

Work for the Lord

Read **Ephesians 6.5-9**

I want to start in an unusual way this morning by talking about what this text does not say first. It may surprise us to see that it does not say that slavery is wrong. Rather it assumes slavery.

And because that may be a real stumbling block to some in the room, or certainly to those you may talk to at some point, I want to begin by asking, "Why does Paul not condemn slavery here?"

After that, we will get into the heart of what this text does say.

1. Why does Paul not condemn slavery?

The first thing I think that will help us is to get a sense for the **Roman world in Paul's day**.

Some historians estimate that as much as **half the population** of the Roman Empire in Paul's day....60 million people.....were slaves. Among these slaves were not just field hands or household servants (the images that may jump to our mind) but also **teachers, doctors and other professional people**.

Slavery in Paul's day was a **fully accepted practice**. It was a fundamental part of what **made the economic engine turn** in the Roman Empire. I'm not saying that makes it moral, but it just means that our perspective of slavery and the Ephesians would have been very different. For the Ephesian Christians, slavery was just part of normal life. Some **members of the church** there were certainly slaves or slave owners.

For Paul to condemn slavery; for the early Christian churches **to make a political or social push against slavery in the ancient world would be to denounce the whole structure of the society** in which they lived.

This would have led to the **extermination of the infant religion**.

Christians were **already being blamed for just about everything that went wrong** in the ancient world. **Even though the early Christians never interfered** with political or social or economic matters, whenever things went wrong in the Roman Empire, Christians were blamed.

If Rome **lost a war, or a city went up in flames**, men said that it was because the Christians refused to worship the old gods.

Christians were regarded as atheists because they did not believe in the various gods who were said to control the elements. So Christians were blamed for **earthquakes and drought**.

And so if Christians had sought to reform the entire social and economic systems of their day, the church may have not been established.

And so **you see the wisdom of God here**. Paul and the churches did not go after slavery per se, but they did **preach the gospel to slaves**. They did **preach the gospel to slave masters**.

And though **indirect in its method, this is the true answer to every social problem**. Because if **slaves are getting converted**, and beginning to work as unto the Lord, and seeking to love their masters, and as **converted masters are seeking** to treat their slaves well, and love them as neighbors.....then the whole institution is at the beginning of being undermined.

Now, be sure **Paul does not approve of or recommend slavery here**. And in fact, it was **Christians who led the charges** against slavery in the Western World many centuries later

Paul's method is indirect.

ill. He aims to chip away at the institution of slavery in the same way that a woodsman **strips the bark off of a tree and leaves it to die**.

Here is how John Eadie puts it, "Christianity did not rudely assault the forms of social life, or seek to force even a justifiable revolution by external appliances. Such an enterprise would have quenched the infant religion in blood. The gospel achieved a nobler feat. It did not stand by in disdain, and refuse to speak to the slave till he gained his freedom, and the shackles fell from his arms....No; but it went down into his degradation, took him by the hand, uttered words of kindness in his ear, and gave him a liberty which fetters could not abridge and tyranny could not suppress."

I say all of that to **clear away a natural objection** that could get in the way of you hearing the vital truths that are in this text for us this morning.

Now let's talk about the **main thing God IS saying** here.

In a sentence here is the main point of the passage this morning:

2. Whatever you do in your vocation, do it in service to Christ

And the **very first thing** I want to be sure we all see is that this is very much a text for **employees and employers**. For **subordinates and bosses**. For **teachers and students**. This text is helpful for everyone that is in a relationship where there is a **structure of authority**—from those in the traditional workplace to those in a school context (kids, listen well), and even to moms and dads with the kids at home.

With that in mind, let's **take a look at what Paul is plainly saying here**. Let's read the text again. Look for the **repeated phrase** that is here. Paul says it in a slightly different way each time, but the basic essence of it is the same.

"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 (*do what the same....work for the Lord*), 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."

So, here is the **plain meaning of this text in a sentence**: Whatever you do in your vocation, do it in service to Christ.

ill. When I was in HS, I had a job in the summers working for **JK Moving & Storage....**

Jeremy....would always say, "For the Ring Baby...."

His internal motor, put mine to shame. And the reason was that his ethic came from what he was serving. He was not passionate about pallets. He was not passionate about the sunburn we would get. The pay was really not even the important thing for him.

It was the ring. His pallet building **was done unto the idea of winning a woman**.

I'll say it this way: **there was something external to pallet building that invested the pallet building with meaning and purpose.**

And it ought to be the same for us except the LORD is who we are serving. **He is that external end goal. He is the reward.**

Why do you work? Why do you go to **school?** To earn a paycheck; to prove that you are contributing to society; to make good grades? Why?

