

## **The Gospel at Work**

Ephesians 6:5-9

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The last few weeks we've been looking at the practice of Gospel-living. If chapters 1-3 were about what Jesus has done for us and who we are now in Him, then chapters 3-6 are about what it looks like to live a new life.

In fact, before Paul teaches us about marriages, parenting and work, he calls us to "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). He then shows us what being filled with the Spirit means by immediately addressing our most common and important relationships - marriage, parenting and work.

The power of what Christ has done is to be experienced in every facet of our life. It has to be worked in and worked out in these relationships or else it isn't true Christianity but instead some conceptual religious commitment. Jesus wants us to live as full-time disciples in the nitty-gritty of everyday living.

This is why we need the power of Spirit to change us and lead us into a new way of relating to ourselves and one another.

Paul's going to help us with that by teaching us about slaves and masters. Let's read the passage.

**Ephesians 6:5-9** "[5] Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, [6] not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, [7] rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, [8] knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. [9] Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him."

### **A Note on Slavery**

The first thing we need to do is deal with the question of slavery because it's simply too big to overlook.

Unfortunately this passage has been used by so-called Christians to condone slavery and it's been used to oppose Christianity, to condemn the Bible.

The truth of the matter is that if you read the entirety of the Bible it neither outright condemns slavery and it doesn't condone it. The reason is a fairly complicated one but I'll try to make it simple.

First, in the ancient world there were different kinds of slavery. There were indentured servants that acted as employees by selling themselves to a master so that they could learn a trade. In fact, a number of slaves became doctors, architects, nurses, and some even became philosophers and politicians. In Jewish, Greek and Roman slavery, a slave was often set free by his master or could purchase his freedom.

Second, there most certainly were abuses because of slavery. In the Roman world,

slaves would often be treated as property and would sometimes be passed down to their children as an inheritance. They were tortured, some were maimed, and many were put to death because of the harshness of their master. Think of Israel's slavery in Egypt as an example of tyrannical rule over slaves.

It was estimated at the time of this letter that there were some 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. In many of the Roman cities, the slaves would outnumber the rulers by 4 to 1. It was a massive form of labor and was ingrained in the economic life of several empires. The Romans treated their slaves worse than the Greeks and the Greeks worse than the Jews.

There was a variation of treatment just as there were a variety of masters. We see this today, some bosses are harsh and threatening and some are gentle and gracious.

The condemnation of the practice of slavery would have been confusing to both the slaves and the masters. Which type of slavery should be condemned? How would the labor force and economic structure of the Empire be replaced overnight? In this time, getting rid of all forms of slavery would be like getting rid of all forms of employment because some bosses are harsh and sinful. It wouldn't make sense.

When we think of slavery we often think of the African slave trade. This, of course, was a horrific practice where a specific race was targeted and slaves were taken from their family and sold as a piece of property apart from their will. They couldn't escape, couldn't buy their freedom and were considered less than human.

It was a Christian man by the name of William Wilberforce that fought powerfully in England to change the laws of owning human beings as property that eventually spread to America as slaves were liberated. When Martin Luther King spoke to crowds about equal rights, he didn't tell them to be less religious; he told them to believe what the Bible said about the human dignity of every image bearer who is equal before God.

However, just because the Bible doesn't outright condemn the practice doesn't mean it condones the use of slavery. Instead, what the Bible does with slavery is what it does with every injustice since the fall. It points to a day when there will be no more slavery, and it calls Christians to live with that future reality today.

It is an inside-out job, not an outside-in. What the Bible does is undermine slavery by reforming the identity of every disciple so that both slaves and masters are fundamentally changed and are called to work out their new life in Christ towards one another.

This is incredibly applicable because we still work and get paid for our labor. We still have bosses and leaders, some kind some harsh. We still have a work force and our economy is dependent upon servitude.

So what does the gospel at work look like? Paul addresses both employees and employers, both slaves and masters.

### **A Word to the Servant/Employee**

Like last week, the first thing I want us to notice is how stunning it is that Paul addresses slaves alongside masters. What other community could bring these two

together as equals? What does this show about the power of the gospel to make them a family where they're equal?

Paul addresses the slaves first just as he addressed wives and children first. Listen to what Paul's driving at:

**Verses 5-8:** "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, [6] not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, [7] rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, [8] knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free."

Three things Paul deals with:

### **1) Our Work Glorifies God**

Two views of work: Work is a curse or work is our life.

There are many of us that have believed the lie that our work isn't important. Priest/Laity distinction

**Q-**How many of you are or have been in full-time ministry?

How we answer that question demonstrates how we view the value of all our work.

