



Let me start with a question today: How do you feel about your job these days? Hopefully you come to church today not because you have to but because you want to. We come here and we're surrounded by people who think like us and we sing songs and we get encouraged and inspired. But tomorrow most of you will drag yourself out of bed and head off to a job that provides little satisfaction or enjoyment. You might be thankful for your job, but you really don't enjoy it. In January, 2010 The Associated Press reported on The Conference Board's survey findings on work satisfaction. In a nutshell:

- » Only 45% of Americans are satisfied with their work
- » This is the lowest level recorded in 22 years of this survey
- » Only 51% of people find their jobs interesting
- » Of the under 25s, 64% say they're unhappy at work

Part of the problem, of course, goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve sinned, God said to Adam, *"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field"* (Gen. 3:17-18). Once man sinned, God made work—even good work—hard.

Another part of the problem is for most of us there's a huge disconnect between our jobs and what we call serving the Lord. Unless we're actually telling people about Jesus, we see what we do in our jobs as separate from what we do when we're serving the Lord. Serving the Lord means teaching Sunday School or feeding the homeless or volunteering at a church work day, not designing software or selling real estate or cutting hair. Catholic theologian and scholar Dorothy Sayers said it well many years ago: "In nothing has the church so lost her hold on reality than in her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments... She has forgotten that the secular vocation is sacred... How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life?"

Our text today is Ephesians 6:5–9. In this passage the apostle Paul reminds us that through Jesus Christ this separation between the secular and sacred is destroyed and everyday work can be transformed into meaningful service. Listen to what Paul says.

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. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. 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 (Ephesians 6:5–9).

When you read this passage you can't help but see how Christ transforms our work. Look how central he is to everything Paul says here:

- (v. 5) *"...just as you would obey Christ"*
- (v. 6) *"...as slaves of Christ"*
- (v. 7) *"...serving the Lord"*
- (v. 8) *"...the Lord will reward each one"*
- (v. 9) *"...he who is both their Master and yours"*

It's very clear in Paul's mind the presence of Jesus Christ in your life can transform your work. A prominent newspaper editor once wrote: "Most people don't think that work could possibly have anything to do with spirituality. They assume that these two worlds cannot mesh. But if we bring our souls to work then we can transform our work." I think he's on to something there. But what Paul seems to say is not only do we bring our souls to work, we also bring our souls *to Jesus* at work.

But before we look at that, we must face something squarely in this passage. If we're honest, this passage bothers us because it appears to condone slavery. Let me say a couple of things about that. First of all, even though this passage doesn't condemn slavery, it doesn't condone it either. The essence of slavery is evil. Its evil isn't in the servitude it involves. Jesus elevated the idea of serving others. He served us and said if you want to be great then become the slave of all. The evil in slavery is the idea of one human being owning another, which degrades that person and turns them into subhuman goods to be used and exploited. The evil isn't in the serving; it's in the owning and exploiting.

The second thing we must realize about this is slavery in Paul's day was quite different than what we think of when we think of slavery. When you and I see the word "slave" in the Bible, we immediately think of 17th, 18th, and 19th century New World slavery: race-based, African slavery. When you read it

through those blinders, you misunderstand the Bible's teaching. Historian Murray Harris wrote a book on what slavery was like in the 1st century world. He made a number of important points: First, in Greco-Roman times, slaves weren't distinguishable from anyone else by race, speech, or clothing. They looked and lived like everyone else and were never segregated off from the rest of society. Second, slaves were often more educated than their owners and often held high managerial positions. Third, slaves made the same wages as free laborers and normally weren't poor and often saved enough money to buy themselves out. Fourth, very few persons were slaves for life in the 1st century. Most expected to be freed after about ten years or by their late 30's at the latest. Also, the African slave trade was started and resourced through kidnapping, which the Bible condemns.

So while the early Christians, like Paul, discouraged slavery and set principles in motion that would eventually destroy it, they didn't go on a campaign to end it. But many Christians, when faced with New World slavery, **did** work for its complete abolition because it couldn't be squared with biblical teaching. So the point is that when you hear somebody say, "The Bible condones slavery," you say, "No it didn't—not the way you and I define 'slavery.' It's not talking about that."

The fact is, 1st century slavery parallels what we think of today as employer-employee relations. So what Paul says to slaves and masters can relate and apply to people in the workplace today.

Subordinates Are to Give Their Boss the Jesus Treatment.

Paul starts out and addresses slaves and what he says to them can be applied to anyone in the work place today who is an employee or has a boss. The question here is, how does Jesus transform our work as subordinates? Paul makes it clear: Subordinates are to give their boss the Jesus treatment. Serve them as you'd serve Christ. Look again at the key phrases: v. 5, "**just as you would obey Christ.**" v. 6, "**as slaves of Christ.**" v. 7, "**servicing the Lord.**"

Howard Hendricks tells of a time his flight was delayed. His fellow passengers were getting very irritated, and some of them began to take out their frustrations on the flight attendants. He noticed how gracious and poised one of the flight attendants was, and when they finally took off and she had a minute, he called her over and commended her. He told her he wanted to write a letter of commendation to the airline to tell them what a good job she'd done. Her reply: "I don't work for the airline; I work for Jesus Christ. And this morning before I left for work, my husband and I prayed that I would be able to serve Christ in my job." She got it. She wasn't serving them; she was serving Christ.

