

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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"It's off to Work we Go"

The Text: 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.

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On a company notice board was found the following:

Our company requires no further physical fitness programs. Everyone gets enough exercise:

jumping to conclusions,
beating around the bush,
running down the boss,
going around in circles,
dragging their feet,
dodging responsibility,
passing the buck,
climbing the ladder,
wading through paperwork,

pulling strings,
throwing their weight around,
stretching the truth,
bending the rules,
and pushing their luck.

I am sure that all of us in the context of the work place can identify with anyone number of these play on words. It is to the theme of the work place we turn today as we continue our journey through Ephesians.

As we have seen over the past two weeks, this section of Ephesians shows how important it is for Christians to have a biblical understanding of marriage, the parent child relationship and now Paul concludes this section on essential relationships by discussing labour relations.

Is it not true that along with family life, the work environment is one of the most important communities in which we live and move and have our being? When we are followers of Jesus, how we view work is a matter of discipleship. Within the society of the work place Christians are to walk, not according to the flesh, but in the power of the Holy Spirit. We can only walk in the power of the Holy Spirit when we remember that our salvation is a continuous work while we are in this world as we are being made after the likeness of Jesus Christ. In the work place, a question we can ponder as Christians is the following.

If Jesus was here as my boss how would I do my job? If Jesus worked for me, how would I treat him as an employee?

These are helpful questions to keep before us because today Paul will tell us that as Jesus' disciples this is the kind of attitude we are to cultivate in our work. This is because the work environment, whatever it may be, is a setting where we can put into practice what Paul wrote in 2: 10:

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

What Paul teaches us about marriage, the parent/child relationship and the employee/employer relationship is all of a piece as he gives practical application to the principle he laid down in chapter 2: 10. This is because the way we engage in our work is an opportunity for the

Holy Spirit to be active in our lives. To cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the context of our work relationships requires of us an activity, an attitude, and an awareness.

We realize as we read these verses that Paul is talking to those who were slaves and masters. Within the Roman Empire of Paul's day there were some 60,000,000 people. Of this number half were slaves. As such, they had little opportunity to become freed men and so would spend the rest of their lives under the yoke of slavery. In the first generation of the Christian movement it is estimated that the vast majority of Christians would have come from this slave class. So how does Paul address them? He does not council them to strike and set up a trade union. This is not to say that in any number of cases the setting up of unions is not important. However it is not the priority of first importance for the Christian worker. Paul concentrates elsewhere. And what he says is to pertain to both the slave and the master.

As we consider these verses from Ephesians 6:5-9 we will discover that for the Christian employee and employer there is again a call for mutual submission in the way Paul described this in chapter 5:21

"Be subject to one another out of reverence from Christ".

Here in Ephesians 6 you will notice that there is a balance between the responsibility of the Christian employee and employer. Although in the five verses we are to consider today, four of them concentrate on the responsibility of the slave, everything said to the slave holds true for the master as well. This is why the text says at verse 9:

"Masters, do the same to them"

"The same to them" is in reference to verses 5-8. In other words, Paul is saying that masters are to apply to their treatment of their slaves the same behaviour that slaves are to exhibit in their relationships with their masters. There is a mutuality of respect that is to be engendered in these relationships.

And what is it Paul says slaves and masters are called to engender in these relationships?

They are to

1. Exercise an Activity,

2. Cultivate an Attitude
3. And live with the Awareness of a principle

1. The Activity:

The activity is described in verse 5: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters." Then in verse 9 he says to masters "Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening". The activity described here is one of mutual listening. Now the way this is exercised will not be identical for slave and master. Because the slave or employee is under the authority of the master/employer it is expected that the employee will fulfill their responsibilities in a timely and thorough manner. However it is implied that the employer will also listen to those who work for him or her and will not use a threatening tone or action. Rather the interaction will be one that shows mutual respect for those under them. Do you see how this council allows for the relationship to be one of balance where both employee and employer are valued and show mutual submission?

This is all Paul says about the activity because he understands that if such action is to be practiced there needs to be an essential attitude that will enable this to be so. Paul has two things to say about this attitude.

2. The Essential Attitude

First he says:

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling."

The first part of an essential attitude is the quality of fear and trembling. He does not mean in this a cowardly attitude toward your master or boss. Rather the fear and trembling is to be directed toward oneself. It is a healthy recognition of the danger of a Christian going along with the philosophy of those around, and acting as they do, thus destroying the possibility of God working through him and the power of God being released in that situation.

That this is what Paul has in mind is supported when we consider to other places where he uses the same phrase. In 1 Corinthians 2: 3-5 he wrote:

3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of

wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Why did he come to them in fear and much trembling? He was concerned that he would come with the wisdom of the world, reflecting the philosophies, the ideas, and the dominant attitudes of those around. He was afraid he would merely titillate the Corinthians minds with the mental acrobatics that the Greeks so loved to hear. No, he says, I came in fear and trembling lest I succumb to that and thus rob you of the great and transforming manifestations of the power of Jesus Christ at work.

He writes also to the Philippians, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," (Philippians 2: 12 RSV). Why? Because it is God that works in you, "both to will and to do of his good pleasure," (Philippians 2: 13b KJV). Be afraid lest you fail to reckon on that and turn to these empty cisterns, these false forces that are so dominant in the thinking of those around you. Therefore, that is the first thing. Face this relationship with fear and trembling, lest you fail to trust in a living God.¹

The second part of this essential attitude is so important that Paul says it in four different ways. He captures it at the end of verse five when he says "work with a sincere heart as serving Christ."

