

Work for the Lord

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Preacher: Cory Brock

[0 : 00] So we'll read from Ephesians 6 and from verses 5 to 9. Bond servants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart as you would Christ.

Not by the way of eye service as people pleasers, but as bond servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man.

Knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bond servant or is free. May the masters do the same to them and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their master and yours in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Let us pray. Lord, we ask now that you would open our hearts to receive your word and that you would give us insight and understanding and most importantly, faith. We ask for real change based on this passage in our lives.

So Holy Spirit, help us now, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. We're walking through the back half of the book of Ephesians week by week.

[1 : 05] One way to summarize it all is to say that there is nothing more practical than the Christian faith. And the headline article that we introduced last time, two weeks ago really, is verses 18 to 21 in the previous chapter, which says, Do not get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit.

And then says, Submit to one another. And so he's talking to Christians. Paul's talking to Christians. People who are filled with the Holy Spirit. And he's saying, Submit to one another in every relationship you have.

And so the big headline that we're working our way through in this section is the gospel. When you come to faith in Jesus and the gospel gets a hold of your life and the Spirit is a part of your life, one way that you know you have the Holy Spirit and that you know God is at work in your life is when your relationships start to reorder and reorganize based on the facts of the gospel.

And so last week we looked at marriage and how the gospel changes the way we look at husbands and wives and dating. We skipped children and parents because the family service is next week.

So I'll come back and be able to tell the kids next week in the service, Obey your parents. And parents, there'll be something for you too. This week we're coming to Paul who says masters and slaves.

[2 : 26] The slave-master dynamic. He's talking about work and he's talking about employment and being an employer and an employee. And we'll come to address this issue of slavery in just a second.

But work is what we spend most of our time on in our waking hours. So the average human being, the average person in this room will spend 90,000 hours in employed work over the course of their lifetime.

That's the statistical average and if you're a high worker, an over worker, it's far more, right? And so, boy, you got to believe that Christianity has something to say about work.

That which we spend most of our awake time doing. And it does. Christianity is so practical. So let's think about that. First, let's understand Paul in context and deal with this issue of slavery.

And then second, we can't ignore that. And then secondly, I just want to give you the one big principle that Paul gives us for how to think about faith and work in this passage. And of course, when I say one big principle, that means one big principle with lots of sub-principles underneath it, okay?

[3 : 35] All right, so here we go. First, what do we do about the context when we open the passage and read verse 1? Slaves, obey your earthly masters. The ESV U.S. actually says, bond servants, obey your masters.

So there's two different versions of the ESV, one for Americans, one for British people. And in the American one, it says, bond servants, obey your masters. And the reason for that is because the translators are trying to soften the language to distinguish Greco-Roman Mediterranean slavery from African chattel slavery.

And they want to soften the language to make a distinction there. And there are many distinctions to be made there. But the word is slaves. Slaves, obey your masters. Now, you may say, Paul says, slaves, obey your masters.

And you think, where I work, I am a slave. So I don't need any contextualization here. This is right on. But here he's, of course, talking to first century people in the city of Ephesus.

And after William Wilberforce, after the Civil War, after the Jim Crow South, in the area where I grew up, after apartheid, some of us and lots of people in our city would come to a passage like this.

[4 : 49] And they would struggle, struggle, struggle. And maybe you do. Because you say, Paul, where is the sentence that says, slaves, revolt against your masters and abolish slavery?

Where is that sentence? All we read is, slaves, obey your earthly masters. And what do we do with something like that? And many, many, it's definitely true that many Christians in the past, at times, have come and used this passage to condone slavery.

And if you go back and read some of the sermons in the 1850s, where I come from, you'll see that sometimes, and that happened in the UK and Britain as well, that they used this passage to condone slavery.

And that is not what Paul is doing. Not at all. What is Paul doing? He is writing to a little bitty church in this city called Ephesus. And we realize it has to be the case that most of the people he's talking to are slaves.

So the historians will tell us that the estimates are as high as the population, first century population of the Roman Empire, being up to 75 million people in the first century.

[5 : 54] And up to 60 million of them are slaves. 60 out of 75 slaves. Slavery is so ingrained, so part of the normal fabric of the culture, that overwhelmingly, at least 80% of all the people in the Greco-Roman Empire are slaves.