Paul is saying that for the Christian there is **something much more important than any of those things** happening in the workplace. Or at school. Or at home with the kiddos.

God is there. You belong to him. And he wants you to devote yourself to him even as you carry out these various tasks. He wants you to do your vocation as an act of service to Christ.

ill. Envision **your morning commute tomorrow**. There will be thousands of other people **going to the same places** you are going. **Doing the same sorts of jobs** you will be doing. Some of them **better than you**. Some of them not as well as you.

But some of them are **believers and some of them are not**. Even though their **task** is the same; even though their **performance** may be the same; even though their **pay** may be the same....**for the believer there is something wholly unique and different going on** there than with the non-believer.

God is with His people. Their heart can be enjoying the presence of God. And their work can be accomplished for God's sake.

This reality **brings great significance to his work....not because of what he is doing. But because of who he is serving**. Slave or master; CEO or trash man.... the meaning of your work comes from who you serve, and not from what you do...if you are serving Christ.

The bad theology that Paul lays bare here is the theology that **limits the practice of our faith to spiritual realms**. That is the theology that thinks of our spiritual life over here, involving our **Bible reading, our church attendance, our singing** worship songs; and then secondarily, our **real world life over here and separate**—work being the primary consumer of time and energy.

So, **maybe you teach a class or lead a ministry team, or host people in your home for ministry events**. Those are all great things. I'm a pastor—believe me, I'm not trying to lessen the value of those things. But those endeavors are **not the only place where you can be in service to Christ**. Those are not the only things in your life that please him. You can also serve Him sitting in some cubicle in Reston, or Arlington or DC.

Paul is showing us that the **Spirit of Christ is walking the halls of your government contracting office**; He is there in the **classroom where you are teaching**....students where you are learning; He is on the phone for the **sales call**; he is in your **accounting software**. Jesus is there.

And he is saying....**serve me** in **the way** that you work; in **why** you work.

If the work you do and the way you work are things that you'll answer to God for, than work becomes a **spiritual exercise**.

Paul teaches that the Christian's work is **full time service of Christ**. In doing **secular work, the Christian can serve Christ**.

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Now, everything we've said **so far is true for both slave and master**; both boss and subordinate; both teacher and student. And the **basic thing** is this: **carry out the job you have in service to Christ**.

But Paul does address **each group specifically**. And how he approaches each group is **slightly different**.

Notice that he **reminds the slave of the reward** that is available to him if he does his work to the LORD. That is verse 8.

For us the application might be along the lines of getting **passed over** for a position in your company; **not getting the raise** that your co-worker got; not being **appreciated** for your service in nursery ministry.

Here is the Holy Spirit's word to you: there is reward for you. Its coming....if you work for me.

Now notice: he **does not mention the possibility of reward to the Master** (though certainly that exists for him). To the master (verse 9), he **draws attention to the accounting he will have to give** for his conduct as a master.

To the slave he's saying—**there is reward** for your thankless labor. You will gain a wage one day. To the master he says—**remember that you also are a slave**, and that you'll have to give an account to me....the true Master.

The **gospel rescues both** slave and master by giving **hope and purpose to the subordinate** on one hand, and **humility and accountability to the master**, on the other hand. This is theology meeting the nitty gritty of real life.

3. Implications

1. The first implication is the most obvious from the text. **If Christ is who you serve in your vocation than the effort you give should not be based on the competency or character of the one in authority over you.** It should be based on who Christ is to you.

Here is how Paul describes the required attitude of a Christian subordinate:

Fear and trembling
Sincere heart
Not with eye-service as people-pleasers
Doing the will God of from the heart

Let's take those one at a time.

The **attitude of fear and trembling is not so much abject terror**, but as one translation puts it, "**anxious care**". It's a **sense of responsibility and eagerness to leave no duty undone**.

Think of the employee who always blames the company and his supervisor and his fellow employees when this or that does not go right. The Christian employee on the other hand should have an "anxious care" to leave no duty undone at work.

Secondly, the Christian subordinate should have a **sincere heart**. The meaning here is an **undivided heart**. So when you arrive at work, you are there to give your **whole heart to furthering the ends of your employer** or supervisor.

A typical contrast to this would be the employee that sneaks in **personal time (online banking) or frivolous time (mindless web browsing)** rather than working hard toward the ends that his superior has set out for him.

Third, not with eye-service **as people pleasers**. This is working well when the boss is around, and slacking off when you are on your own.