This word sincere is an interesting one. It is rooted in the Latin term *sine cere*. It means "without wax." Years ago, a potter would often put his seal, or stamp, upon a completed vessel with the words *sine cere*. This meant that to his knowledge there was no flaw in that work. If a potter did crack a vessel, he would carefully patch that flawed vase or bowl by filling in the crack with wax. Then he would glaze it over. But it did not merit the stamp *sine cere*, "without wax," because it was not a flawless piece of pottery.

Thus, believers are to give their employers sincere and honest service. This means we are not to appear respectful on the surface ("Yes Sir, I'll get right on it!") and then curse our employers under our breath. We are to display "sincerity of heart." Why? Because when we serve our employers, we are really serving Christ. We are to do our work "as to Christ." It is this attitude that is essential for the Christian.

¹ Ray Stedman: Employees and Employers at: <http://www.raystedman.org/ephesians/0133.html>.

It is so important that we understand this attitude that Paul puts it again in the negative: "not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers".... And then in the positive... "but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart".... Once again Paul says: "rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men".

How can we work "as to Christ?" If you are a cook, cook like Jesus will eat it. If you clean, clean like Jesus will stay there. If you administrate, treat it like it is Jesus' business. If you sell, sell like you are selling to Jesus. If you serve customers, serve them as you would serve Jesus. Colossians 3:23 says, "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men and women."

Verse 6 exhorts believers to be faithful workers. We are to serve with "sincerity... not with eye service as people-pleasers." If you've ever taken a PE class and seen the push-ups stop when the coach isn't looking, you understand this. Some only work when the boss is looking.

The Lord is always watching. We are to serve with "sincerity...not with eye service" and certainly not as people-pleasers. You know what this means...always trying to impress the boss, being a yes man, a yes woman. I tried to think of a polite way to say it from the pulpit but couldn't. You know exactly what this means!

Remember the parable of the talents in Matthew 25? The man who received 5 talents worked hard while the master was away. Likewise the man with 2. However, the servant with 1 talent wasted his opportunity. When the master returned he called him a "wicked and lazy servant."

Even if you have a dead-end job, do it "heartily as to the Lord." We are to do what you should do where you are to the best of your ability and the Lord will place you where you should be tomorrow." This is stewardship. What we reap is what we sow. What we put into life is what we get out of life.

Whatever the job, Christians should stand out. Employers should recognize them not only for their honesty and integrity, but for the effort they put in, for their hard work.

3. Awareness of an underlying Principle:

Paul concludes this section by underlining a motivating principle that he puts like this: "knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free". Here is something that we need to be aware of. When we cultivate an attitude where we are serving Christ we will be aware of a principle that considers how God will meet us in that situation. It does not mean necessarily that we will be taken out of a difficult situation because we know that the Lord Jesus himself was not removed from the challenges that face us while in the world. But I think it does mean that as we live as followers of Christ we are learning to live as those who do good because we are walking in newness of life. We are not walking in the futility of our thinking, as Paul refers to the unredeemed, in chapter four, but rather we are walking in the power of the Holy Spirit. God does repay good by what he is able to do to change our character, and yes at times our circumstances.

Let's make this practical; let's get down to the nitty-gritty. If we just do enough to get by, if we have to be poked and prodded to do the job, if we show up for work grouchy and irritable, if we are moody and undependable, if we exhibit a "poor, poor pitiful me" mentality, then we are violating Scripture and sinning!

Further, we are robbing ourselves of blessings. Remember the law of sowing and reaping? Look again at verse 8, "knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is slave or free." Maybe you didn't get that raise. Maybe you didn't get the promotion. Maybe your boss is mean-spirited and unfair. You are not responsible for your boss. You are responsible only for you. When you work pleasantly, you will "receive from the Lord."

Let me conclude this section in this way. We are not slaves; we are employees. We have the freedom to change jobs. If you cannot work where you are, respectfully, sincerely, faithfully, and pleasantly, perhaps it is time to consider looking for another job. The worst thing you can do is stay there and bring disrespect on Christ.

Verse 9 shows us that believing employers are to be fair in their actions. This is why he says: "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."

We might loosely paraphrase it this way: "Employers, did you read what I said to employees? You did? Good. Here's my word to you: ditto!" Colossians 4:1 says it this way, "Masters, give your

bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a master in heaven."

Employers, get this: Not only are you to be respectful, sincere, faithful, and pleasant, you have the responsibility to model these qualities for all your employees! You are not better than your employees. You are where you are because God has given you that place of authority. Jesus said in Luke 12:48, "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required." If you want gracious employees, you must yourself be a gracious employer.

Clarence Francis, who was chairman of the board of General Foods, said:

"You can buy a man's time; you can even buy a man's physical presence at a given place; you can even buy a measured number of skilled muscular motions per hour or day. But you cannot buy enthusiasm, you cannot buy initiative, you cannot buy loyalty, you cannot buy devotion of hearts, minds, and souls. You have to earn these things."

Verse 9 addresses how believing employers are to be fair in their attitudes. Paul adds that employers are to "give up threatening." Though threatening might have had a different meaning for slaves, today it refers to the threat of dismissal. Employers, don't use your god-given authority to bully and intimidate your employees. Be fair, honest, and above all, kind to all of them.

Why? First, because you "know that your own Master is in heaven." God is watching. Verse 8 says, "Whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether slave or free [master or servant]."

Second, because "there is no partiality with him." In God's eyes, employers and employees are the same. On Earth there may be different classes, but not so in heaven.

And so the action, attitude and awareness that employees are to cultivate are to be cultivated by employers as well.

Conclusion

When Harry Truman was asked how he could account for his success in politics, he pointed to several pictures of family ancestors and said gruffly, "I come from good stock, and I've got a lot to live up to."

Believing employee, believing employer, you come from good stock too. You are of "the household of faith," the family of God. Let's live up to who we are.

