



WORK: ARE YOU SLAVE OR FREE?

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 6:5-9
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Our text today deals with the very important subject of work. Work occupies half of our waking hours. Pastors, some feel, are the exception here. Someone once said of pastors that they are “six days invisible and one day incomprehensible!” So as we look at the topic of work together I promise not to share with you my 20-year-old illustrations of when I used to get up at 5:45 a.m., don a hard hat, take the 6:40 commuter train to San Francisco and labor all day on a 37-story high-rise building at the corner of Fourth and Market.

What I am going to do instead is give you the point of view of a man who worked with his hands all his life, yet his intellect equalled that of the great philosophers of his day. This man’s background was such that he felt at home in all arenas of first century life: the Hebrew synagogue, the Greek marketplace, the Roman court. He knew how to work alongside the prominent and powerful, the poor and insignificant. He plied his trade in magnificent palaces and oppressive prisons. He knew how it felt to be affluent and honored, as well as poor and despised. He never tired of work, because he regarded work as holy activity, indeed the very means to worship God. He never retired, but labored to the end, even looking forward to death as his final act of worship.

I am referring, of course, to the apostle Paul, whose letter to the Ephesians, written during a time when he was held as a slave in prison, is the subject of this series of messages.

In our text today, from chapter 6 of this letter, we come to the apostle’s word to slaves and masters. Slavery was widely practiced in Paul’s day. William Barclay wrote that “it has been computed that in the Roman Empire there were 60,000,000 slaves.” John Stott had this to say about slavery in the empire: Slaves “constituted the work force, and included not only domestic servants and manual laborers but educated people as well, like doctors, teachers and administrators...” Referring to how they were cruelly treated, he said, “Slaves were sometimes whipped, mutilated, and imprisoned in chains, their teeth were knocked out, their eyes gouged out, they were even thrown to the wild beasts or crucified, and all this sometimes for the most trivial offense.” There were exceptions to the rule, but more often than not, the life of a slave was extremely demanding, as evidenced by the fact that “some slaves ran away (risking, if caught, branding, flogging and even summary execution), while others committed suicide.” (*The Message of Ephesians* [IVP, 1979] 250-251).

But in the gospel, Christ had redeemed slaves from a life of oppression, and in the process set their spirits free. And in the house churches of the first century, we know that slaves were treated as equals with free men and women. Here in this text now, Paul addresses both slaves and their masters. He encourages slaves to relish the liberation

that was theirs in the gospel through the Spirit of God, and masters to find their true freedom as slaves of Christ, ready to serve those who labored under them.

We could well say that our text, therefore, poses the following question of all who work: Are you slave or free?

First, a word about the context of the apostle’s word concerning work.

I. Work: The Natural Soil for Cultivating Spirituality

This text is found in the broader context of spirituality, of Paul’s command to believers in chapter 5 to “be filled with the Spirit.” He is referring to all aspects of life—to marriage, the home, and now, as we will see in this text, the work place.

Following the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the early Christians recognized that this event had two implications for their lives. Here is the first:

(a) No Distinction Between Sacred and Secular

There certainly were distinctions between the sacred and the secular in the Old Testament. There was a holy land, a holy temple, a holy priesthood, a holy sacrifice, etc., and Israel’s task was to guard the holiness of these things from anything that would defile them. This was what lay behind the building of walls and gates, the establishment of rituals, etc. But the prophets foresaw a day when all this would change. This was Zechariah’s prediction when he wrote: “In that day there will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, ‘HOLY TO THE LORD.’ And the cooking pot in the LORD’s house will be like the bowls before the altar. And every cooking pot in Jerusalem and in Judah will be holy to the LORD of hosts...” (14:20-21).

This picture captures the idea that in the day of Christ, everything would be regarded as holy, and this holiness would be intensified by the coming of the Spirit. This was why Jesus could do things that were strictly forbidden in the OT. He touched a leper, healed a hemorrhaging woman, touched a dead person, and communed with sinners. The Spirit had been given him in such measure that, rather than these actions defiling him, his holiness cleansed those whom he touched.

The work place was no different. It, too, had become holy. And it would be a takeover, not a merger. It had been taken over, and henceforth believers would be the representatives of the new regime, with new systems and new management. So think of your workplace this week as the future home of the New Jerusalem, and yourself as its secret representative.

Here is the second implication.

