, if you have people who work for you or you are in a position of leadership over someone, God wants you to be the best boss you can be and treat those under you justly and fairly. In Proverbs 20:28 gives advice to kings, “Love and faithfulness keep a king safe, through love his throne is made secure.” Solomon may well have written this verse to his son Rehoboam, who would be the next king of Israel. “Son,” he says, “when you become king and you want your kingdom to flourish, be a faithful, dependable leader and put the needs and interests of your kingdom above your own.”

Later on when Rehoboam became king the people said, “The taxes are too high, why don’t you give us a break?” His older advisors counseled him to listen to the people and win their loyalty, but his younger advisors said, “Keep the people under your thumb and show them who’s boss.” Rehoboam followed his peer’s advice and made life miserable for his people. Life was so bad under Rehoboam that the people rebelled and the kingdom was torn in two.

Rehoboam’s philosophy was, “I’m the boss and I’m here to be served.” But Jesus taught servant leadership – “I did not come to be served, but to serve and give my life a ransom for many.” Good bosses serve their workers. Back in the days of the Pony Express, the ponies were more important than the mail. Getting the mail delivered was important – but the ponies were more important because if you rode them too hard, the mail would not be delivered. A boss who is demanding and threatening may get more work out of his employees, but in the long run he will turn them against him and he will be the loser.

Verse 9 says that master should treat their slaves the same way God instructs workers to treat their boss. If you want respect from your workers, show them respect. If you want them to be honest with you, you be honest with them. If you want them to do their best for you, do your best for them.

God’s Word instructs every person who is in authority over others to use their authority in a respectful and Christ-like way. Wives are to submit to their husbands, and husbands are to sacrificially love their wives and care for her in an understanding way. Children are to obey their parents, and parents are not to exasperate or embitter their children. Church members are to obey the leaders of the church, and leaders are not to lord it over the people, but serve them. When each believer fulfills their God-given role there is peace and harmony and God is glorified before a watching world.

Verse 9 goes on to give the motivation for bosses treating their workers right... “Since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.” The idea that slaves and masters are equal in the eyes of God was unheard of in the Roman culture of the first century. Slaves were slaves and masters were masters. But God reminds Christian bosses that they, along with their workers, are on the same level in relationship to Him.

He is the boss of both slave and master, and shows no favoritism – whether it is gender, whether it is race, whether it is economic status, or whether it is workers and bosses – all are equal in His eyes and given the same dignity and status. It doesn't change God's order of authority in relationships, but reminds those in authority who the real boss is – the God of heaven who entrusts authority to them.

There are a number of ways you can apply this passage, depending on where you are in relation to work. If you are young and have not started working yet, these verses provide a golden opportunity for you to start off on the right foot. God wants you to view work as a blessing – it may not always be fun – but everything you do in some way contributes to God's plan for creation.

If you are working, be sure to take with you to work an obedient attitude, take your heart and give your best as though you were working for the Lord, and take your integrity, working hard whether your boss is watching or not, because God is always watching. If you lack motivation, remember that ultimately you are working to please the Lord – He is your boss. And remember that God promises to reward diligent work – it may take some time, but in the end there is always a payoff.

If you're retired or disabled and not working to make a living, you still work for God. He still wants you to be productive and contribute to His kingdom. Jesus said, “As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. Work for the night is coming.” In God's eyes, we are to work for His kingdom until we pass from this life and we can work no more.

If you have authority over someone – whether you're a husband, a parent, or a boss – treat those under you with honor and respect, and serve them in the same way that Christ served you and gave His life for you.