



## A WISE WALK AT WORK

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Ephesians 6:5-9  
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In recent years there has been a remarkable downturn in the economy in Silicon Valley. Three years ago, we experienced gold rush conditions in this valley, with companies popping up everywhere and workers receiving stock options worth millions of dollars. But today the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, with massive layoffs and dot-com closures. Stocks have plummeted, and thousands are out of work.

This is quite a change, but one thing that has not changed is God's purpose and design for work. As we come to the end of our studies in the book of Ephesians we turn our attention to this critical topic. Over the past few weeks we have talked about a number of important relationships in the context of Christians submitting to one another in love: the interaction between husbands and wives, and that between parents and children. We have seen what it is to be filled with the Spirit as we live out these relationships: we must yield our lives to others in order to serve them. Today we come to the last of these relationships, that of slaves and masters, or in more modern terms, employees and employers.

Before we examine the text there are two things to keep in mind. The first is the importance of work. Work is the means by which we sustain our bodies. If we don't work, we don't eat, unless we are subsidized by the government. We may well spend more time at work and with our fellow workers than we do with our spouses and children. Consider the priority of work in creation. In Genesis we read that after God had created Adam and placed him in a garden, "Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). God created work as a good thing.

But, secondly, there is a problem with work. Work can be frustrating, disappointing and difficult. A wide gap exists between what we expect from our jobs and what we actually receive. The problem goes back to the garden:

**Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it';**

**Cursed is the ground because of you;  
In toil you will eat of it  
All the days of your life.  
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;  
And you will eat the plants of the field;  
By the sweat of your face**

**You will eat bread,  
Till you return to the ground,  
Because from it you were taken;  
For you are dust,  
And to dust you shall return." (Gen 3:17-19)**

God created work as a good thing, but when Adam and Eve sinned, part of the curse that followed as a result affected work. It was not work, but the ground that was cursed. And God's purpose in cursing the ground was not punitive, but redemptive. God did not want mankind to find ultimate fulfillment in work, so that we might seek him.

Therefore, even though work is good, in our labors we will encounter thorns and thistles, toil and sweat, frustration and lack of fulfillment. We can love our job but hate our boss. We can love our boss but hate the people we work with. We can love the people we work with but become dissatisfied with our job. No matter where we work or what we do, there will always be toil and trouble involved. This is why people congregate around the coffee pot at work and talk about how wonderful life would be if we could move the company to Monterey, fire the boss, or lose the client.

So work is important, valuable and good, but it will not satisfy our longings. With that in mind, we come to Paul's word to employees and employers:

**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 render 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 things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him. (Eph 6:5-9, NASB)**

Employees are commanded to obey their employers. This is the same command given to children with respect to their parents. Behind the husband, the parent, and the employer stands the Lord. Slaves or employees should do their work "as to Christ" (5), "as slaves of Christ" (6), "as to the Lord" (7).

The apostle's words are just as radical today as they were in Ephesus. The boss, the company, the CEO is not

a man or a woman, it is Jesus Christ. The Christian is to recognize this authority as such, and obey the Lord. God directs our lives through earthly masters whether they are believers or not. It makes no difference whether you are a pastor sitting under the church authority or an engineer with a difficult boss. The authority that God has placed you under is his provision for your life. The only time you should not obey is when you are asked to do something immoral or unethical.

The way we obey is important, however. That is why Paul describes the nature of our obedience. It is not an external but an internal obedience. We serve or obey “with fear and trembling.” The word fear is the same word used in 5:21 and 33. We treat our employers with the same sense of respect and awe that we have for Jesus. The word tremble is associated with fear, and is used in the book of Acts to describe Moses’ reaction to the voice in the burning bush: “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses shook [trembled] with fear and would not venture to look” (Acts 7:32).

We must serve and obey with sincerity of heart, as if we were serving Christ. This word has the idea of singleness of purpose, of acting with integrity and doing something wholeheartedly. It also is connected with generosity, i.e., we do not serve meagerly, but give ourselves fully.

When I worked as an engineer, my assignment was drastically altered on one occasion. I had been anticipating going on a trip, which would have given me a chance to spend time with my parents. But because of poor management I was directed to stay behind and finish a report for which I had not been responsible. I was very unhappy with that decision, but my response was critical, since people at work knew that I was a Christian. I could not do that task half-heartedly, so I gave it my best effort, knowing that Jesus himself had given me the assignment.