(b) Spirituality Gives Coherence to One’s Life

The early Christians did not feel they needed to engage

in grandiose schemes in order to minister. On the contrary, they filled out the life of the Spirit in the natural arenas in which God had placed them—in their marriages, homes, and in the work place. In America today, however, we often run across a very different philosophy of ministry. Christians at times structure ministries in a way that uproots them from their natural spheres and places them in unfamiliar, artificial settings. The result is that some believers who are being pulled in these new directions, under the guise of “ministry,” become less committed to their marriages, homes, and work. Frequently, their lives become fragmented and unfocused because of this, and they crash and go down in flames. What believers need to do is recover authentic spirituality, the kind of spirituality that will enable them to be integrated and whole, not disintegrated and scattered.

Work, then, is the natural soil where spirituality is cultivated.

We come now to our text. First, the apostle’s word to slaves.

II. The Motivations for Work(6:5-8)

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with good will rendering service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

In Paul’s time, the Greeks thought of work as servile activity, while the Romans felt it was beneath their dignity as citizens. Many Christians today seem to have similarly bad attitudes regarding work. Some feel work is a necessary evil resulting from the fall, a curse they have to put up with it. Others regard the work place strictly as the source of their twice-monthly paychecks. They might have to slave five days a week at work, but the weekends are for freedom, and their paycheck provides the resources for their leisure hours. The only connection either of these viewpoints has with Christian ministry is the tithe, which is given to support what they regard as “full time” Christian ministries.

Paul has a very different viewpoint, as we will see. He gives slaves two strong motivations for work.

(a) Knowing the Purpose of Work

The apostle uses language that links work, which at first glance may seem ordinary and mundane, with worship, which is extraordinary and divine! His understanding of work can be traced clear back to Genesis where, in the opening account of creation, the omnipotent God worked like an architect and an engineer, designing all the grand divisions of the universe and filling them out with created life. Then, like a potter, from the dust of the earth he made man in his own image. Next, God went to work as a gardener. He planted a garden, and placed man in the garden to do his first work, given in the two-fold command, “to cultivate it and keep it.” Like God, man was made to work.

These verbs, “cultivate (or serve) and keep,” are used in Deuteronomy 7 with respect to worshipping God. There the priest was instructed to “serve God and keep command-

ments.” Work and worship, therefore, are clearly linked in Scripture. Work is the link between humble humanity, working in cooperation with omnipotent Divinity, to bring about a harvest of life through the accomplishment of mundane things. All work is geared toward this. Gardening, you will agree, is humble work. It involves plunging the hands into the dirt, turning over the soil, mixing in manure, and burying seemingly insignificant seeds in the mixture. The only thing left to the gardener is to go to bed and sleep. While he is sleeping, the seed also sleeps. Then it dies, and a divine miracle is worked.

One of the great Hebrew poets Judah Halevi (ca. 1080), expressed this miracle beautifully in these words:

Here is the wisdom hidden in the seed which falls into the ground, where it undergoes an external transformation into earth, water and dirt, without leaving a trace from him who looks down upon it. It is however, the seed itself which transforms earth and water into its own substance, carries it from one stage to another, until it refines the elements and transfers them into something like itself, casting off husks, leaves, etc., and allowing the pure core to appear, capable of bearing the Divine Influence. The original seed produced the tree bearing fruit resembling that from which it had been produced.

The gardener wakes up to awe, wonder, and amazement. The seed which he planted came to life while he was asleep, but it took both God’s and man’s work to bring it about. In the same way that the Jews worshiped God by bringing the first fruits of the harvest and offering them to him, we work all week long and then offer our tithes to God in an act of worship, as an expression of how he has prospered us at work. Is that how you felt earlier this morning when you put money in the plate at the offering, or did you think of your giving in terms of a tip?

So there is the first motivation to work: knowing that the purpose of work is to worship God.

The second motivation is knowing who is our master.

(b) Knowing God Is At Work

Obey your masters...in sincerity of heart, as to Christ... as slaves of Christ...doing the will of God from the heart...serving the Lord...from the Lord.

Five times in these verses our boss is identified as Christ. When we go to work, it is God who is at work in us to make our work *holy* activity. So give your heart wholly to your work. God is present, watching all the while. The company is his holy temple, and you are his representative there. The early Christians delighted in this perspective on work, but we have lost much of this today. Although many of these believers were slaves, and thus powerless to change their circumstances, they had superior job satisfaction because they knew the identity of their true boss.