It's a lie that the only work that truly honors God is ministry work (bible studies, worship service, preaching, communion, prayer, etc.)

We've created a spiritual life above one line and a regular life below. But what about sports, entertainment, recreation, work, mowing our lawn, caring for our pets, etc.? How do we feel about these things? They often are seen as less than ideal or not really living for God. This means that since we only spend about 3% of our day in the "ministry" work and 97% in the "regular stuff" we come to believe the regular stuff doesn't really matter. We feel guilt for not doing enough for God, or being effective for Him, or we give up and don't care about those lesser things that aren't considered spiritual. This radically affects our world when Christians only consider themselves as living for Christ in 3% of their life. **What about the other six days?**

**Q-**What if we began to believe that everything we do is for the glory of Christ and is a witness of His power and grace?

**Q-**How would we work? How would we study and learn in our studies? How would we treat sports and entertainment? How would we treat art? How would we do politics and science?

The way God is bringing in His Kingdom and changing this world is by winning over the hearts of one sinner at a time. These blood-bought and grace-saved people now become the change agents of the world. God places us in various roles of our culture, from laborer to leader, so that His Lordship over our lives affects the way we serve, build, teach, dig, program, paint and express culture with a new Kingdom worldview. In doing so, we become salt and light as His community that disperses daily into various nooks and crannies of the city.

But work is not ultimate. We swing from one end where work is not really important to another which makes work too important. Many of us define our identity by what we do.

**Q**-What does a life defined by our work look like?

## **2) Our Work is a Witness of Christ**

This is what Paul says a Spirit-filled life looks like as an employee:

- We're to obey our bosses as we would obey Christ (**v. 5**).
- We're to work hard always, not just when the boss is around as we would for Christ (**v. 6**).
- We're to labor as if we were working directly for Christ and not just our boss (**v. 7**).

**Q**-What kind of witness do you think we'd be in our workplace if we actually believed these verses? What would that look like practically?

**Q**-What keeps us from working this way? Answer: Our heart. Paul teaches us that all work is always heart work.

## **3) Our Work is Always Heart-Work**

Our work teaches us about our heart. Our behavior shows us where our heart is because behavior always follows our belief. We do what we believe.

Paul says we're to work with...

- A sincere heart (**v. 5**).
- Doing the will of God from the heart (**v. 6**).
- Working with a good will/right motivation (**v. 7**).

## **A Word to Masters/Leaders**

**Verse 9:** "Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him."

Paul turns to the masters and speaks to them about how they treat their servants. He wants them to live out their faith in their role of leadership. How is a boss supposed to treat his employees? Paul tells us.

### **1) Treat them as equals.**

Masters looked down at their slaves and thought they were superior because they compared themselves to someone they treated as sub-human. Everyone is laboring to gain their own righteousness and one of the primary ways we do this is by making ourselves feel better because we aren't like "that" person or "those" people.

But there is no partiality in our righteousness because it is a gift righteousness. Since Jesus had to live a life we failed to live before God, and since God gives us Jesus' righteousness as a gift of grace, we have nothing to boast in and no one to compare ourselves to. Instead, we are equal in our righteousness before God.

Paul says to “do the same to them.” In other words, treat them as you want to be treated. If you want to be respected, respect them. If you want them to care about your company, care about them. If you want them to work with a good heart, have a good heart towards them.

Why? Because we both have the same Master in heaven and before God there is no partiality with Him. None of us are superior before Him.

## **2) Stop motivating by fear**

Paul says to “stop your threatening...”

Our Father wants our obedience because we love Him and know we’re loved. He doesn’t want us to obey purely because we have to. God is more concerned with why we obey Him than mere obedience. We can’t be saved by keeping the law.

**Q-**How do we get out of this cycle of bitterness towards our bosses and harshness towards our employees?

Jesus is the way out of our people-pleasing and threatening.

Jesus became the servant/slave who didn’t simply people please with eye service. He obeyed with a sincere heart doing the will of God as a servant all the way to the cross for us.

He is also the perfect Master, who does not merely threaten, but instead takes the threats of judgment upon Himself. He didn’t crush His disciples, but instead washed their feet. He stands as the supreme authority but does not wield this authority over His people with cruelty, but with patient longsuffering love that cares deeply for those He is King over.

Jesus succeeds where we fail so that we can be free to obey His word. What a Savior we have that knows we’ve failed and yet takes our failure upon Himself so that we can now live with the confidence that we’re already successful in Him.

We’re already perfect employees and servants in the Father’s eyes. We’re already perfect leaders in His eyes. And this truth, this reality, is what motivates our hearts, makes them sincere so that we are not merely people-pleasers but we obey the will of God from the heart.