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WORKING FOR GOD

Ephesians 6:5-9

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September 21, 2008

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Ephesians Lesson 54

Working for God Ephesians 6:5-9

Have you ever thought about how a slogan like, "good help is hard to find," ever got started? It must have started because, in fact, good help *is* hard to find! And, why is good help hard to find? Because people are basically self-centered and self-serving. They usually don't put the interests of their employer first, unless it somehow benefits them. And so employers everywhere complain that good help is hard to find.

It works the other way, too. Good jobs are hard to find. Why? Because employers are basically self-centered and self-serving. They do not often put their employees' interests first. And so it is rare to find a job where the employer genuinely cares about your welfare.

The apostle Paul wrote our text to show how Christian workers and bosses should treat each other. Granted, it is addressed to slaves and masters, not to employees and employers. Slavery was an accepted institution in the Roman world, where it has been estimated that between one-third and one-half of the population were slaves. Critics of the Bible attack Paul because he did not condemn slavery directly. But if he had done so, it would have led to armed revolt and the Christian faith would have been stamped out as an anti-slavery movement.

Instead, Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, did something else: he addressed both slaves and masters directly and showed how their faith should radically change the way that they related to one another. As Charles Hodge observes (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans, p. 370]), as both sides treated one another in this Christian manner, "first the evils of slavery, and then slavery itself, would pass away as naturally and as healthfully as children cease to be minors."

But although our text was written to slaves and masters, it applies directly to employees and employers. It shows practically how those filled with the Holy Spirit, who subject themselves to one

another in the fear of Christ (5:18, 21), should relate to one another in the workplace. Paul is saying,

Your relationship to Christ and the fact that you live primarily for heaven should transform your relationships at work.

There are two foundational principles in the passage that provide the base for the third principle:

1. Your relationship with Christ is the primary thing in life.

Paul drives home through repetition the centrality of our relationship to Jesus Christ as Lord. Note: (6:5), "as to Christ"; (6:6), "as slaves of Christ," "doing the will of God from the heart"; (6:7), "as to the Lord"; (6:8), "receive back from the Lord"; (6:9), "their Master and yours is in heaven...."

You can't miss it: as a believer, your relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord is the primary, governing fact of life. Paul is expounding here on what he said (5:21), that we are to submit to one another "in the fear of Christ." Nothing that we do should be done apart from that consideration. Every believer should live every day with the focus, "I fear Christ. I am no longer my own. I belong to Christ as my Lord. I must do His will. I must live to please Him. Someday I will stand before Him to receive the reward for my faithful obedience." Christ must be at the center of all that we think and do.

This is the emphasis of the entire Bible. The first and greatest commandment is (Matt. 22:37), "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." The second greatest commandment is that we love one another. But the Lord does not put that command first. It is deliberately second, because the primary thing in life, the foundation for everything else, is that you love the Lord God, who has manifested Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Relationship with Christ is primary!

Is it primary for you? Did your schedule last week reflect that fact? Did you meet alone with God in His Word to learn more about Him and how He wants you to live? Did you submit every thought, every decision, every word that you spoke, and every deed to the test, "Does this please my Lord Jesus Christ?" Did you take your needs to Him in prayer? You can't begin to have the right per-

spective towards your job or your boss or your employees until you first get right with Jesus Christ. As Paul makes clear, you work primarily for Him. As he puts it in the parallel (Col. 3:24), "It is the Lord Christ whom you serve."

2. Your relationship with Christ should put your focus primarily on heaven, not on this world.

Slaves in the Roman world often were treated terribly. They could be whipped, branded, mutilated, or killed. As punishment a slave could be sold so that he was forever separated from his family. Augustus crucified a slave who accidentally killed his pet quail. Juvenal wrote of a slave owner whose greatest pleasure was "listening to the sweet song of his slaves being flogged" (William Barclay, cited by John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Ephesians* [Moody Press], p. 323).