*ill.*There's a **coffee shop I go to a lot**, and in conversations with the employees this week I found out that the Health Inspector is coming next week. And so its been a stressful week for them; extra hours, extra grit. They are getting the place up to par for the health inspector. I've not said this to them, but my thought has been—wouldn't it be smart to have a clean, healthy coffee shop all of the time, and not just when the PWC guy shows up?

Fourth, doing the **will of God from the heart**—or literally, "**out of the soul**". The idea here is hard work....working "**heartily**" we could say. That's how **Colossians 3.23** puts it, "[23] Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men."

iii. Many of you know Clif Roth who led worship here for about 1.5 years before moving to LOU to attend seminary. I met Clif when we both lived in Chattanooga, TN 10 years ago. And we met at a trucking company where we were sort of the grunt labor force on a loading dock. All of the other guys there moved the forklift freight, but Clif and I moved all of the freight that had to be moved by hand, or hand truck.

And I remember how important it became to us to work well for Christ there, because everyone knew that we were Christians.

And I remember when the company hired another young guy from the Christian college in town, who was also part of the grunt labor force. But he did not care about working hard. He quickly gained a reputation as a lazy worker.

And it really bothered Clif and I because we knew that the reputation of Christ was on the line in terms of how the Christian guys worked.

For us, our work is unto Christ. It does not matter how **cruel, or dumb or unfair** the supervisor is. It does not matter how **meaningless** the work is. What matters is that **Christ is there.** He's **with you.** He **receives your "secular" service,** as spiritually rendered. He will reward it.

Young people hear this. All the time I hear you say, "**My teacher is so lame. Or, math is so pointless.**" Hear me now.....it does not matter. You do well at that because you are serving Christ.

***iii.* Praise God that we have young people that want to go to NYC to tell Muslims and Hindus about Jesus.** Praise God for that. But there is something just as "spiritual" that they can do every day at school. It **may not be as glamorous, but God cares about it too**---and its doing HW in such a way that God is glorified. Its honoring teachers so that Christ is seen as your treasure.

2. The second implication is parallel to the first, but for those in positions of authority. Many of you are both in and under authority.

To the one in authority Paul says....

Stop your threatening

Here is how FF Bruce says it, "Masters should make it easy for their slaves to work for them with goodwill. Threatening with punishment, or harsh language and behavior in general, may ensure outward obedience, but hardly that obedience which comes "from the heart.""

I believe that **one of the things in our church that commends the gospel** is that men and women who have positions of notable authority in the secular workplace, **live like servants...as those under authority.**

I just **love to see that.** There is **not a proud, bullying way** about them. There is a **gentle, servant hearted, humble**....Christ-like way about them.

That commends the gospel.

Now, what is the key to those in authority taking on this attitude....of leading those under him in a Christ-like way? Look at verse 9--its for him to recognize that just like his subordinate, he has a Master as well. And it's the Master in heaven.

I think that **those in authority get accustomed to using their authority to bully** people. And so **instead of acting in humane ways** they force the hand of others with **threats**—sometimes pronounced, sometimes subtle. All the time using their position to **manipulate and gain the edge over others.**

Parents, this applies to you as well. Do you parent by threat? Ask yourself—**would you enjoy being a child under your parenting?**

Rod said it last week, we are to lead and correct and care for our children in the way that God loves us....with love; with patience; with justice.

3. God cares more about whether you are serving Him in your job than what job you have.

This cuts **across the grain of our American success syndrome.** But **God is not a respecter of persons.** The CEO has no advantage over the sales clerk at Target, before God.

Each will be **judged with the same question:** did you work as unto the Lord?

Take notice of **who we do our work unto**....the Lord. Who is that? Well, that's Jesus. **He's been a King and he's been a carpenter.** He's **laid in the food** bowl of sheep and cows, and he has **commanded armies about** like pawns on a chess board.

He is **not impressed** with your **security clearance;** your **W-2;** and the way **people kiss up to you.**

Nor is he put off by the **mundane, low paying work that some of you do.**

ill. Men, when we meet each other for the first time, what do we usually ask? *What do you do? What kind of work do you do?* Now, maybe its just because we are **socially awkward**, and can't think of much else to say, but sometimes I **wonder....what is it that's behind that question?**

I don't know your heart, but I wonder is it a **value judgment?** We are ranking people when we ask that question, sometimes.

ill. I remember meeting some people recently, and hitting it off with them well. I knew them for a few weeks before I had any idea what the father did. But in our 4th or 5th conversation **I found out what the father did.....and it was a prominent sort of position. It had a degree of prestige with it.** And I remember that within me there was an adjustment in how I spoke to him. I was more careful with my words; I wanted to sound intelligent. I had internal concern that he would not approve of my level of 'togetherness'.

