

Work and employment

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Date: 03 July 2016

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. We ask the Lord to speak to us and to change us till the earth is filled with his glory.! Please turn to Ephesians chapter 6. This is on page 1177.

Lord, help us please as we come to your word as we have sung and asked. So we ask again in the name of Jesus. Amen.

We're going to look at the bit Ephesians 6 verses 5 to 9, the bit entitled Slaves and Masters. And I am going to say that this is Christ and the everyday world of employment.

And it's just a short few verses and I think I'm only capable of saying one thing from it. It'll probably take me a while to say it, but there's just one, really one lesson from it.

Let me give you two introductions. So the first introduction is from Wikipedia, which I've done what students should never do, which is copy and paste from Wikipedia.

[1 : 26] And I want to tell you about a German sociologist called Max Weber. I presume that's how you pronounce it.

He was a sociologist, an economist and a politician. And he reflected on the history of Europe and asked the question, how is it that Europe economically has done so well and that this seemed to happen at a certain point in European history?

And he came up with this phrase, I think it was from the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. That's his book. If you speak German, that's it in German.

And what he says, this is what Wikipedia says, he says, he says that the Reformation, the Reformation, that is to say, that great burst of spiritual life that came to Europe when to a sleepy and forgetful Roman Catholic church, the freshness of the gospel burst through and went from one nation to another nation affecting all those countries.

And this is what Wikipedia says about this. The Reformation profoundly affected the view of work, dignifying even the most mundane professions as adding to the common good and thus blessed by God as much as any sacred calling.

[2 : 56] A common illustration is that of the cobbler, man making shoes, hunched over his work, who devotes his entire effort to the praise of God. And what Max Weber saw, and I think rightly saw, was a revolution.

A revolution in the way people thought because they began to understand God and Jesus Christ and the gospel in a revolutionary way. And this affected their everyday lives and particularly the life of work.

I've just put in there that if you actually read more deeply, perhaps not very deeply, but you just read a little bit further. This is, the sociologists will say this is to do with Calvinism, which of course is correct, because that was the gospel came through the understanding of such people as Calvin. But they get considerably twisted up in what they understand Calvinism to mean. So I just point that out in case you don't take everything that Wikipedia says as gospel, because the gospel, Wikipedia doesn't necessarily understand the gospel.

Here's a second introduction. I was in Sri Lanka. I think some of you know, I go there, have the privilege of going there every couple of years for quite a while back. And the pastor who was driving me around said, come pastor, we will go and visit Brother Lyle in the Bible College.

[4 : 23] Okay, I didn't really have any choice. So we went to visit Brother Lyle in the Bible College. And he showed us the library. And we walked through the library. And it had all sorts of sections in it.

I forget the details. Let's suppose we came to the travel section. And I said, oh, that's funny. There's a commentary on John's gospel here in the, it's been put in the travel section. And he took the book from me.

And I said, I don't want to get anybody into trouble. He said, no, I will deal with the woman. That's what he said. And I wondered why he'd made such a fuss about it.

And he said, we have in Sri Lanka, we don't have what you people have in the West. You have a guilt culture. We have a shame culture. So unless the girl who does this is told that she should not put the John's gospel in the travel section, she will just do it again until she gets caught.

Because what he was saying was, rightly or wrongly, this is what, I'm just telling you what he said, that the girl who was employed to do this didn't have it in her mind that God was seeing where she put this book.

[5 : 34] What she had in her mind was the only thing that matters is whether I get caught putting it in the right or wrong place. And that's the difference between a shame culture, where what matters is when you get caught, and a guilt culture, which is sort of inwardly what you think God is thinking about you.

The idea that the Lord sees and values whether anyone else does or not is the issue here.

And what a difference. What a difference. If you could put people in charge of libraries, who would put the books in the right place, whether they would get caught putting it in the wrong place or not, it's a big difference, isn't it?

And that really is two introductions to our subject this morning. So let me put it into a context for you. I've been asking this question for the past few weeks.

What does advanced holiness look like? What is Paul aiming for? As he takes this opportunity to write to the Ephesians, he has this opportunity to tell them what God is wanting for in their lives.

[6 : 46] And does he say, make sure you get knocked over by the Spirit, this slaying in the Spirit, make sure amazing, unusual things happen to you. Actually, he doesn't do that.

He says, what I want you to really put your effort into is to make sure you have loving and holy Christian communities, loving marriages, orderly homes, respectful employment, and daily Christian living.

And if you think about that, what is holiness really doing? It is not actually making us superhuman. So it's not making us into superheroes like Superman.

I've just run out. I've heard people thinking, you can tell me some superheroes. Batman. Batman. I know you could, yes. But the thing about all these people is they're not constrained by the ordinary things that human beings are constrained by.

So, can Superman hear things? That's not a human thing. Humanly, we only hear what people say to us within earshot.

[7 : 59] That's the way human beings work. We only sort of communicate with one person at once. We can't delve into people's thoughts. The gospel doesn't make us superhumans. It doesn't make us people who can do stuff without needing time to do things.

It doesn't make us into people who can do things without having to think about it. It doesn't, God doesn't give us, give us things without us being creative.

God doesn't take away our responsibility to be stewards. The gospel doesn't make us superhuman. It doesn't make us subhuman, like animals.

That's what sin does. Satan would love to make us subhuman. What the gospel does, it makes us truly human. And that's what holiness looks like. To make human beings what human beings really ought to be.

