

Servant-Mindedness (Work Matters)

Ephesians 6:5-9
January 22, 2016

This morning we're going to look at Ephesians 6:5-9 which addresses the relationship between Masters and Slaves. This is the 3rd and final subcategory in this section of Ephesians covering the topic of Submission. Let's begin with 2 opening statements.

1. Slavery is a painful and difficult subject.^{1,2} It's a bit of a strange passage to look at because it is unlikely that anyone in this room is a slave or the master of a slave. This particular relationship structure is foreign to our current realities. That said, we must be mindful of the shadows throughout history that have touched some of us more closely than others. In American history, many African-Americans endured harsh slavery conditions that were a clear moral evil. Let us respectfully acknowledge that these conditions were wicked and sinful. And, let us also be thankful together that we have made many advances toward becoming a society that values giving equal respect and dignity to all races. We have certainly not fully arrived. In fact, we have quite a ways to go. But, we ARE making progress toward learning to live together in kindness and mutual respect.

Here's one other comment before we dig into Ephesians 6:5-9. We must also be mindful of the CURRENT reality in our world that there is still slavery in our modern-day society.

2. Human trafficking is a current form of slavery. It is a moral evil that calls for our strong and immediate push back as Christ-followers. We addressed some of this when we talked about Compassion & Justice in May of 2016.³ If you were not there for that Sunday, I'd urge you to get a copy of that sermon. For this morning's sermon, let's recognize that 2,000 year ago in Roman society, the institution of slavery was an existing social structure. However, it would be a mistake to think that the slavery we are most familiar with, is exactly like the slavery that existed in Ephesus. Certainly there are some parallels but there are also differences. One example is the practice of "manumission," which is "the act of a slave owner freeing his or her slaves."⁴ "Slaves could, and did, save funds allocated to their use and purchase their own freedom."⁵ This sermon will not take time to go into other details, but suffice it to say, that we should not rush to judge ancient Roman society or the NT itself until we have studied it more thoroughly.⁶ There is a chart at the end of this transcript that shares a few more comparisons if you are interested. I also typed up a 1-page devotional meditation on the idea of being "Slave of All." It's also at the end of this message.

¹ Ever wonder, "Why didn't Paul order Christian Masters to free their slaves?" Can you imagine what it might have been like for slaves and masters to attend church together, pray together, or do Bible study together? Perhaps this was Paul's strategy, let the Gospel work its way in and then let that create social change organically. Consider 1 Corinthians 7:21-23, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. 22 For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings."

Also, consider when Paul challenges Philemon to show grace to his runaway slave, Onesimus in Philemon 1:12-16, "I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord."

Further, read and ponder the list of vices in 1 Timothy 1:8-11. **How could the slave/master relationship structure ever be honoring to God?** As Paul is writing to the Ephesian Christ-followers, what is clear is that Paul is teaching that it was not only possible, but also necessary, for slaves and masters to live in God-honoring ways since they attended the SAME church!

Some of us may be uncomfortable with the relationship structure where we work. We may not like a particular boss, co-worker, or an employee we supervise. But, that doesn't give us reason to justify mistreating them or disrespecting them in any way. An application of this text to our modern-day setting is for employees and bosses BOTH to have a servant-minded attitude and a God-honoring posture in the workplace.

² Paul just so happens to be writing this NT epistle at a time in history when slaves/masters was the norm. But, just because he is describing the norm of that day does NOT mean he is necessarily prescribing that this should be the norm or condoning it. In other words, the Bible is not necessarily explicitly or implicitly endorsing the ownership of slaves. What is explicit here, is that in the particular slave/master relationship structure of that time, there was a way for both the slave and the master to honor God with the right attitude and motivation in workplace relationships. Again, this was pretty radical stuff for its day. Roman Law gave full authority for Masters to treat their slaves however they wanted to. But one of the key messages in God's Word, Ephesians 5:21-6:9, is for men to step up and become sacrificial, kind, and considerate leaders!

³ This sermon on "Compassion & Justice in Jesus' Name" was preached on May 8, 2016. It's available by emailing efree@paulbunyan.net or downloading the audio or written transcript online at <http://www.efcbemidji.org/media>

⁴ Wikipedia's definition. Pronounced "MAN you MISH en."

⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 2nd Ed.*, Eerdmans, 1993, p. 57.

