

“Jesus’ Transformation of Work”
Ephesians 6:5-9
June 7, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

We have been looking at the three primary relationships within households that Paul addresses in this section. The pattern in all of these relationships is the same, where Paul addresses first the one who is to be in submission, followed by the one in authority. So he addresses wives and then husbands, children and then parents, and in today’s passage, slaves and then masters. It is clear that the gospel fundamentally changes all these relationships by changing our view of power. Since Christians already have all things in Christ, we no longer need to grasp for power. So we are free to accept the limitations that come from placing ourselves under the authority of another. And those who have authority don’t use it for their own sakes, but for the sakes of those over whom they have authority.

A big question looms over the slave-master relationship that we come to today. Why does Paul not speak out against slavery here? He seems instead to remain more neutral in his stance. I think there are several answers to that question, but let me mention just two. First, it is important to recognize that slavery in Paul’s day was very different from the race-based slavery we are familiar with in our nation’s history. It is closer to indentured servitude, where someone becomes obligated for a period of time to another in order to pay off some debt. Second, we must remember that Paul is writing a letter here to people he knows in order to help them. The church in Ephesus had both slaves and masters within it. A treatise on the evils of slavery would probably not have done them much good. Clear instruction about living out the gospel as a slave or a master would be much more helpful. Imagine that the church you attend has a large number of undocumented immigrants. After being away from that church for a time, they write you a letter asking for advice on how they should approach their life as both undocumented immigrants and Christians. It would not be loving or helpful for you to write a long treatise on U. S. immigration policy. They need more practical help, and that’s exactly what Paul provides them with here.

Another question arises as we get into this passage. How should we apply it to ourselves when none of us is either a slave or a master? I think its most direct application is to our situation as employees or employers. Though I don’t at all mean to suggest that a slave is no different than an employee, it is the case that if these instructions from Paul apply in the far more harsh situation of slavery, they can be useful to us in the milder situation of being an employee. And if Jesus can transform the situation of a slave while he still remains a slave, then he can do the same with people who may feel trapped in

dead-end jobs. Jesus has already begun to make all things new, and he does so even in this practical area of work. So let's pay attention to what he says.

I. Jesus and Slaves

Do you ever feel like a slave in your work? Slaves don't get to do what they want to do, but must accomplish duties decided upon by others. Slaves often work without recognition, laboring at jobs that are repetitive. Some of these elements are part of even the best of jobs, aren't they? A stay-at-home mom delights in watching her children grow, but not so much in the mountain of dirty laundry that seems endless. The schoolteacher must teach not just the motivated children, but also the troublemakers with a bad attitude. The physician must treat not just those who can be cured by their efforts, but also those whose condition will stubbornly resist the doctor's best efforts. To one degree or another, all jobs involve slave-like limitations that make the work burdensome.

There is one thought that dominates Paul's advice to both Christian slaves and masters. Both are to remember that Jesus is their ultimate Master. Five times in these verses slaves are told this truth. They are to obey their earthly masters **"as you would Christ"** (v. 5). They are not to do the right thing just when being watched by the master, but at all times **"as servants of Christ"** (v. 6). In this way, they are to do **"the will of God from the heart"** (v. 6), by which they render service with a good will **"as to the Lord"** (v. 7). Finally, they are to look to the Lord's reward and not to that of the earthly master.

There are numerous and profound implications of this, and I want to consider just four of them. First, it means that there is no such thing as the secular-sacred distinction when it comes to our work. During the Middle Ages, the church taught that jobs in the church were of greater worth than those outside the church. It was more holy to be a priest than to be a farmer. Sacred jobs were inherently of greater value than secular jobs. The Protestant reformers renounced this view. For example, William Tyndale was an early English reformer who wrote that if our desire is to please God, pouring water, washing dishes, cobbling shoes, and preaching the Word "is all one." Martin Luther wrote more extensively on this than most.

The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone.... Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith.

Second, it means that work is fundamentally a good thing, since God doesn't ask us to do that which is bad or evil. In his letter, Paul repeatedly emphasizes that the church is God's new community who live out heavenly values. Work is part of God's good creation. This takes us back to Genesis 2 and its view of work. We learn there that God created us to work because we bear his image, and he is a worker. Think about the difference between humanity and the rest of the animal world. We alone are called of God to rule and subdue the earth. Animals more or less take the world as it comes, without shaping it to any significant degree. They live in caves, hollowed out places in trees, and holes in the ground. But humans are called to shape the world, to take trees and make houses and furniture out of them. In doing so, we are following the example of our God, who creates things. What's more, we see a diversity of work in Genesis 2. Adam was involved both in manual labor as he worked the garden, and also in intellectual pursuits as he named and classified the animals. One is not better than the other. There is a diversity of jobs and calling, but not a difference in value before God.

When we move on one chapter from Genesis 2, we find that work is significantly affected by the sin of the human race through Adam and Eve. God curses the institution of labor when he says to Adam, **“Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field”** (Gen. 3:17-18). Note that even in the midst of a curse there is still a good promise of fruitfulness. “You shall eat the plants of the field.” The biblical view of work at this period of time after the fall and before the new earth is created is that work is both good and cursed, all at the same time. One of the mistakes I see people make regarding work is to emphasize one side of this over the other. Those who emphasize the remaining goodness of work can become too idealistic, always seeking the perfect job but never finding it. Those who emphasize the fallen aspect of work can grow cynical about work and just start collecting a paycheck. We are to hold both of these truths together, seeking the goodness of work as God created it, while at the same time accepting the reality of its brokenness.

