

I heard a story about a restaurant in southern California which had a bartender who competed internationally in CrossFit competitions. He was unbelievably strong. The owner was so convinced that his bartender was stronger than anyone else that he offered a standing \$1000 bet. He said that after his bartender cut open a lemon and squeezed it in his fist, with all the juice running down into a glass, that any patron who could pick up that lemon and squeeze even one more drop out of the lemon would win the \$1,000. Patrons tried again and again, week after week, month after month - the lemons were bone dry. No one got a drop. Then one day a scrawny little man came into the bar, wearing thick glasses and a wrinkled suit. He said in a tiny, squeaky voice, "I'd like to try the bet." After the laughter had died down, the bartender said OK. He cut lemon, squeezed away and handed the remains of the rind to the little man. He took the lemon, clenched his fist, and in stunned silence the patrons watched as one drop after another after another fell. Eight drops in total. No one had ever seen it before. Everyone applauded. The bartender paid the \$1000 and then asked curiously, "What do you do for a living?" The man said, "I work for the IRS." Some people are great at doing their jobs.

Today, as we continue our study of the Book of Ephesians, here's what we are going to talk about: **God's love changes our work.** This is good news for us, because so often we approach work as a necessary evil. I was looking for common sentiments towards work online this week, and these were three of the phrases I came across:

"I like my job only slightly better than I like homelessness."

"When I show up to work late, I like to make up for it by leaving early, too."

"My boss told me to have a good day, so I went home."

We all know that it's possible to view work as a necessary evil. But that is not how the Bible views work. The Bible actually teaches us that work is inherently good, that God himself works, and that when we work, we should do it in such a way that brings God glory. Take a look at what we see in our passage today: **6:5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6 Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. 9 And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.**

Before we talk about work, I think it is important to recognize that the Bible is addressing slaves and masters. One might expect the Bible to condemn slavery. Let me speak to that for just a moment. The slavery that we think of from the trans-Atlantic slave trade is far different to the slavery of the ancient world. Slavery in America was based on race. It was for life, and it was for menial tasks. Slavery in the ancient world was not based on race. It was not necessarily for life, and it included all manner of professions, including educators, managers, doctors, and artists.

That doesn't mean slavery isn't an issue that needs to be dealt with, simply that slavery in the Bible is far different than what you see in 12 Years a Slave. It's also important to take note that in other places in the Bible, when Paul is addressing slaves in 1 Corinthians 7, for example, he tells them that if it is at all possible, to get their freedom. And he tells a slave master in Philemon that he should set his slaves free, so that this man can relate to him not as slave to master, but as brother to brother.

The Bible sets us on a trajectory toward the abolition of slavery, and in certain places directly tells people to work towards an end of slavery. But other times, like in this passage, Paul simply deals with reality. In the first century Roman Empire, there were roughly 60,000,000 slaves. It was a deeply ingrained part of their economy and society. So instead of living in an illusory world where they pretend slavery wasn't a reality, Paul addressed the situation that people actually found themselves in. And he basically says, "In light of the situation that presently exists, here's how to honor God." The Bible doesn't pretend we live in a perfect world, it teaches us how to be faithful to God in the midst of an imperfect world. Luckily, because of the work of devout Christians like William Wilberforce, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln, slavery has been abolished in the Western World. And we can approach a passage like this not focused on slaves and slave owners but rather on work in general, on how to engage at work as an employee, as well as how to engage at work as an employer. This passage has a lot to say to both situations. And I'd like to take some time and speak to the situation of employees as well as employers. First, let's talk about what it means to be an employee.