A glance at the lives of the New Testament couple, Priscilla and Aquila, proves the point. Aquila, a native of Pontus, on the south-east coast of the Black Sea, in all probability was a slave. In Rome, he married Priscilla, a woman of some financial means and social rank, and they set up business as tent-makers. When in 49 A.D. the emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from the city, Aquila and Priscilla went to Corinth and set up shop. There they met another tent-maker, the apostle Paul, and they spent 18 months studying the Scriptures with him. Everywhere

they traveled for the rest of their lives—and they traveled a lot, as you will discover if you trace their footsteps in the NT—their home was the site of a house church. So the imperial edict of expulsion, far from being a tragedy in their lives, was actually the avenue which led to their being disciplined by the apostle Paul.

Is your company forcing you to relocate in another state or you will lose your job? Then be glad. God, your master, your boss, not your company, is pulling the strings. You are working for him.

Now we come to the question that Paul is really asking in these verses.

III. Working: Are You Slave or Free? (6:5-9)

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with good will rendering service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free. And, masters, do the same thing for them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

What determines whether you are slave or free? Slavery is not determined by role (whether you are slave or free), but by your attitude. It is not where you work, but whom you are seeking to please. In the gospel, Christ has liberated believers from the most enslaving practice of all, that of pleasing men, to pleasing God. So, if we serve as slaves of Christ, then we are free indeed. As Martin Luther said: “Man is free from all and servant to none by virtue of grace, but slave of all and servant to all by virtue of love.”

Here the apostle lists four changes in attitude that will affect both slaves and masters as they learn to grasp that God is really their employer, their master. We could call these “the attitudes that liberate.”

(a) Giving Respect Liberates

Be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling,...

“Fear” and “trembling” are the exact Greek words that are translated in the Septuagint version of Psalm 2 with reference to how we respect the Messiah:

**Serve the Lord with reverence,
And rejoice with trembling. (LXX Psalm 2:11)**

The words Paul uses are not speaking of cowering or of cringing servility, but of respect for the fact that God is the power behind employers, and when we respect them we are actually worshipping God. In the same way, if employers want to be respected, they must demonstrate respect for their employees; and if they want service, they must serve. They must never use threats to motivate. This is true liberation in the work place.

It's interesting to think that it is the servants, not their supervisors, who have the advantage in the work of spreading God's kingdom. The bosses, if they are going to be successful in this, must put down their titles and take on the role of servants. This is how the company of Christ operates.

In the wonderful little letter of Paul to Philemon, the

apostle instructs Philemon on how to handle his runaway slave, Onesimus, upon his return to service. The runaway had visited the imprisoned apostle in Rome, and in the process the prisoner in chains liberated the slave, made him a slave of Christ, and set him free from his oppressive master. But then Paul sent Onesimus back to serve his master freely, accompanied by a letter reminding Philemon that the runaway was no longer a slave but a brother forever in Christ. Furthermore, Paul, the prisoner in chains, undertook to pay any debts the slave had incurred, although he gently reminded the master that he, too, was indebted to Paul for his own soul—a gentle rebuke to a master who already should have been serving and respecting his servant.

Here is the second attitude that liberates.

(b) Working Wholeheartedly Liberates

...in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ...doing the will of God from the heart [lit. soul]

In these words we have an allusion to the great Shema of Israel:

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery” ... “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.” (Deut. 6:4-5)

God is one—there is no division in his heart—thus as believers in Christ we must love him with our whole hearts, souls and minds. When this happens, it is beautiful to behold. Paul labels it sincerity, but it would be better translated as *integrity*. As David observed Israel's wholehearted offerings for the Lord's temple, he used this same word, integrity.

“Since I know, O my God, that You try the heart and delight in uprightness, I, in the integrity of my heart, have willingly offered all these things; so now with joy I have seen Your people, who are present here, make their offerings willingly to You. O Lord the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, preserve this forever in the intentions of the heart of Your people, and direct their heart to You.” (1 Chron. 29:17-18).

May God preserve that attitude in us forever.

The opposite, of course, is true also: God hates halfhearted worship. Likewise, God detests halfhearted work done to impress men.

Reflecting on this text we discover that spirituality, by definition, makes believers into enthusiastic, robust, vital workers! We must not go to work with our heads hanging, our eyes glazed, our feet dragging, doing just enough to get by. This kind of attitude is a contradiction. Spirituality makes us vibrant and alive. It enables us to do everything before and for God. This is how we will act as Christians if we are walking in the Spirit.

Here is the third thing.

(c) Making Friends Liberates

With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men,...

“Good will” means “to be well disposed to someone to make them your friend.” The noun has two ideas: first, that of “favor, affection or benevolence towards someone,” and second, pursuing others with “zeal and enthusiasm.” The Greek OT used this word to translate the Hebrew

word which describes how a husband and wife are to cleave to one another (Genesis 2:24). What an exalted view of work! People are behind every task you do at work, so you should work to their good will and to make them your friends. How can you work with people for 40 hours a week and not cultivate affection for them?