And that means that when Paul writes this, he's talking to a little bitty church in Ephesus of people who have come to faith, discovering the gospel for the very first time. And what they're trying to do is work out, what do I do with this thing called Christianity?

And if, Paul, you're telling me that the gospel, Ephesians 1 to 3, frees me in Christ, the gospel says you are now free in Christ, what does that mean when I go to work on Monday as a slave who is not free?

And that is Paul's biggest concern, right? And so, in Greco-Roman Mediterranean slavery, you had some really, really brutal forms. People, masters separating families, men from their wives and children sometimes.

You had torture sometimes happening. But in many forms of Greco-Roman slavery, you also had a paid job where you were housed, fed, well-educated.

[7 : 08] It was not race-based. Most of the people who were slaves were conquered peoples. And lots of people would sell themselves into slavery because it was a really, really steady thing. You knew that you could be fed, clothed.

So, for instance, some of the most well-educated people in the whole of the Roman Empire were slaves, like the doctors in Caesar's household. They would have been slaves in the Roman Empire. It was the normal pattern to be a slave.

And there were some horrible forms and some not-so-horrible forms. And what Paul's doing is he's not completely dismissing the institution. The principles of the Bible will ultimately lead to the abolishment of slavery one day.

Yeah? But what he's doing here is he's looking out and he's being a pastor. And he's talking to people who have just come to faith in Christ and saying, Now, what does Jesus mean for Monday? I'm a slave.

And boy, if he would have told this little band of slaves in the middle of a metropolis like Ephesus, Go out Monday morning and be an activist, you know, and protest on the royal mile against slavery, they would have all been dead before lunch.

[8 : 12] Okay? And so it would have been very foolish. And instead, what is he doing? He's trying to pastor them. Think about 1 Corinthians 7. Paul's got this list in 1 Corinthians 7 where he's going

through, What does it mean to be a Christian in your normal life?

And one of the issues he addresses is, If you've become a Christian but you're married to a non-Christian, do you leave your spouse? And Paul says, No. Stay with them. Be for them. Right? Because they just don't know. They're trying to figure it out. They don't know the ethics of following Jesus. And that's what he's doing. He's pastoring them. He's pastoring us. And he's saying, What does Jesus have to do with your Monday, with your employment, with your work? He's getting right down to it. That's his big goal. Now, does Paul care about the abolition of slavery? Absolutely he does. Does Christianity matter for the social conditions of a city? Absolutely it does. But the principle in the Bible is not revolution but always reformation. The biblical idea is never revolution but always reformation.

[9 : 12] In other words, what he's telling us is something absolutely revolutionary that leads not to revolutions but reformations. And just like last week, if you were here, I mentioned that when Paul turns to men in the Greco-Roman Empire and says, Men, you husbands, you cherish your wives as if she is your own body.

In a society where men would get married and then have any relationship they wanted on the side and could care less about their wife except for status, He says, You nourish and cherish her like it's your very body.

Boy, that was an equality, a plane of equality in the Greco-Roman world that had never existed. And when he turns in this passage in verse 8 and 9 and he says, You cannot look at your slave and think, I'm greater than my slave.

Instead, when you know that you're standing before the Lord, you're equal with them before God. That is a revolution that will lead to a reformation. And you can think about William Wilberforce here in this country in the 19th century.

William Wilberforce, who really led the movement towards abolition of the slave trade here, he was an aristocrat of aristocrats. He was as ostentatious as it gets.

[10 : 28] So he was a character in a Jane Austen novel. A pretentious, snobby, very, very wealthy man. And he found Jesus. Jesus found him. He came to Christ. It changed his life.

It reordered all of his relationships. And what did he do? He spent his entire life slowly trying to be leaven in a society that still had the slave trade by slowly, slowly, slowly drip-feeding parliament with biblical principles until parliament abolished the slave trade.

The principle in the Bible is to care about social conditions, but not through the lens of revolution, through the lens of reformation. Drip-feeding the gospel principles over and over and over again until change starts to happen.