We serve and obey not to win the approval of men, but of God. When we seek men’s approval, we work with an attitude of eye-service, working well only when someone is watching. The goal is to gain recognition, advancement or approval. We work feverishly when the boss comes around, but other times we are busy surfing the web or playing computer games.

When we seek God’s approval we do God’s will from the heart as a slave of Christ. We work with sincerity and purpose even when no one is watching. We do the will of God whether that is recognized or not. We realize there is a higher calling than our paycheck or review.

Paul describes our obedience as serving with good will as to the Lord, not to men. This phrase is somewhat parallel to the previous one, but it has an additional word that deals with our attitude. “Good will” means to be enthusiastic or zealous. We serve eagerly and willingly. In Colossians, where Paul addressed the same

subject, he used the word heartily. As Christians we do not serve or obey grudgingly, criticizing and complaining. When God gives us an assignment, we serve happily.

You might be thinking, “All this sounds good, but you don’t know my boss.” Why should we work with an attitude of respect, sincerity, integrity, selflessness and eagerness? It is because God is not only our boss, he controls our paycheck as well. Ultimately he will reward the good that we do. We will be compensated for our service, if not in this life, then in the life to come. If we do our work without being concerned with our pay, God will take care of us.

I have learned this through experience. Each time my wife and I had a child, God gave me a raise at work. When my second child was born and we needed a second car, I was able to lease one from my employers. Over and over again I recognized God’s faithfulness to me. On one occasion I was caught up short, however. I noticed the pay raise schedule lying on my boss’s desk, and when I saw how much the Lord intended to bless me, my heart sank. I had pre-empted the joy that would have been mine in the future. This reminded that I didn’t have to worry about money. If I worked as to the Lord, he would take care of the rest.

This brings us to Paul’s words to employers: “do the same things to them.” Masters should have the same attitude toward their workers as their workers have toward them. Employers must hold the view that they are in charge because God wants to use them to serve, bless, and benefit their employees. Masters should not regard themselves as superior, but see their role of oversight and management as a way to serve Christ.

Therefore, masters are to give up threatening, i.e., they are not to motivate with punishment or misuse their position of authority. This is similar to the word to fathers to not provoke their children to anger. Employers should shepherd, care and lead by example, even as Christ leads and guides the church for her benefit. Their motivation is that God is the master of both slaves and masters—and he is not partial to either. Both groups are responsible to him for their actions and attitudes, and both will be recompensed by him accordingly.

This leads me to the following five principles.

#### **A. Work is intended for the fulfillment of the worker, to some degree.**

Work is good for us. It feels satisfying to accomplish a task and be a part of something creative. In our ability to work we enter into God-likeness. God created and God rested from his work. Dorothy Sayers said, “Work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do.”<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II said, “Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from the rest of creatures whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work.”<sup>2</sup> “[E]very man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God” (Eccl 3:13).

God wants us to find joy and fulfillment in our labors. He gives us the freedom to pursue our interests and desires, and explore our gifts and talents. Doing something well gives us a great sense of satisfaction. This is why being unemployed is so hard. It involves more than just being affected financially. We have too much time on our hands. We feel useless and unproductive and long to be engaged in labor of some kind.

**B. Work is intended for the benefit of our family, those in need, and our community.**

Work provides for our families. Our jobs give us the means by which we can help those in need. This is what Paul said earlier in this letter, “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need” (Eph 4:28).

This is how the church is to care for widows and orphans and others in need. Beyond this, our labors serve and benefit our community and society in general. We need to look past our individual job function and see how our project or our company benefits others. Years ago, when I worked on defense systems, there were times when I caught a glimpse of how the company was serving our country. All of us have jobs that benefit or serve others in some capacity.

**C. Work is intended to glorify God.**

God is the Creator, but man is the cultivator. The creation does not maintain itself. God told man to subdue and develop it. God provides the soil, the seed, the sunshine and the rain; man does the plowing, the sowing and the reaping. If we do not work, the creation returns to chaos. When we work, we cooperate with God, serving the needs of others and helping them fulfill his purpose as they grow to maturity.

When we see that our occupations are in concert with God, our work actually becomes worship. One of the words used in the Old Testament for work or service can also mean worship. If our work becomes a service towards God, it yields worship. If our work is for ourselves alone, for shortsighted gratification, then it is reduced to idolatry. It loses its proper meaning and place. “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship” (Rom 12:1).