But what does that mean? What does that look like? Paul says four things are to characterize the way you serve your boss.

Respect

First, you serve them respectfully. Paul says "**with respect and fear.**" That qualifying phrase—"with respect and fear"—is always reserved in the Bible for God. In fact, there's an exact parallel to this verse in Colossians. Paul writes, "**Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.**" The respect and reverence we show to our masters is really respect and reverence for the Lord. In other words, when we show genuine respect to our bosses, it's actually our reverence for Christ they're seeing. In our minds, they're Christ's surrogate. Our bosses get something they personally may not even deserve. Even if they're great and deserve a measure of respect, they don't deserve reverence such as we'd give to God. But that's what they get from us.

I think there's a sense here that we show respect not because they've earned it but just because they're in that position. And do you know what? God put them there! When I was in Africa, I flew on a plane and one of the passengers was the second-in-command of the entire nation of Cameroon. We all waited while he was the last one to board the plane. And when he boarded, everyone stood up. I didn't even know who the guy was until later, but I stood up. There was a respect for his position; his office.

Sincerity

Now it's possible to do that on the outside but to have a totally different attitude on the inside. Like the little boy who misbehaved and was told by his teacher to go sit in the corner, which he did. But when asked about it later he said, "I was sitting down on the outside, but on the inside I was standing up."

That leads to the second thing: serve them sincerely. He says "**with sincerity of heart.**" Think of a situation where deep down you really don't respect your boss. Maybe you feel you could do his job better than him. Or maybe you have an issue with her integrity or her personality just rubs you the wrong way. You know in order to keep your job you have to be careful. So you resort to hypocritical patronizing or a sarcastic inner attitude like, "I know I'm better and smarter than you but I'll pretend otherwise." Or maybe you gather support for your point of view with other employees and together you feast on his reputation.

But if you see that person as Christ's surrogate, you won't do that. The word "sincerity" that Paul uses literally means "singleness of heart." It's like you have a singular focus on Christ. That means whatever you do, you do it unto him. John Stott wrote, "It is possible for the housewife to cook a meal as if Jesus Christ were going to eat it, or to spring clean the house as if Jesus Christ were to be the honored guest. It is possible for teachers to educate children, for doctors to treat patients and nurses to care for them, for solicitors to help clients, shop assistants to serve

customers, accountants to audit books and secretaries to type letters as if in each case they were serving Christ."

Conscientiousness

The third thing that should characterize how we serve our boss is conscientiousness. Paul says "*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.*" In other words, don't shape your work around what makes you look good—office politics. Let God take care of all of that. Don't play that game. Let God take care of the posturing and scorekeeping. Focus instead on obeying your boss as slaves of Christ.

Once in a while I go to the gym and I do the cycling class. I'm one of those guys who picks a bike in the back. I want to be able to hide a little bit. Then the instructor turns on the music and starts barking commands and pretty soon I find myself slacking off when she's not looking. As soon as she looks my way, I'm hauling, but when she turns away, I'm easing off. I'm thinking, "Why am I doing this? No one is making me take this class."

But this sort of thing is ingrained in all of us. We do this at work as well. There are some who are all action when the boss is around, but when he's gone you can find them at the water cooler. Notice what Paul says to describe this conscientiousness: "*doing the will of God from the heart.*" We often say, what's God's will for my life? Well, here it is, at least in part. God's will is for you do your job as if Jesus was the one who will give you a performance review at the end of the day.

Years ago there was a young woman who was a maid. She had come into a relationship with Christ and was applying for membership at the church in London where Charles Spurgeon was pastor. The church had a committee that examined all potential members. During the interview, Spurgeon asked her if there was any evidence that she'd truly repented of her sins. She looked at him and said, "Well, I no longer sweep the dirt under the rugs in the house where I'm employed." Spurgeon turned to the committee and said, "That's all I need to hear. We'll receive her as a member." You see, she did her work unto him.

Cheerfulness

That also means doing it cheerfully. Paul says "*Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people.*" That word "wholeheartedly" actually means with cheerful good will. And we can do that "*because you know the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do...*" You see, we can serve cheerfully because we have hope. Not only does God see but God rewards! And we serve with an eye to the reward the Lord will give us for whatever good we do. So, if something good they do goes unnoticed by our boss, we're okay with that since Christ sees and he'll reward.