And God calls us at all different levels to care about the social conditions we may have been dropped into. So some of us might become William Wilberforce. Others of us, most of us, will not in tiny little small ways in whatever community workplace that we've been put in.

But the Bible calls us to care about that. But let me give you the biggest takeaway here. And the biggest takeaway to see is that Paul is saying to us the most important thing is to care in this fleeting life about what does Jesus have to do with me in my life today.

[11 : 41] So the social conditions may change, I hope so, for the better. But this life is fleeting. And Paul is saying the most important thing is to ask, in the first century, what does it mean for me to be a slave tomorrow at 8 a.m., 7 a.m. when I wake up?

What does it mean for you as a Christian to be an employee or an employer tomorrow? Tomorrow. So the workplace may be really unhealthy. And what you've got to think about is slow drip-feeding permeation of change.

But the most important thing is to say, how do I follow Jesus in that tomorrow? Even if the social conditions never change. So a Christian is willing to suffer in bad conditions and pray that they get changed.

But in the meantime, witness to the gospel the whole way, all along the way. All right? So what does that mean? What does that look like? How? Secondly, the one principle I want to give you with lots of sub-principles.

Here we go. Secondly, what is Paul teaching us here about work, about employees and employers and how to think about it? He's telling us one main thing.

[12 : 44] And that is, if you're a human being, you work. And if you work and you're a Christian, you work for the Lord. God is your ultimate boss.

God is your boss. That's how a Christian works. That's what he teaches here. And that means, good news for all you employees in the room, your earthly boss, as he puts it in verse 1, is relative, not final.

And for all the employers in the room, you work for the Lord, Paul says. And that means that you have to think about your workspace, your employees, the people who work under you, who work for you, as entirely equal before God.

God shows no partiality to masters, to employers. You work for the Lord. That's the big lesson that we learn here in this passage. Now, what is Paul doing? He's bringing us back to Genesis 1 and 2. And he's reminding us that when the gospel comes into your life, it has the power to reorder your relationships, to make them what they should have been if Genesis 3 would have never happened. [13:51] So the goal is to realize, hey, this is for Christians, but it's also the gospel so permeating our lives that we live as if Genesis 3 never happened.

That's the big goal. Now, of course, we won't do that perfectly, but we want to reorder marriage to look like Genesis 2 again. We want to reorder work to look like the Garden of Eden.

That's what he's talking about here. And so look how he puts it. If you just scan your eyes across the passage, you can see all the times he takes you back to realizing, I work for the Lord. God is my big boss.

That's what really matters. So he says in verse 5, Slaves obey, and then there's the clause at the end, as you would obey Christ. In other words, as you're obeying your employer, as you're serving them, do it as if because you are serving Christ.

That's what he's suggesting. Keep going. Not through eye service, but as servant of Christ. So in every sphere of work, whether you work at home, you work in an office, you work as an employer or an employee, work as if you are serving Christ in that moment.

[14:56] That's his suggestion. Doing the will of God from your heart, wholeheartedly for God, all the way down to the bottom when he says to masters, knowing that when you work as an employer and give orders to people, God is your master.

You should do it as if you've been mastered by Jesus Christ himself. All right, so you can see all throughout the way how clear it is. The main idea, you work for the Lord if you're a Christian.

He is your boss, and everything's about relating ultimately to him. Now, he gives you three ways to do that. Here's the sub-principles. Practically, just the little words that he chooses to use here.

Number one, he tells you something every time, negative and then positive. So the normal way that people do it in the city apart from the gospel and then how the gospel really can change your life at work.

And so the first one he gives you is in verse one. And he says, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling. That's the first one, with fear and trembling. By the way, if you look down at verse nine, you'll see that he says, masters do the same thing.

[16:02] So every one of this list, these three principles, he's saying to both employers and employees. So most of us in this room are both probably, a lot of us will be, where you will be an employee, but you'll also be a boss of somebody else at the same time.

And so a lot of us have to figure out, with wisdom, how this works out in your life. So all we can do today is give the principles from the Bible. And every single one of us has to say, how does this very particularly work in my workplace, according to my job, my rhythms, depending on if I'm an employee or an employer.

So the first one he says is, obey your employer with fear and trembling. All right, does that mean going to work and everything your boss says, saying, yes, sir, doing it, yes, ma'am, doing it as a scaredy cat.