Let's look at 6:5-6 **Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.** What stands out to me right away from this passage is this: **As an employee, work as diligently as if Jesus himself were your boss.** We all know we work harder and better when the person who makes the request is comparatively more important in our minds. When I was 20 years old I had a job that I really loved. And one of the reasons I loved it was because I had such a great boss. I respected him, appreciated him, and was always willing to go above and beyond for him. After about a year, my boss took a new role and I got a new boss, whom I didn't respect nearly as much. I still did my job, but that's basically all I did. In my immaturity, I didn't always work with joy, didn't work with excellence, and didn't go above and beyond. Then I was asked by the President of my school, Matt Proctor, (whom you heard last week) to work for him. This was the president of the college I was working for now! I respected him immensely. He treated me great. He mentored me. And guess what, I started working with joy, with excellence, and going above and beyond. This is one of the greatest regrets of my professional life: in my immaturity, I allowed the quality of my work and the quality of my demeanor to be determined based upon whom my immediate boss was, not whom my ultimate boss was. Look at the passage again. What does it say? **Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.** If you are a Christian, your immediate boss is not your ultimate boss. Jesus is. So whatever task you are given (as a nurse, as a cashier, as a construction worker, as a dentist, as a salesman), work toward that task as if Jesus himself gave you the directive. As followers of Jesus, we work

for our boss as if Jesus himself were our boss. When we have that mindset, it transforms our employment.

Now look at 6:7 **“Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people.”** And I want to focus on that word **“Wholeheartedly.”** The practical takeaway is that **As an employee, work with all the creativity and passion you have.** Being a Christian at work is not just about getting the job done, it’s about doing the job; with all your heart. If you are a waiter or waitress and you have three tables on your shift, your job isn’t just to get people in and out, get them their food and drinks; it is to help them have a world class customer experience under your care. It’s for you to take complete ownership of those few tables and say, “I am going to serve these people with such excellence they’ll be posting about this on social media before they leave and will be telling all their friends to come eat with us.” Serve wholeheartedly! If you are a teacher, your job is not just to go through the set curriculum and make sure your kids can pass their exams at the end of the year and that they stay alive. It’s to be the sort of teacher that gave you a love for teaching in the first place, to inspire your students, to approach every class with joy and energy, to make learning fun, to speak value into young lives, to give students the tools they need to succeed in the world, to set an environment in your classroom that makes your students look forward to coming to school. Christian employees don’t just do their job, they don’t just do their job well. They work wholeheartedly, with all the creativity and passion they have.

One more word for employees. Look at 6:8: **You know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do.** Paul says instead of focusing on how our company is going to reward us for the work, we should focus on how God is going to reward us for the work. Said simply **As an employee, work for eternal compensation.** When most of us think about our compensation at work we think about our hourly wage or salary, about our healthcare, our vacation days, and the retirement package. And of course those were good things to be aware of. But how often do we focus on the compensation promised by God? What this passage says is that God himself evaluates our work, and is going to give us an eternal reward for what we’ve done. It doesn’t matter if you are a CEO or a janitor, an NFL quarterback or a person selling popcorn in the concession stand, an astronaut who goes to outer space or the guy who poured the cement for the launching pad. No matter who you are or what you do, God sees your work and will actually give you an eternal reward for your labor. Think about the change this would make if we kept this in our minds. If I asked you to mow my yard and said I’ll give you \$10, you’d probably do a pretty good job, if only out of self respect. But if I asked you to mow my yard and said I would give you \$10,000,000, how good of a job do you think you’d do?! You’d be on your hands and knees with scissors making sure every blade of grass was just right. When the reward is higher, our work is greater. And the Bible says we will receive an eternal reward for our work.

If you are a Christian and you are an employee, you should make it your job to serve your company in such a way that makes everyone at your place of work more interested in Christ. Think about that. You are not just showing up to work to get the job done. In every area of life you are a representative of Jesus, you are an ambassador of the kingdom. So your attitude and energy level when you show up to work, your respect for your boss, your kindness and concern for your teammates, the excellence with which you execute your job responsibilities, you should work as if you are trying to win the employee of the month every month...and not primarily because you want a raise or want recognition, but because you want to represent Jesus well. You

have a higher mission than anyone else there. You are trying to open doors for the gospel at work and make a difference for eternity.