So when Paul tells slaves, in effect, "be good slaves and you will be rewarded in heaven," critics viciously attack him: "That's just 'pie in the sky when you die.' That's cruel disregard for the hardships that these poor victims are suffering right now! How dare you promise them reward in heaven when they die! We need to organize a slave protest! Slaves of the world, unite! Stand up for your rights!"

But you've got to decide at this point, do you go with the world's way or with God's way? The two could not be much more opposed to each other than they are here. The world says, "Fight for your rights! Don't take this abuse!" God says (6:5, 8), "Slaves, be obedient to your masters according to the flesh" [emphasizing the temporality of the situation] ... "knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord...." The world's focus is on the here and now. God's focus is on rewards in eternity.

An old song goes, "This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through; my treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue. The angels beckoned me from heaven's open door, and I can't feel at home in this world anymore." I wonder how many believers today could sing that song *truthfully*?

Paul repeats a phrase twice (6:8, 9) that reveals something that he had taught these believers: "knowing that...." The slave asks,

"Why should I toil day after day in a difficult job that has no financial rewards for me?" Paul says (6:8), "knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free." The master asks, "Why should I treat my slaves decently and not threaten these no good, lazy bums when they don't work hard?" Paul answers (6:9), "knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him." Both verses point to eternity. Because of their relationship with Christ, both slave and master should have their focus on laying up rewards in heaven, not on rewards in this life.

This is a neglected doctrine in our day. I wonder how many of you did something this past week because you were consciously motivated by the thought that the Lord would reward you for it in heaven? If you're not living to lay up treasures in heaven, your focus is wrong. In Hebrews 11, the great faith chapter, the emphasis is on the fact that these great men and women of faith died without receiving the promised reward. They were seeking "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:16). Moses left the riches and power of Pharaoh's court and endured ill treatment with the people of God, "for he was looking to the reward" (Heb. 11:26).

There is a story about an old missionary couple who had spent their lives working in Africa. They were returning to New York City to retire. They had no pension, their health was broken, and they were discouraged and afraid. When they went down to the wharf to board the ship, they discovered that they were booked on the same ship as President Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from a big game hunt.

When they boarded the ship, no one paid any attention to them. Then they watched the fanfare as the President arrived, with the band playing and people waiving and straining for a glimpse of the great man.

As the ship moved across the ocean, the old missionary said to his wife, "Dear, something is wrong. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these years, and yet no one cares about us? Here this man comes back from a big game hunt, and everybody makes much over him." His wife replied, "Dear, you shouldn't feel that way. Try not to be bitter about it." But he said, "I just can't help it. It doesn't seem right."

As the boat neared America, he became more depressed. When the ship docked, a band was waiting to greet the President. The mayor of New York plus a bunch of national leaders were there. The papers carried the story on the front page. But no one noticed the missionaries, as they slipped off the boat and went to find a cheap flat and to look for work.

That night the man's spirit broke. He felt that God had abandoned them. It just wasn't fair. "We don't have anyone to help us and no where to go," he told his wife. "Why doesn't God meet our need?" His wife replied, "Why don't you go into the bedroom and talk to the Lord about the whole thing?"

A short time later he came out of the bedroom, but now his face was happy. His wife asked what happened. He said, "I told the Lord the whole thing. I told Him that it's not fair. I told Him how I was bitter because the President received this tremendous homecoming, when no one met us when we returned home. And you know, as I finished, it seemed as though the Lord put His hand on my shoulder and said simply, "But, you're not home yet." (There are several versions of this story. This one is from Ray Stedman, *Jesus Teaches on Prayer* [Word], pp. 30-31.)

Do you have a boring job? Maybe it's even oppressive. Do you look on each day with dread, thinking, "What a hassle" as you grind through work? Paul says, "Get the eternal perspective! Put your focus on heaven. Even if your earthly boss doesn't reward you, your heavenly Master will." This doesn't mean that you should not look for a better job or try to better your circumstances. But it does mean that your relationship with Christ should put your focus primarily on heaven, not on this earth.