Fear and trembling. No, okay, the Greek word fear and trembling is an idiom in Greek for honor and respect. So it's using a Greek idiom to say, serve at work, serve your boss with honor and respect. And remember, who's he talking to? He's talking to slaves. He's saying, slaves, serve your master. Employees, serve your boss with honor and respect, therefore, even if they are bad.

[17:21] So here's how the gospel can reshape your relationship to work. It gives you a new reason, a new power, a new impetus to going to work and saying, I don't have a good boss, but because I work for the Lord, God calls me to honor and respect the authority above me, even when they're not doing a good job, even when they're not doing what they should be.

Now, does that mean being walked all over? No, because the paradigm we've already had in Ephesians is always speak the truth and love in your relationships. And so what does it mean to honor and respect, fear and tremble?

It means that you have the confidence because you work for Jesus, to stand up sometimes to a bad boss and say, I respect you, but I disagree, and I don't think that's the right course of action. Truth in love, right? And at the same time, you've got the humility to then go to the water cooler and kill the water cooler gossip about how bad your boss is. That's the humble confidence the gospel gives you.

So what's the first thing we learn here? One of the first things we learn, the first thing we learn here is the way to go to work and serve the Lord. How do you serve the Lord at work? You serve God at work. You work for the Lord by bearing with a bad boss in ways that other people will not bear with them.

[18:37] Forbearance with them, no matter what. Bearing with a bad boss. And it goes the same for masters. He turns and says, the same for you, you employers. Stop your threats. And so in the ancient world, in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean society, masters would oftentimes be brutal to their slaves.

And imagine, boy, masters and slaves. When he's speaking, when Paul is writing this, it's being read out loud in church. And who is there in church? Masters and slaves sitting next to each other and saying, you employers, you look across the room and know that in all the ways that you continue to be harsh, the gospel has to mortify that and kill that.

And you've got to respect your employers, your slaves in this first century because Jesus Christ came to die for them just like he came to die for you. The gospel has got to reorder that.

And then he turns to employees in this room and he says, look over and respect that person even when they don't do a good job. The gospel changes everything. The gospel reorders our relationships from top to bottom.

The second thing he gives us here is in verse six and seven. So he says in verse six and seven, here's the negative, not by eye service and people pleasing, but instead serving God wholeheartedly, rendering service from the heart.

[19:58] So not eye service, not people pleasing, but serving the Lord at work wholeheartedly. Now boy, this is where it really comes down to the practical. I remember in high school, my dad made me work a lot in high school.

And when I grew up, it was big on you work, work, work as young as possible so that you learn to work. You learn how to really work, right?

So I did construction and all sorts of other things. To learn hard work, no matter what I thought about it. And I remember when you're 17, when you're 16, maybe when you're 26, maybe when you're 36, maybe when you're 46 or 56, maybe you still are with your pals at work.

And you, you know, once I had a desk job, a computer job when I was about 16, 17, and we had it worked out pretty well where you could put your hands on the keyboard, right? And close your eyes like this.

And we had code words, you know, and people would be designated, okay, if the boss is coming, you know, cry out like an eagle or, right? And immediately you pop up and just start typing, right?

[21:08] Now this is the word Paul uses, eye service, meaning you only work when the master, in the first century, when the master shows up. And the rest of the time you are doing as much as you can to do as little as possible, right?

And then he turns and he says, and also not as men pleasers in the text or people pleasers, it's translated. And it's the same idea, but in eye service, the idea is that you only appear to be doing work when the boss is around.

People pleasing is you are only working so that the boss would see you. So maybe you work as hard as you can, but the only reason is because you want to get promoted, promoted, promoted. Success, success, success. So I'll do whatever work I need to do in order to be seen by my boss so that I can go up, up, up in the business or whatever hierarchy you're a part of.

And he says, the gospel changes that. Why? Because now you work for the Lord. He's your big boss. And so now when you go to work every day, you gotta say, why am I doing this?