Now, why is that? **it's because in the flesh, I'm a respecter of persons.** I esteem people or don't esteem them based on my assessment of their work's prestige.

In this text—there is none of that. Slave and Master are on **equal footing with God.** If anything, this **text lifts up the slave and pulls down the master.**

Oh, to think like God.

With God there is no partiality. **What he cares about is how you go about that work.**

You may be a presidential advisor.

You may do part time administrative help in a job you'll lose in 3 months.

You may be a preacher.

You may be a sixth grader struggling through math class.

No matter. Equal footing before God. **Here's what matters:** did you work as unto the Lord? Were you serving Him? If so, then your **earthly rewards may be different, but the great rewards of heaven** that come from the one true Master, those.....everyone has equal shot at those.

4. We need ambition for Christ, more than ambition for success.

Again, we are **cutting against the grain of the American ethic** at this point.

And I want to especially address the young people here who have not entered a profession yet.

"..... the implication of our text is this: When you ask yourself the question, "**What is God's will for my life?**" you should give the resounding answer: "His will is that I maintain **close fellowship with him and devote myself to obeying his commandments.**"

I am absolutely sure that what God wants you to be is Christlike. Biblically, there is no doubt...that is God's will for your life.

Devote yourself to that with all your heart, and take whatever job you want.

If our young people are **ambitious for Christlikeness**, God will **distribute them** in the world exactly where he wants their **influence for him.**" Piper

5. You can have fulfillment in Christ no matter what job you have.

If you are **looking for fulfillment from work** itself, you are **fighting against the very order of society** after the Fall of Adam & Eve.

Here's what **Genesis 3.17-19** says about God's curse on humankind because of sin, "[17] And to Adam he said,

"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
[18] thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
[19] By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return."

God made work intentionally frustrating to demonstrate how evil sin is. So for you to look for purpose in life through a cursed institution, is **hopelessly futile.**

I know that many of you are unhappy in your current job, for various reasons. And I'm not saying leaving them is necessarily sinful. Let's flesh this point out together over lunch or in Application Groups next week.

However.....

If the most important thing about your job is who you know, rather than what you do, than you can do that job as **unto the Lord**, as **service to Christ**, in **fellowship with Christ**, and find **contentment** there.

No matter the position, or the commute. No matter how meaningless it may seem or how unjust your supervisor is.

On this point, I think it would help us to hear from someone that is **truly in the trenches**. This week, I read some things written by a **50 year old Christian factory worker**, and felt like they were potentially the most profound thing I saw in all of my study.

“The entire atmosphere of a factory is challenging. Do you conform to your peers in ways that go far beyond cursin’ and drinkin’—their laziness, abject indifference, utter cynicism, bitterness, hopelessness, idle gossiping, and a countless number of other forms of self-destruction and squeezing into a world’s mold that ‘takes no prisoners’? The work is largely mindless, and I’m sure that I’ve lost a goodly number of the original brain cells that God gave me, but the challenge is to still believe that God is with me each day, even as the machines whirr and the people shout. The work defines the word *repetitious*. Can I each day (mostly) thank God for it and show that thanks by repetitive, conscientious diligence? The work can be discouraging, joyless, numbing—but will I live life in a bigger context, with an ultimate meaning that isn’t defined by what I do but Who I know?”

And there it is—maybe the most important thing that will be said about our jobs this morning: **will I find meaning in what I do, or in Who I know?**

If you work as unto the Lord: CEO, student, mom, IT guy....you can find fulfillment.

Everything else is frustration, and meaningless.

In prayer at the close:

The thing we are seeing in these texts over the last few weeks is that all of life should be lived in reference to Christ.

Wives submit to husbands as unto the LORD.

Husbands love wives like Christ loved the Church.

Children obey your parents as unto the LORD.

Slaves, work hard for your masters as unto the LORD. Masters the same.

Now, maybe you are here this morning and you are not a Christian. Do you realize that rather than being his child, and being able to live all of life as unto Him, you are out on your own. You are not under his umbrella.

God is not for you. Your life is in no way in reference to him. You are living as your own rebel master. And you will stand before God one day for that.

So, I would just urge you. Repent of that. Come to Jesus. He loves you. He will take you in. And you will find meaning and purpose, and forgiveness and the possibility for peace, and satisfaction. He died to make that possible for you.

Now, Christians, where you have not lived as unto the Lord, now is the time. Reorient your life according to what is most real: God in heaven—with you, in you. Your great reward. Receiving your work done for His sake.