⁶ For further study, consider reading Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles*, Zondervan, 1984 or *The Problem with Paul* by Brian J. Dodd, Intervarsity Press, 1996.

For this morning, let's address the text at hand, as we consider a way that Ephesians 6:5-9 more directly applies to most of us sitting in this room. Servant-mindedness is God's design for the relationship structure between employees and bosses. Now, I realize that this text is talking about slaves and masters. But, the closest parallel for most of us today is to consider the relationship structure between bosses and their employees. Most of us have at least one boss in our life. And, quite a few of us, are the boss of someone else. Or, at least the leader of some group, organization, band, or team. So, let's consider how the principles from this text on slaves and masters transfer into the workplace and into school and other settings that are more relevant to us.

Godly employees have a servant-minded attitude and motivation in their workplace.

Ephesians 6:5 says, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." This phrase in v. 5, "with respect and fear," is referring to respect that is prompted by reverence for Christ, not fear of their earthly masters.⁷ This shows up in the earlier context of Ephesians 5:21 which says to, "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." So, Ephesians 6:5 is not suggesting that the workplace be a setting where employees are cowering in fear of their bosses. Rather, this obedience flows from a sincerity of heart that works hard for their bosses "just as [they] would obey Christ."

Ephesians 6:6 says to, "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." "When their eye is on you" literally means "eye-service;" it's working just for show. Thus, the ESV translates v. 6 "not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers." So, what this verse is driving at, is that God does not want our work to be "performed only to attract attention" or just to "curry favour" with our bosses."⁸ We've all seen this happen before. You're at work or school and the person next to you is pretty ho-hum about their work ethic. But suddenly, when the boss passes by or the teacher is looking, they pretend to be hard at work. Or, maybe it's at sport's practice or doing chores at home. As soon as the coach is looking the other way or the mom or dad is in the other room, the effort level decreases dramatically!

Have you ever Googled "Pretending to Work?" ...I did. This week...as part of my work in preparing this sermon. Here are some tips that I found for "How to Look Busy at Work Without Really Working," by wikiHow: 1. Know what the minimum standards are in order to keep your job, and then do just enough to meet those minimums, so that you avoid getting fired. 2. Always have a few business-related programs visibly open on your computer screen. Or, make a decoy screen of these open programs by taking a screen shot of a busy computer screen and then copy and paste that image as your desktop background. 3. Be alert and watch out for Big Brother. Not working is like playing a sport or a game, so you need to stay on your toes and watch for certain cues. For example, pay attention to the time of day your boss usually walks by and if you hear his or her footsteps, try to look especially busy during those times.

Well, this article goes on to give 17 different suggestions for "How to Look Busy at Work Without Really Working." Now, you might be thinking, "Pastor Jerry, why would you give the slackers these terrible ideas?" Believe me, I didn't. People who desire to slack off at work have already thought of all these ideas and many, many more. In fact, they are probably the ones who wrote up this wikiHow article, while they were pretending to look busy at work! Ephesians 6:6 calls Christ-followers to a much higher work standard. As "slaves of Christ" we are to work at our jobs like those doing the will of God from our hearts. So, how about it, at your job or at school or at home, are you working to please people by just looking busy or are you working to please God as a Slave of Christ?

Ephesians 6:7 urges us to, "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people." This word "wholeheartedly" is actually defined as "a state of zeal...[and] eagerness" In fact, "an equivalent of 'serve wholeheartedly' could be expressed...as to 'serve because you really want to.'"⁹ Now, keep in mind, Paul is writing this to Christian slaves in the Ephesian church. Their work ethic is being radically defined and transformed by embracing a perspective of serving the Lord, not people.

⁷ See Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 1999, pp. 449-450.

⁸ O'Brien, p. 451.

⁹ εὐνοία. Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 296). New York: United Bible Societies.

How might this kind of perspective transform your attitude and motivation at work? It's worth pondering. Ephesians 6:8 reveals the ultimate motivation for servant-mindedness in the workplace: "because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free." It's significant for us to recognize that by addressing the slaves with instructions about God-honoring attitudes and working for the Lord's reward, Paul is explicitly recognizing slaves as much more than someone's else's property. Slaves "are treated as ethically responsible persons" who are just as much a part of the Christian congregation as were their masters who were receiving the same letter from the Apostle Paul.^{10 11}

The motivation for servant-mindedness in the workplace is REWARD from God; and it's a really amazing reward in at least 4 ways:¹² 1. It's a future reward that motivates us in the here and now. V. 8 says "the Lord WILL reward," future tense. And God keeps His promises, you can take that to the bank. This motivates us to work hard in our current jobs!