[22:14] Even in a job that maybe you don't like, and he says, you've gotta wake up and you gotta say, because I'm doing it, I'm gonna work, I'm gonna do what I signed up to do because I'm working for the glory of God. In order that by my good work, even when all the other guys are asleep with

their hands on the keyboards, they might see my work and give glory one day to my father who's in heaven.

Maybe I'll get a chance to say, look, the reason I'm not gonna do it is because I work for the Lord. I wanna give glory to God. And so I'm committed to doing exactly what I signed up to do. Boy, if you think about all of our lives, we have a natural heart disposition to care so much about what people think about us.

And we care about what people think of us as men. We care about what people think of us as women. We care about what people think of us as workers as well, and in every sphere. And we desperately care about what our bosses think about us.

And when we live according to that gospel, which is not gospel at all, it's bad news, then our whole life becomes about being controlled by what everybody thinks, everybody's opinion.

We're literally making all of our decisions based on opinion formation. And what we're reading about here says that when you realize that you work for the true boss, for Jesus Christ, when he really is your master at work, we are freed from desiring the praise of people all the time.

[23 : 38] It no longer becomes my ambition to care as much about what everybody thinks about me. And instead, what I really care about is seeking the common good and rendering service for the Lord as much as I possibly can.

And sometimes that may even mean being fired for something, going that far, because I care about the Lord. I'm not gonna do that. I'm not gonna sin when I'm asked to sin at work. Because the Lord, I care about the glory of the Lord in all that I do.

The third thing and final thing he gives us here in verse seven and eight is ultimately rendering service and goodwill, doing all we do with goodwill to the Lord, knowing, he says, you may not be rewarded in this life for it.

So he's talking to slaves. They're sure not gonna be rewarded for their service before God in this life. He says, but you will be rewarded one day. The Lord sees. Now, what is he saying? Do you, he's asking you this.

Will you ask yourself this diagnostic question? Do you go to work to make money? Yes, that is a good thing. Do you go to work to provide? Yes, that is a good thing. God has made work for that, to be able to provide.

[24 : 42] But he's asking, do you have a heart because of the gospel? Because God looked out at the world and said, I will not leave this world to die to itself.

I will save this place. I love humans. I love this world so much that I will redeem. You look out at the world and you say, look, yes, I come to work to make money. Yes, I come to work to provide for my family or myself.

But boy, I come to work because God made me to be a worker. And I'm made in his image. And he's the great worker. And I want to work to his glory. And ultimately, I want to serve the common good as much as I can to witness to the future kingdom of God that God, the great craftsman, is building for us.

That's the real reason. That's the real motivation. That's what he's talking about here. So let me put it simple. The greatest lesson, I think, in this passage is the most important way to serve God at work, according to Paul, is to go to work and do good work, do excellent work.

That's what he's saying. When you work for the Lord, you go to work and you work excellently. And you say, I work excellently to the glory of God. Now, let me bring things to a conclusion.

[26 : 00] I'll put it like this, even more simply. You can say, God doesn't make junk, so I don't make junk either. Right?

Every morning you wake up and you say, God doesn't make junk, so I don't make junk. I work for the Lord. I try to do my work skillfully, beautifully, because it's all ultimately about his glory.

Now, the headline, remember, was verse 18 to 21, be filled with the Spirit. And look for the Spirit working out sanctification in your life by the way your relationship to work is changing.

Look for that. Be aware of that. Think about that. Try to reorder your life and relationship to work through that lens. But what is he ultimately saying there? He's saying that in order to see work like this, you've got to get the gospel into your life.

And you've got to believe the good news of Jesus Christ. And what is the good news? We could spend a long time talking about it, but let me just say it this way. The gospel means resting in the voice of Jesus Christ who says over you, while you were my enemy, while you were a sinner, I

came to love you beyond and in spite of your performance.

[27 : 14] The gospel says that God loves you despite your performance. And you know what that means when it comes to work? It means that when you believe the gospel, you are freed from needing to create meaning and your own existential meaning and your own personal successes merely through the workplace because God has already told you, I accept you beyond your performance.

In other words, it gets you, it frees you, it liberates you from believing my performance at work and in every other arena of life is my ultimate meaning. The gospel frees you from that.

And you can go to work and you can know that you're freed, you're freed from selfish ambition. You're freed from just pursuing higher levels of success and money all the time because you don't need to be somebody.