I know we have people here today who are working a job you don't love for a boss who is not great. Please hear me on this: I hope that you find a career you love and a company and a boss who is incredible...but even if you never do, this still applies to you. Remember, this was first written to slaves! So whatever your work situation, work as if you were working for Christ, work with all your heart, work to earn an eternal reward. And even if it's really hard at work right now, remember that God forms, shapes and refines his people in less than ideal circumstances, and don't miss out on that. Embrace that. God wants to refine you and sanctify you during those 40 hours. God is not just doing something *through* you at work; he is doing something *in* you at work.

So those are three very specific lessons for employees. What about employers? God's word speaks to that as well. First, let's look at 6:9 **Masters, treat your slaves in the same way.** When Paul says "**in the same way**," he means that they can't expect something from their workers that they aren't doing themselves. Here's the first take away: **As an employer, lead by example.** If you want your people to be professional and respectful, you be professional and respectful. If you want your people to be prompt and diligent and gracious, then you be prompt and diligent and gracious. Everything rises and falls on leadership, so don't just hope and wish for a better culture. Be a leader! Create the culture! I can't stand when leaders in an organization complain and say, "Our company just doesn't _____" or "Our people just don't _____" I stop the conversation right away and say: You are talking like a follower instead of a leader. Leaders don't complain and blame. They take ownership. They don't say, "Our people don't _____." They say, "We have not yet led our people to _____." If you are a leader, your job is not to be a thermometer that reads the temperature. It is to be a thermostat that sets the temperature. Take ownership. Set the tone. Lead by example.

Paul also says: Ephesians 6:9 says **Masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them.** It could also read, "Do not be harsh with them." Here's the simple and clear take away: **As an employer, lead with kindness and respect.** Sometimes an employer has to have direct and uncomfortable conversations. Sometimes you have to coach. Sometimes you have to critique. Sometimes you have to confront. Sometimes you have to release. That's part of leadership. As a leader, I've had to have every one of those conversations with people. But here what we have to remember as Christian employers: Jesus said, "**Love your neighbor as yourself.**" And if we were to contextualize that in the work environment here's how it would read, "**Love your employees as yourself.**" Leaders, how are you doing with that? As a follower of Christ, everything you do should be done with kindness and respect even when what you have to do is hard. Here's the litmus test that I use when I get ready to lead hard and have a difficult conversation with someone. If the person I'm getting ready to sit down with was in my family, if this was my mom, if this was my brother, if this was my sister, how would I hope their boss would treat them? Leaders have to make hard decisions, and leaders have to have hard conversations, but in everything you do as a leader, God is calling you to lead with kindness and respect. The leads whom I have loved the most are not the ones who gave me the most freedom, they are the ones who engaged with me and led hard to get me to be at my best.

Employers: Lead by example, lead with kindness and respect. And here's the third lesson. Look at how 6:9 ends: **You know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.** Do you see what Paul is saying here? This is so important for leaders and employers to remember! **As an employer, lead knowing you will be accountable to God.** Paul is saying, one day there is going to be a performance review for everyone who has ever lived. And God isn't going to give you a pass because you were the boss at work, because you were the CEO, or because you owned the company. Everyone is going to have to give an account, and one of the things that leaders will have to give an account for is how they led at work. Leaders in the room, the person on your team, the person two, three, or four levels beneath you in the organization - you all have the same master in heaven. God sees everything. He knows everything. He is your heavenly father and he is their heavenly father. Remember that as you lead.

If you are a Christian and you are an employer, you should make it your goal to make working for you the single best professional experience anyone on your team has their entire career. They should say, "My boss has set clear goals for me. My boss invested into me professionally and personally. My boss coached me. My boss had difficult conversations with me that helped me to grow. My boss communicates well with me. My boss leads by example. My boss compensates me generously. My boss helps our entire organization accomplish our mission." If you are a Christian and you are an employer, you should hope to lead in such a way that everyone on your team is more interested in Jesus because of the way you lead. Think about that goal.