So we have two foundational principles for approaching the third principle that deals specifically with work. First, your relationship with Christ is primary. Second, because of that, your focus should primarily be on heaven, not on this world.

3. Your relationship with Christ should make you the best employee or employer on the job.
 - A. Your relationship with Christ should make you the best employee on the job.

The key concept is, you do not work primarily for your employer. You work primarily for Jesus Christ, who sees your every motive and action, even when your earthly boss is not there. Paul gives five qualities that should characterize every Christian worker:

(1) A Christian employee should be obedient.

Don't ignore your boss. Don't say yes and then not do what he asks you to do. Don't roll your eyes and then piddle around because you think that what he asked is stupid. Rather, obey "with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ" (6:5). In the Greek text, Paul says to obey from the heart (6:5), from the soul (6:6, NASB, "heart"), and from the mind (6:7, NASB, "good will"). In other words, it is to be a total person thing, not half-hearted obedience.

There are times when a Christian employee must refuse to obey an employer. If he asks you to lie for him or juggle the books or take advantage of a customer, you must tactfully refuse. But hopefully these situations will be rare. Your normal mode of operation should be to obey your boss.

(2) A Christian employee should be conscientious before the Lord.

Paul says to obey "with fear and trembling" (6:5). This does not mean cowering in fear before your boss. Paul uses this expression frequently with the idea of fearing that you will misrepresent the Lord and the gospel. It refers to fearing God in light of the final judgment (Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 449-450). It means doing your job well so that your boss will not think poorly of your Lord. If you would not do shoddy work for Christ, then don't do shoddy work for your boss.

(3) A Christian employee should be focused in purpose.

Paul says to be obedient "in the sincerity of your heart" (6:5). *Sincerity* is often used to refer to generosity in Christian giving (Rom. 12:8; 2 Cor. 8:2; 9:11, 13). It has the nuance of singleness of focus, along with liberality. It means that you give it your all, with undivided attention and effort. You don't waste time on the job. You don't share your faith with other employees on company time, unless your boss has given you permission to do so. Rather, you are focused on the task that you have been assigned.

- (4) A Christian employee should be genuine, not hypocritical.

Paul says (6:6), “not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers.” In other words, you don’t just work hard when your boss is looking, in order to get his approval, and then slack off when he’s not around. A man-pleaser worries about what people think, but he’s not concerned with what God thinks. He tries to make a good impression, so that he can get a raise or promotion, but his heart is not in the work. He is manipulative for his own gain, but not sincerely concerned about pleasing his boss as a testimony for Christ.

- (5) A Christian employee should enthusiastically serve Christ from the heart on the job.

As I said, in the Greek text, Paul says to obey from the heart (6:5), from the soul (6:6, NASB, “heart”), and from the mind (6:7, NASB, “good will”). This implies having an enthusiastic, positive, cheerful spirit on the job. It’s easy to fall in with other employees that complain about the boss or the low pay or the poor working conditions or the lousy benefits. The list goes on and on!

But remember, the slaves to whom Paul was writing didn’t have any rights, any benefits, any time off, or any pay beyond board and room! If they goofed up, they could be beaten or worse! If they did well, there were no raises or promotions. And yet Paul tells them to be obedient in the sincerity of their hearts, doing the will of God from the soul, and rendering service with good will, which has the nuance of zeal, eagerness, and wholeheartedness (O’Brien, p. 452). Why? Because they were doing it for the Lord Jesus Christ, not for their earthly masters. Christians should be the best employees on the job!

- B. Your relationship with Christ should make you the best employer on the job.

Paul lists two things for the Christian master or employer:

- (1) A Christian employer should treat his employees as he would wish to be treated.