There has been a spirituality of work throughout history. The Benedictines adopted the idea of the dignity of manual labor as worship of God. Their rule was *ora et labora*, “work and pray.” Martin Luther’s conviction was that the “menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is more acceptable to God,” than the work of monks and priests. Frank Laubach, who established a volunteer literacy movement, wrote: “Of all today’s miracles, the greatest is this: To know that I find Thee best when I work listening, not when I am still or meditative or even on my knees in prayer, but when I *work*

listening and cooperating.”<sup>3</sup>

In times of stress or fatigue, I find that mowing the lawn or trimming a tree is good for my soul. Involving myself in tasks like these results in some of the best times of worship and prayer. Years ago, some young men helped me trim trees in my yard. They brought with them a man who was extremely depressed. At dinner later he said that working with Christians all that day had encouraged him greatly. When we serve through our labors, we worship and glorify God.

**D. Work puts us in a place to develop character.**

During our school years life is exciting, challenging and stimulating. When we get a job, however, we often become disillusioned, because work at times is mundane and routine. We cannot choose the people we work with, and we are not challenged with the work we are doing. The classroom is for learning, but work is where character is formed. Character is etched out in the daily, routine surroundings of the marketplace. We don’t see instant results. The timetable for growing and learning lengthens dramatically. We are no longer on the quarter system. The cycle lasts three years instead of three months. But unless we submit to what God wants to do with us in the marketplace, we will never grow in character. Real character becomes evident over the long haul.

This is why it is important to stay in the same job for a significant period of time and not change careers on a whim. It isn’t wrong to leave a job, but if you are leaving because you can’t stand the work, or you can’t get along with others, that may well indicate that you need to stay put. When you get to the place where you don’t need to leave, then you are free. Ask yourself whether God is done with what he has been teaching you. If you leave without learning the lessons he has for you, you will face the same issues elsewhere.

After I graduated from college I worked for two years as an engineer. When the job didn’t meet all of my expectations, I went to law school. When that too failed to satisfy, I returned to my original company. Seven years went by before I finally came to the place where I could say to God that if he wanted me to stay in that job for the rest of my life, then that was fine with me. From that moment on my attitude changed, and God was able to do things that I had resisted earlier.

This can be a helpful principle for single women who are not particularly career-minded and look forward to raising a family. They might tend to regard work as a waste of time, but it’s not. The workplace is a great environment for character development, and that will pay off no matter what you do for the rest of your life.

**E. Work immerses us in relationships and gives us an opportunity for ministry and evangelism.**

“[M]ake it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave

properly toward outsiders and not be in any need” (1 Thess 4:11-12). Many young people today want to go into the ministry, but some who have done so learned a hard lesson. Full-time ministry can be difficult. If you are seeking a ministry, consider the marketplace, which is ideal for ministry. If God wants you in ministry, one of the best training places is the real-life atmosphere of a job. The people you work with can't get away from you! There is no limit to what you can learn about yourself and your gifts when you serve among others, with a whole heart, as to the Lord.

In my years as an engineer God led me to teach Bible studies at work, to pray with people and share the gospel. What a great opportunity today, in the midst of economic and international turmoil, to be a voice of hope, encouragement and redemption in people's lives. My wife says that one of the reasons God allowed her to start a business was to give her an opportunity to share Jesus with her business partner. When her partner faced problems in her home or with her children, she would call my wife to pray with her.

This is what makes our jobs exciting. Every day is an adventure when the people we work with see our character and know our faith in Jesus. This takes time, because our influence will come from our love for people. Our theology must be seen in our actions, not our words. My own conviction is that ministry should be just as visible and active at work as it is in church. This is this kind of maturity that qualifies people to be set apart for full-time ministry.

My father was a butcher and meat merchandiser with Safeway stores for over 40 years. He never went to college, and as I was growing up I didn't think much about his job or career path. But when I graduated, I began to see what a wonderful attitude he had toward work. He loved his job. Every day he went to work enthusiastically. He was the friendliest butcher in Lincoln, Nebraska. Everyone knew his name. When I began working as an engineer, I wrote him a letter telling him what a great model of work he provided to me. At his funeral, I reflected on his work ethic and how everyone he worked with loved him. Afterwards many people who had been his fellow workers expressed how much they loved him. His work as a butcher was significant. It couldn't have been more significant had he been a doctor, a lawyer, or a senator.

Paul's word may not be easy to implement. But if we have the right perspective and the right attitude, we can live a life of great purpose and dignity, doing what God created us to do, working as unto the Lord.

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1. John R. W. Stott, *Involvement: Social and Sexual Relationships in the Modern World* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984), 23.

2. Stott, *Involvement*, 23.

3. Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 44.

I am indebted to John Stott for points A and C above.