You may reply by saying, "You don't know who I'm chained to all week!" My response is: Paul was chained to a member of the Praetorian Guard, a Rambo-like figure, a Jew-hater who could not care less about Hebrew theology or Greek philosophy. But Paul didn't see it that way. He recognized that these guards were chained to him, and he led many of them to Christ. Who is chained to you all week at work? This is how you should view your co-workers.

Work is the natural channel to make friends, so look beyond the task at hand to the people you are yoked to. Wish them well, and cultivate your affections for them. Reach out and invite them to lunch, or into the sanctuary of your home.

In an effort to keep abreast of the world, I often desire to cultivate a ministry in the community. So last year I asked God to give me one that would bring coherence to my life, family and work. In March, when I went to pick up my daughter at the high school, I volunteered to help coach her softball team. At first the coach didn't take me up on my offer, saying that I hadn't met the coaching requirements. A couple of days later, however, he told me I could help if I kept things low-key. The following week, he came to me and said, "I'm leaving town for 10 days. You're the coach!" Thrilled with the new opportunity, I asked my daughter what I could do to make her team mates feel special, and she suggested I invite them over for a barbeque. We had a wonderful time together, and afterwards we watched the baseball movie "A League Of Their Own." When we played against the best team in the league, I told the girls that if they won, they could dump the contents of the ice chest on my head. (We scored in the final inning and won!) To finish the season, I called a friend and his wife and asked him if he would like to be father to 14 daughters for a day. They hosted us one afternoon and we had a marvelous pool party. Later, while we were driving home, one of the girls expressed amazement that people they didn't even know went to such trouble to host them and give them such a great time.

When I set out to coach softball, I didn't regard it merely as work. I wanted to make 14 friends, and I ended up with 14 daughters. This is what work is supposed to be: moving beyond the task at hand, to wholeheartedness, to divine friendships.

The fourth "attitude that liberates" has a reward.

(d) Waiting for the Ultimate Wage Liberates

Many great athletes today are noted for holding out for more money, lest their pride is damaged, before signing their contracts. What a way to live, holding up the whole company to get what they feel is their due! But, Paul says, we must not look to men for our ultimate worth on the job. The gold watch just isn't worth it. Let us look only to God.

The apostle concludes: "...knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free." God is our employer. He will pay back all the good that has been done.

Last week, I got a letter from Jim Foster, our missionary in Romania, which I found to be very helpful with respect to what the apostle is saying here. Jim wrote:

One night a Danish couple was packing to go to Denmark for one and half months. They are here living on faith and working to help the street people in Arad, mainly children. I heard that they needed some money so I asked the Lord if I should help them because I had a little and it was more than they had. As I was going home I decided to give them all that I had in our house. I thought that it was \$350, but I had forgotten that I used \$150 on a trip to Hungary. So I took the \$200 put it in my pocket and took some Romanian money to buy some gas and I put it in the other pocket and went to their apartment in the city. They were still packing when I arrived at 11:30 p.m. but they stopped so we could pray together. They had one daughter with them who is a Christian, and a son and [his] fiancée who are both non-believers. After prayer, I just reached into my pocket and put the money into my fist and put it in his hand and said good-bye. When I went to the car I decided I had better check to see if I gave him the right money. Oh! Oh! I had made a mistake. So I ran back and knocked on the door and quickly explained my error. Filled with joy, I went home, and my Danish friends left early the next morning.

Later, I received a letter from the couple saying: "Remember, Jim, when you were in our apartment and gave us some Lei, the evening before we left for Denmark? We told Lisbeth and Kim about it, and he said, 'It was good, but if he had given you \$200, then I think it would have been God.' Then you came back with \$200 and I showed him what you gave me...God's perfect timing. Kim had to think about this, and later that week both gave their lives to Christ at a youth camp. Hallelujah. God is so good.

Jim concluded by saying that the very next day, he got a special delivery letter from a brother at church, and when he opened it he found \$200 enclosed. God pays wages, and he keeps very short accounts!

Work, then, is the natural soil where spirituality is cultivated. It begins with respect, moves to wholeheartedness in work, presses on to friendships, until we meet God himself face to face.

My friends: God has constructed a holy stage for you to play your part for 40 hours a week to teach the world what it means to worship him and be truly human. Please don't walk off that stage, saying your ministry lies elsewhere. Can the farmer abandon the soil and expect a crop?

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