2. It's a reward for "EACH ONE," regardless of whether they are slave or free. The slave/master distinction will not affect the scope or size of the reward because there is no favoritism with God. So, when we all get to heaven, there will not be any out of balance stock options or HUGE bonuses for the few executives at the top. God will not play favorites.

3. It's a reward based on one simple criterion: the good that each person has done.¹³ There won't be any smooth talking our way out of this one or listing all of the good things we had meant to do or were about to do. 2 Corinthians 5:7, 9-10 reminds us, "For we live by faith, not by sight... So we make it our goal to please him, ... For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." Let's be clear, this is not about good works helping us earn our salvation. We talked about being saved by grace alone through faith in Christ alone back in Ephesians 2:8-9. Ephesians 6:8 is talking about God rewarding His people for the good they have done during their time as followers here on earth; for the way that they steward their time, talents, and treasure.¹⁴

4. It's a reward that comes despite whether our earthly bosses ever even notice. Back in v. 6 we learned that it's not appropriate to try and please our earthly bosses by pretending to work with mere "eye-service." 2 Chronicles 16:9a assures us, "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him..." Therefore, God sees everything and He knows about the hard work that you try to do each and every day with a Christ-like attitude and motivation. And, He will reward you as you strive for that!

Ephesians 6:9 moves our focus to those who are in charge of the workplace: "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."

Godly bosses have a servant-minded attitude and motivation in their workplace. When v. 9 mentions treating slaves "in the same way," it's a cue for godly bosses to embrace the SAME servant-minded attitudes that we just read about in vv. 5-8. Therefore, they should not be issuing threats against their employees but rather leading out of reverence for God. They should conduct themselves with sincerity, doing the will of God from their hearts. Godly bosses should lead in the same way that the employees are called to follow: wholeheartedly, as if serving the Lord, not people. It's a call to be servant-minded as the person in charge at the workplace. So, Christian bosses are still expected to be in charge and to lead, but it should look much different than other bosses who do not fear God. You are serving the Lord as you lead your employees.

And bosses will be motivated "in the same way;" by the SAME 4 reward motivations that we talked about for employees: 1. It's a future reward that motivates us in the here and now. 2. It's a reward for "EACH ONE," regardless of whether they are slave or free. 3. It's a reward based on one simple criterion: the good that each person has done. And although bosses should not expect some higher

¹⁰ O'Brien, p. 449.

¹¹ Thus, for slaves, serving their EARTHLY masters well was a way for them to do God's will and receive HEAVENLY rewards. (This is true in the secular workplace as well. See 1 Corinthians 10:31 or Col. 3:17.)

¹² These are taken from O'Brien's discussion on pp. 452-453.

¹³ See Romans 2:6-11.

¹⁴ Consider how this relates to Ephesians 2:8-10, especially v. 10.

level of executive bonus, they can certainly expect a fair and equal reward for their good leadership while on earth. 4. It's a reward that comes despite whether our earthly bosses ever even notice. Even earthly bosses have bosses that don't always see or reward their hard work. But God see it all and rewards it accordingly!

Ephesians 6:9 now brings our discussion on the overarching topic of submission to a close. It's a fitting bookend to an idea that we have been meditating on for 3 Sundays now: In a society that unfairly favored men, one of the key messages throughout Ephesians 5:21-6:9 is for men to step up and become sacrificial, kind, and considerate leaders! God's Word calls out the MEN in particular, to be Christ-like husbands, fathers, and bosses. They are challenged to embrace a Christian world-view where women, children, and employees are worthy of dignity; each one a person created in the image of God; of great worth and of equal value. And so, there is no place in godly households or businesses for any kind of abuse or mistreatment of women, children, or employees. Anyone here who is suffering abuse at their job or in their home can get help today. Talk with someone before you leave church today.