Emma Daniel Gray died on June 8, 2009, at the age of 95. On the office records, her title reads "charwoman." Your job is probably more important than that, right? But there was a big story about her in *The Washington Post* when she died. For 24 years she dusted the office of the President of the United States. Emma Gray was a Christian and so she would stand and pray over the president's chair every time she dusted it. Her dusting cloth in one hand, her other hand on the chair of the president, she would pray for blessings and wisdom and safety. That's what earned her God's reward. After she died, her pastor said she "saw life through the eyes of promise." When we do our work through the eyes of promise we'll have joy and purpose no matter what we do.

Bosses Are to Give Their Subordinates the Jesus Treatment.

But Paul also has a word for masters, or those who have jobs where people look to you as a boss. Paul basically has three things to say to you.

We're to do the same to them

First, he says "*And masters, treat your slaves in the same way.*" Now this is startling. When I first read this I thought, what does he mean? Masters aren't supposed to obey their slaves, are they? The more I thought about it, I realized what he was saying: Just as he called subordinates to give their **bosses** the Jesus treatment, so he's calling bosses to give their **subordinates** the Jesus treatment. Christian bosses must approach their relationships with their employees as their service to Christ, just as much as employees approach their relationship with their boss as a service to Christ. When Paul says bosses are to "*treat [their] slaves in the same way,*" he's reiterating everything he shared in the previous verses. Bosses do their jobs with reverence and fear. They must do it sincerely, conscientiously and cheerfully as the will of God. They, too, are slaves of Christ, and they must realize that he is watching and he'll reward them. While Christian bosses don't submit themselves to their employees' orders, they do submit themselves to their employees' good. That's what's unique about a Christian employer or boss.

We're not to threaten them

This leads to the second thing he says. In Paul's day, it was customary for masters to threaten their slaves. That was the way you got the most out of them... If you don't do this, here's what will happen. But Paul forbade that. He says, "*Do not threaten them...*" Well, if I don't threaten them, how am I going to get them to perform? This doesn't mean a boss can't lay down the law, point out the consequences for poor work, or offer a bad job review. It means that Christian bosses should never lord it over their employees, using fear and intimidation to get their way.

I love the story of Ruth. One of the characters in that story is Boaz. Before Ruth and Boaz fall in love we learn what kind of

man he was. He was a landowner with many employees. In Ruth 2 we see him out in the fields greeting his workers. He says, "May the Lord be with you." And they say to him, "May the Lord bless you." I love that! Is that what you say to your employees when you get to work? Is that what they say to you? People were motivated to work hard for Boaz not because he threatened them, but because he cared for and respected them.

Or better yet, how about Jesus? Jesus wasn't always a preacher. By age 12 he would have been apprenticed alongside his father. Since Jesus began his public ministry about age 30, he'd have worked at a trade for 18 years. That's six times as long as his 3-year public ministry. His former neighbors recognized Jesus by his previous occupation. They said, "Isn't this the tekton?" (Mk 6:3). *Tekton* is usually rendered as "carpenter." But "builder" may be a more accurate translation. In the context of 1st century Israel, the *tekton* was a general craftsman who worked with stone, wood, and sometimes metal in large and small building projects. Tradition suggests his father Joseph died a few years prior to Jesus entering public ministry. If that were the case, Jesus as the eldest son was the one primarily responsible to see family living expenses were met through his and his brothers' work as day laborers.

Equal before God

The third thing he says to bosses is that we all have the same master who treats us equally. There's no favoritism with him. So this brought an element of radical equality into the workplace. Slaves and masters might have different responsibilities, as do bosses and subordinates today, but we all will ultimately answer to the same One.

It kind of reminds me of that reality TV show *Undercover Boss*. Have you ever watched that? I've only watched it a few times but I love the premise: A CEO goes incognito and gets a low-end job

in their own company. Nobody knows who he or she is, and he or she watches what happens. They simply observe how hard the job really is. They see how their employees treat other employees and how their managers respond to those below them. As you'd suspect, they learn a lot.

To those of you who are bosses, have you ever considered that your master—your true boss—is undercover at your company, and he's watching you? Pretty sobering, right? Not only that, as Paul says, there's no favoritism with him. You won't stand before him one day and hear him say, "Wow! You made it all the way to the top. I'm impressed." No! You'll hear him say, "How did you treat those people I put under your watch? Did you care for them? Did you treat them the way you want to be treated? Did you treat them as your brother and sister in Christ; as my beloved children? Did you give them the Jesus treatment?"

So let me ask you, as you do your work this week, what will you have to do differently? What needs to change? And think back for a minute to what we learned earlier in Eph 5. Remember Paul called us to be filled with the Spirit. He said one of the fruits of being filled with the Spirit is that you "submit to one another." And then he explained what that looks like in a marriage where husbands and wives submit to one another. Then he talked about what that looked like in a family where children and parents submit to one another. Here he's explained what that looks like at work as bosses and subordinates submit to one another. But don't forget, it's not possible without the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. So take some time this morning and ask the Spirit to fill you again and transform you and your work.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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