Paul’s word to Christian masters would have been shocking in those times, when the laws and the culture were slanted completely towards the masters, even to the point of brutality and death for

the slaves (O'Brien, p. 454). When Paul says, "do the same things," he does not mean that the masters were to serve their slaves. Rather, as Charles Hodge explains (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans], p. 368), "Masters are to act towards their slaves with the same regard to the will of God, with the same recognition of the authority of Christ, with the same sincerity and good feeling which had been enjoined on the slaves themselves."

In other words, Christian employers should treat their employees as the employer would want to be treated if he were an employee. He should be fair, reasonable, and understanding. He should not play favorites, because his Master in heaven does not show partiality (6:9).

(2) A Christian employer should give up threatening.

This also would have been a shocking command in that day! Paul is not saying that a master could not give a proper warning to a disobedient or lazy slave. Rather, he means that he is to treat him with respect, not demeaning him or threatening him with terrifying punishment. During the same time that Paul wrote Ephesians from prison, he had met and led to Christ a runaway slave named Onesimus. Runaway slaves were usually executed or at least punished so severely that it served as a lesson to other slaves not to try the same thing. But Paul wrote to Philemon, the Christian slave owner, telling him that he should now treat Onesimus as a beloved brother in Christ. This was radical stuff that went against the culture of the day! But that's how Christian employers should treat their employees, knowing that they both have the same Lord in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him (6:9).

Conclusion

On February 22, 1899, Elbert Hubbard, an editor of a small magazine, needed some filler for the next issue. He sat down after dinner and in an hour banged out an article that was run without a title. He didn't think much more about it. But a few weeks later, requests began to come in for that issue of the magazine: a dozen, fifty, a hundred, and then a thousand copies were requested. The editor was puzzled over the interest. He asked a helper, who told him it was the title-less article.

Then an order came for 100,000 copies from the president of a large railroad company. The editor replied that it would take him at least two years to fill that order. The railroad president asked for and received permission to print it himself. He distributed at least a million and a half copies. Then a Russian railroad executive touring the U.S. saw it. When he got home he had it translated into Russian and gave a copy to every railroad employee in Russia.

It spread into Germany, France, Spain, Turkey, India, and China. During the war between Russia and Japan, every Russian soldier was given a copy of this article. The Japanese, finding the booklets in possession of the Russian prisoners, concluded it must be a good thing, and translated it into Japanese. A copy was given to every man working for the Japanese Government. In all, it was translated into 37 languages and sold over 40 million copies, becoming one of the best selling items ever printed.

Why was there such a demand for this article? It later gained the title, "A Message to Garcia." It was about an incident in the Spanish-American War. President McKinley wanted a message delivered personally to General Garcia in the interior of Cuba. An American officer, Lieutenant Rowan, had simply received his orders, taken the message, and without complaint, without procrastination, and without fanfare, in spite of great difficulty and danger, delivered the message to Garcia. The article extolled the faithfulness of this man who simply took the initiative and did his job well. The demand for the article stemmed from the fact that there is such a lack of diligent, faithful employees who do what they are supposed to do—who take the message to Garcia. Good help really *is* hard to find!

That's where your opportunity as a Christian employee or employer comes in. Your relationship to Christ and the fact that you live primarily for heaven should transform your relationships and performance at work. You should be the best employee or employer on the job. While you reserve verbal witness for breaks or after work, your attitude and performance testify to your Savior. Your attitudes and work ethic may be the only Bible that your fellow workers ever read. Let it point them to the Savior! Even if you are never rewarded in this life, your Master in heaven will reward you throughout eternity.

Application Questions

1. Why must your relationship with Christ be the primary foundation for how you relate at work? Give practical examples of how this works.
2. Where is the biblical balance between having your focus on heaven and yet providing for necessities on earth? Do savings accounts, investments, etc. violate the heavenly focus?
3. When is it right and when is it wrong to seek to better yourself financially through a job change? Give biblical support.
4. To what extent should rewards in heaven motivate us? Is this motivation selfish? Why/why not?

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