Ephesians 5-6 puts forth a strong challenge to the Christians living in Roman society to use their positions of leadership to serve and to be kind to those who follow them. They are given a godly vision of what it means to truly be the servant-leaders that God intends them to be. There's a play on words here between v. 9's reference to our Heavenly Master and v. 5's reference to earthly masters. Ephesians 6:9 now culminates this entire section with a strong reminder to all of us, that God is the Heavenly Master of us all. He will show no favoritism or special treatment to anyone whether they are male or female, parent or child, slave or master. Indeed, the Christ-following slaves and masters in Ephesus were "fellow-slaves of the same Lord."¹⁵ They have the same Master in heaven which means they humbly stand TOGETHER on level ground and have equal status before God.¹⁶ Let's also remember the continuing reality of Ephesians 5:18, which says to "be filled with the Spirit." In order for Christian bosses and employees to be empowered for servant-mindedness, they will each need a daily filling of God's Spirit.

A good way of summarizing Ephesians 6:5-9 is that **For Christ-followers, work is an opportunity to worship.** Even as employees work hard for their bosses and as bosses lead well on behalf of their employees, each one has the opportunity to bring God glory. If you'd like to learn more about this, read the book *Work Matters* by Tom Nelson.¹⁷ Right now, take a minute to look up this brief video called "Work as Worship:" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m06DYIAeCtU> It illustrates the concept of Work as Worship. What is your mission in the marketplace? Are you an employee, who works hard out of reverence for Christ? Are you a boss, who treats your employees well out of reverence for Christ? Whatever your situation, embrace your opportunity, as a Christ-follower, to worship God in your workplace!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on January 22, 2017 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

¹⁵ O'Brien, p. 455.

¹⁶ See Colossians 4:1

¹⁷ An excellent, easy-to-read book on finding joy and meaning in your workplace is *Work Matters* by Tom Nelson, Crossway Books, 2011. We also talked about work a while back on October 9, 2016 in a sermon titled, "Truth, Anger, and Work." It's available by emailing efree@paulbunyan.net or downloading the audio or written transcript online at <http://www.efcbemidji.org/media>

American Slavery	Ancient Roman Slavery
Slavery was a permanent condition with no hope of freedom.	Unless a criminal, a slave had every hope of being freed.
Slavery was racially delineated.	Slaves could not be distinguished on the basis of color, clothing or race.
Slaves were segregated socially.	Slaves could not be distinguished from other by friends, occupation, or worship patterns.
Slaves had no legal rights.	Slaves had many legal rights, including the right of appeal in case of unfair treatment.
Slaves were on the lowest rung of society.	Slaves were often of higher status than the free, depending on who their masters were.
Slavery was degrading and dehumanizing.	Slavery was viewed as an opportunity to find a better life.
Slaves were confined to menial work.	Slaves held high positions in civil service and in the business world.
Slaves could not be legally educated.	Slaves were often educated, acting as tutors and advisers for their owners.
Slaves were not able to own property.	Slaves could own property and save money to purchase their freedom.
Slaves had no hope of normal family life.	Slaves often maintained a separate existence from their masters.
Slavery was often the result of kidnapping.	Slavery was often preferred and chosen for financial reasons.

This chart is taken from The Problem with Paul by Brain J. Dodd, Intervarsity Press, 1996. See pp. 87-89.

“Slaves of All” – A Devotional Thought from Pastor Jerry

Although in modern times we have a very negative view of slavery, New Testament writers were willing to use it as a metaphor. This is strange to our modern ears but worth pondering. Slavery is heralded in Scripture as something to embrace. This is not to say that we should naively romanticize it or make light of it. But rather, it recognizes that one of the greatest goods in humankind is when we learn the art of putting others first.

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul proclaims, “Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

One of the most important applications from text’s like Ephesians 6:5-9 comes from the even broader context of the Bible. And, it’s probably one of the most challenging and spiritually maturing applications of the Christian Faith. So, it’s worth meditating on this week. One of the Christians who I admire and respect the most has this written in the cover of her personal Bible, “Die Daily.” It’s a reminder that I see her living out consistently. The Christian life is not about me always getting what I want. It is about learning to die to ourselves, to take up the towel and the washbasin and wash someone else’s feet. It’s not the most appealing posture but it is honoring to God. This is what the Bible calls every Christ-follower to; whether slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile.

Even as Paul wrote this text to the Ephesians, we know that he considered himself a slave of Christ, “all his goods, time, ambitions, and purposes were subject to the determination of Christ...he was at his Master’s disposal.”¹⁸

In Mark 10:42-45 Jesus lays it out clearly: “Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

¹⁸ Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles*, Zondervan, 1984, p. 38.