A third implication of Paul's command to recognize the Lord as our ultimate in all our work is that doing so will inevitably improve the quality of our work. I remember hearing of a cartoon years ago in which a boss walks up to one of his loafing employees and asks him, “Why aren't you working?” The loafer replies, “I didn't see you coming.” Christians are called to work as part of their service to Christ, who always sees us. That's why Paul says that we are to work with **“fear and trembling.”** God always sees us, and we do our work as unto him. It is a sin for Christians to work one way when the boss's eye is on them and another way when the boss is not observing or monitoring their work. To do so assumes that your boss is the ultimate audience for your work, and Paul states that Jesus is your ultimate audience. This gives meaning and dignity to all of our work, even the most menial tasks. If you are a chef in a restaurant,

prepare every meal as if you are preparing it for Jesus. If you are a teacher, treat every student as if you are teaching Jesus. As a pastor, I am to preach every sermon as if Jesus is in attendance at that worship service. In the second century, there was a Christian writer named Justin Martyr who grew up over the hill from Galilee. He notes that the wooden plows made by Joseph and Jesus were still being used widely in his day, over 100 years after Jesus died.

A final implication of this idea of doing our work with Jesus as our ultimate Master is that we look to him for the reward. It is not wrong to be motivated by the promise of a reward for our work. Our earthly bosses may be unwise in the way they reward. Sometimes they promise reward to get good performance, but don't deliver. Sometimes they simply fail to see the quality of the work. But Jesus never misses. **“Whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord.”** Further, the Lord knows how best to reward. It is possible for rewards to bring harm if not done wisely. But Jesus rewards wisely. Paul doesn't specify the exact nature of these rewards because they are of different types. Sometimes he will reward by giving a promotion, as in the case of Joseph, who was promoted whether in Potiphar's house or in prison or in Egypt. At other times, it will be the reward of growing Christ-like character through hard times. It will always be some form of heavenly reward. Christians don't work just for the annual evaluation or the bottom-line profit of a company they own. We work for the wise reward of Jesus.

II. Jesus and Masters

The same principle Paul outlined for slaves applies to masters. **“He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven”** (v. 9). Masters are reminded here of two things. Their slaves belong not to them, but to Jesus. So the earthly masters are but stewards of people who belong to another, and they need to remember that there will be an accounting to the one to whom these slaves belong for the way they have been treated by their earthly masters. Second, the masters need to remember that they are slaves themselves, called to serve their Master, Jesus.

Paul develops three implications of this for masters, and these implications apply to any of us who have supervisory authority over others. First, and quite remarkably, Paul says **“do the same to them”** (v. 9). What does he mean? He has told slaves to serve their earthly masters for the good of those masters, doing so with whole hearts. He is here telling masters to do the same, that is, to seek the welfare of their slaves with their whole heart. The view the masters should have is not that their slaves exist for them, but that the master exists to serve the slave. This is what is commonly referred to as “servant-leadership.” A few weeks ago, I was listening to an interview with Mike Matheny, the very successful manager of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team. Matheny, a devout Christian, explained to his incredulous NPR interviewer that he

embraced a servant-leadership approach to managing in which he sought first to serve those under his authority. It is a mistake to see this just as a better and more effective way to manage people. It lies at the heart of Christianity. In his book about work, Tim Keller tells about a woman who visited his church and said she was exploring Christianity. When he asked her how she had come to decide to investigate Christianity, she said that it was because of a Christian boss she had. Shortly after she started working for that company, she made a big mistake that brought harm to the company and that she thought would result in the loss of her job. But her Christian boss took the blame himself, even though it resulted in a loss of his prestige and reputation within the company. She asked him why he did that, saying that she had had several bosses who would take the credit for the good things she had done, but never one who would take the blame for mistakes she had made. He explained very simply that he did so because Jesus had taken the blame for his sins, and he follows him now.

The next implication for Christian masters is that they are to stop threatening their slaves with violence. It was common practice in Paul's day for masters to motivate their slaves by threats of beatings. Paul here forbids such threats, and again we see in this the way the gospel changes our use of power. Masters had the clear right in this day to exert their control through violence, but Christian masters were forbidden from using this power. They were to use another power in their motivation, the power of love. This doesn't mean that Christian bosses can't establish consequences for poor performance. It does mean that the dominant attitude should be one of love.

Third, masters are reminded that God shows no partiality. Masters are not better than slaves. Masters can't think that they deserve to be served simply because they are better than their slaves. There may be diversity of callings within the church, but there is not a diversity of value. All are the dignified image bearers of God who deserve utmost respect.

CONCLUSION:

Dorothy Sayers once wrote, "What is the Christian understanding of work?... [It] is that work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties...the medium in which he offers himself to God." You cannot offer yourself to God until you come to understand that God has offered himself to you. He has done so through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. I invite you now to offer your work to Jesus, your ultimate Master. You may need to repent of the sin of cynicism as it relates to your work. Or you may need to repent of the sin of looking to your work to give ultimate meaning.