God has already said you're a somebody to Him. He loves you desperately in Christ and it frees you from thinking, it frees you also from thinking that working with your hands and working, maybe you just, maybe you clean, maybe you work in the garden.

This says, God is the ultimate gardener and that means you are free from thinking that there's such a thing as lesser work in this life. Mere menial work instead of, Martin Luther, finish with this, Martin Luther, what did he say?

[28 : 34] In the top of the Reformation, he came up in Roman Catholicism and he believed that the only real way to serve God through our work is to become a monk, a priest, or a nun. And so he did that.

He became a monk and a priest. And he still really struggled with God's call on his life. And when he came to read Paul correctly and find out about the bounty of justification that God pronounces his love and grace and forgiveness over you despite your performance.

What did he turn around and say about work? He turned around and said, here's a quote, the milkmaid and the watchman on the wall are the hands and feet of the Lord. He used to believe the only way to really serve God in this life is to be religious minister, to be a monk or a priest, he thought.

And then he said, no, it's the milkmaid and the watchman on the tower that are the real hands and feet of the Lord week in and week out. The gospel frees you to realizing God has called you to work and so the number one thing is just to work excellently to God's glory.

Martin Lloyd-Jones was a minister in London in the middle of the 20th century. This week, I read his six sermons on this passage. All right, so listen, maybe you're thinking, when is this going to finish?

[29 : 48] Martin Lloyd-Jones preached six straight weeks on Ephesians 6, 5 to 9. We're only doing 30 minutes, okay? But let me give you a couple examples and I want to quote him because they're strong, I think.

He said, if you're a university student, a student in the room, he said, he talked about this happening in his own church in the middle of the 20th century. A university student came to me and they said, you know, I failed my exams.

And he said, okay, sometimes that happens, but why? And they said, well, the reason I failed was because I didn't study because I was out till 1 a.m. every night this week doing work for the Christian Union.

And he said, now that sounds pious, but he said, God called you to be a student first. And to work for the Lord is not to replace nightly evangelism till 1 a.m.

with the primary calling you have during exam week, which is to study and to do your job excellently. He gave another example to the office worker. He said, Paul's calling us here to work for the Lord wholeheartedly, and that means every morning to wake up and fight the, what's the difference in a Christian when the gospel gets a hold of your life and you come to work?

[31 : 05] You fight the drudgery in the morning. When you wake up and you think, oh boy, not again. He says, a Christian says, yes, I do struggle with that. I do feel that way.

But when you realize I gotta go to work again, he says, do not do it in a begrudging manner, but from the heart wholeheartedly saying today I get up and this is hard, but I'm called to work and I'm gonna work for the Lord and I'm gonna work for the glory of God.

God made me to work where it pleases the Lord and I'm gonna give my whole heart to it as much as I can even in a difficult environment. He says, that's the application of the text. So here's the takeaway and the final word and I'll pray.

How do you serve the Lord at work this week? Number one, do a good job especially when nobody's watching you. Number two, the way to serve God at work is to bear with a difficult co-worker, boss, and relationship in ways that other people in the office will not bear with them. Number three, the way to serve God at work is to seek the common good of society, to make something wonderful if you're able, to do something helpful as far as you're able in work, to serve the common good.

[32 : 17] Number four, the way to serve the Lord at work is with public faith, never allowing this false dichotomy in the modern world between private faith and a public sector to go to work as a Christian, as a public witness, using your wisdom if you're able to share the gospel to somebody in a wise way.

And the most important of all is to say, I work for the Lord so when I go to work because God doesn't make junk, I'm not gonna make junk. I'm gonna work as excellently as I possibly can. Let us ask God to give us these hearts. Let's pray. Father, we ask that by the power of the gospel you would change our relationship to work. Reorder us, Lord, reshape us, give us a reinvigorated spirit to work for you.

Lord, you are our true master. And so I pray for some today maybe who have not yet called upon you to be their master who have not yet followed Jesus. And we do pray for them now for those that might be pondering that in their life in this very room and pray, Lord, that you would help them see how practical Christianity is and how powerful your acceptance through the cross is for them. And we pray that now in Jesus' name. Amen.