A pastor I know told a story of someone who attended his church and then eventually made the decision to accept Christ and be baptized. When he asked her testimony she said, "I work in a cutthroat industry. I was new to my company, I made a mistake, and when it was discovered I should have been fired. But my boss covered for me and took the blame himself. It make no sense. It was my fault. I should have been let go. But he absorbed the impact. So I sought him out and asked why he did it. He was dismissive and said it was no big deal. I refused to accept that answer because I knew it was a huge deal and I had never seen anyone else ever do that. He then told me that he was Christian. He said he believes in a God who gives second chances, who pays the price for our mistakes, so as a leader, he tries to lead like Jesus. He said that he attended this church. I had to learn more. So I started attending. Now I am a Christian, too. Employers in the room, love in such a way that makes people want to know more about Jesus!

There are two people in our church who are in a lifegroup who I think do this really well. One is a vice principal, the other is a nurse. I asked them to share their stories. Listen to what they wrote.

The vice principal begins by saying: When I joined a lifegroup at The Creek a year ago I realized that all the other people were much more intentional about taking their faith to work than me, and I was really inspired by their example. I began by taking prayer walks around the campus almost every day at noon with a Christian colleague at the school. We ask God to move powerfully in the lives of our faculty, staff and students. (How cool is it that we have people leading our schools who are doing that?!?!?) When I was at work, I began talking about the change Jesus had made in my life and offering to pray for faculty and staff. I even had the privilege of inviting students at the school to The Creek's high school ministry on Sunday night.

All of this was so encouraging. When the husband of one of our staff members was hospitalized with a threatening illness, I had the chance to pray for her, and I asked everyone else in my life group to pray for her, as well.

That's where the second story picks up: First and foremost, I try to carry out my job to the best of my ability and to pursue excellence in everything I do. If a patient can't trust my capabilities as a nurse, why would they trust me on spiritual matters? As I interact with patients, I ask them questions about their life, family, and faith. This opens the door to all kinds of conversations. I always ask my patients if I can pray with them. Though some say no, most welcome it. And God has moved so powerfully. Sometimes patients are moved to tears and express deep thankfulness. Sometimes patients experience miraculous healings that the doctors can't explain. Sometimes they accept Jesus as their savior. I have countless stories. One story from just a few months ago stands out. A friend from my lifegroup who works as the vice principal at a school reached out and told us his co-worker's husband named Charlie needed prayer. So we all started praying for Charlie. I prayed for him every day for over two weeks, and then one day at the hospital I walked into a new patient's room...and it was Charlie. The man my entire life group had been praying for. I introduced myself, told him there were so many of us praying for him, and then got to pray with him and his family. They were amazed and overwhelmed with awe by God.

Let me wrap up the rest of the story by going back to the vice principal. "Kaida and Charlie are good stewards, but the hospital bill was overwhelming. I recommended them to the generous ministry at the Creek, and my church was able to get them back on track by paying for their August living expenses. I got to share this incredible news with my colleagues at the school. Even non-believers were touched and inspired. And I got the chance to share what it really means to be followers of Jesus.

Two people, in our church, in a lifegroup, who made a commitment not just to go to work, but to represent Jesus at work, to make a difference, to advance the kingdom. Lives are being changed. Can you imagine what would happen if the 4,000 people who worship here every week had the exact same vision? Our city would be a different place. You don't have to go to Africa to be a missionary. Wake up. Go to work. And represent Jesus in all you do. It will change the world.

I've put together a prayer that I want to encourage you to print off and say as you leave your house, or in your car before you go into work each day. Here it is:

God, as I go to work today, help me to honor you and represent you in all I do. Give me the grace and strength to work with excellence, joy, creativity, passion, and integrity. Make me a great leader, a great follower, and a great teammate. Help me to be at my absolute best today. May my work be worship. May I demonstrate your love to everyone I come in contact with. Use me to open doors for the gospel, so that the work I do today will last for eternity. All for your glory and honor. Amen.