So, I've already said this. To make us beautiful, useful, appreciative children of God in community, as husbands and wives, as families, as workers and employers, as spiritual soldiers, and in the world to come, the spotless, radiant bride of Christ.

[9 : 10] So, let's look at the text, which is Ephesians 5 verses, sorry, Ephesians 6, 5 to 9. It's addressed to slaves and masters.

Just to say we've had already an address to wives and husbands. We've had already an address to children and parents. And now it's slaves and masters.

And it says this. 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 like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart, serve wholeheartedly as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

So, I just took that to pieces a little bit. Whoops. The, so the word for slaves is genuinely slaves. You might know this word *doulos*. It's the name of a ship, isn't it?

[10:30] It means, you know, slave, slaves. Obey is a word meaning, it's putting together here and sort of being subservient. So, listen and heed and obey.

Your earthly masters, the word is actually fleshly. So, your masters, according to this, this limited world in which we live. The word for masters is lords.

So, when he talks about serving the Lord, he's using the same word. You have earthly lords and you have one Lord, Lord Jesus Christ. And when he says with respect and fear, you could translate that with fear and trembling.

And fear and trembling is usually used in the Old Testament as a way of approaching God. That's the context of it. That the seriousness of being in the presence of God, they came to the mountain with fear and trembling.

And then he says with sincerity of heart, just as to Christ. And then he says, the obey them is copied over. It isn't actually there.

[11:38] To, and this, this phrase, phrase, to win their favour when their eye is on you, is just one word in the original, not with eye slavery.

It's a word, it almost sounds like a word made up. So, you, you only do it when they're watching. As soon as the, as soon as the master's turned his back, you know, you stop working.

He says, don't do it that way. But, as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God. And there's several expressions here to talk about the inner motivation.

So, this one, the first time, it's a, NRV says, from your heart. Original language says, from your soul. The, the very depths of who you are, that's how you serve.

And then it says, again, serve wholeheartedly. And if you took that word to pieces, you get something like, good-mindedly. So, there's your soul, your thinking.

[12:44] And he says, as to the Lord, and not to men, because you know, that the Lord will reward everyone, each one, for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

And it seems to me that those texts just make that, really, that single point, that even if you're a slave, what you do, every day, you're to do it, as if you're doing it for Jesus Christ, personally.

That, that's the thought of this. There's a text again. Let's, let's, let's, comment on it. It's, still about submission. So this, whole section, is about, falling into order.

It's, that the world has, order in it, structure. We're not all, just like snooker balls, that we, just, randomly, fly about, with no particular order.

But there is a, a pattern in life, submitting to one another. Christians are to have, a general attitude of submission.

[13:58] And this is, works out in various ways. So this is one of the ways it works out. Notice, the number of times, he relates, the workers, daily life, to Christ.

So, just, as, to Christ, but as, slaves of Christ, serving the Lord, and not men. So, those three times, he, he emphasizes this.

And notice also, the emphasis he puts on the genuine motivation, and effort. From your heart, or from your soul, with a good mind, with sincerity of heart.

And then, finally, that he brings in, because you know that the Lord will reward each one, for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

And that amazing thought, that Jesus Christ, values, the work, that the slave does.

[15:05] and that Jesus Christ will say, you stacked up those bricks, you stacked them, carefully, even when no one was looking.

I reward that. In a quiet way, you see, it's just so revolutionary, to think this. So, that's the text. So, let's deal with a couple of objections, because you might be objecting.

If you're thinking about this, you might be saying, well, hold on a minute. He's gotten, he's gotten to this about, slavery. Are you telling me, Mr.

Preacher, that, you, evangelical Christians, approve of slavery? It's a good question. And the answer, well, if, if, if by slavery, we mean, one person, having another one, as their possession, you know, an item of property, which would be one way, of expressing slavery, then, yeah, this text talks about that.

I suppose you could say, what else could it talk about, because Paul is writing, to those people then, and slavery was a fact. Apparently, there were 60 million slaves, in the Roman Empire. It was

just, a fact of life.

[16:28] And he's addressing, a fact of life, without really expressing, approval, or disapproval, for the system. He's just saying, this is a fact of life. There's also a fact of life, that slavery could be very cruel.

It is also a fact of life, that slavery could, at one end of the spectrum, provide protection, employment, and the possibility, of freedom.

So it might not, have been as cruel, or as uniformly cruel, as we might think. In the Old Testament, God's people were slaves, in Egypt, and God's attitude, was to set them free.

So I think we could say, God is in favour, of setting people free. However, even in ancient Israel, they did have slaves, or something quite like that.

And the, legislation in the Old Testament, regulates it, and says, you, even if we call this person, a slave, you're not to treat them, as a thing.

[17:36] They have certain rights. They have certain, protections. You're to treat them, in a certain way. And that slavery was certainly regulated, in ancient Israel.

And I think we could also say, that Christianity, is one factor, in undermining, the whole institution of slavery, from within. There was Christian involvement, in prohibiting the slave trade.

It wasn't an awful long time ago, but there was Christian involvement, with that. But the big factor, that undermines it is, that slave and master, are both treated, as children of God.

That's very clear, in this text. And that, from within, undermines, the, cruelty, if not, the very idea, of slavery.

I've got another objection. So before I go on, let's deal with this. So, somebody might be saying, look, I read the Bible, it says slaves and masters. Are you going to equate, employment nowadays, with ancient slave labour?

[18:47] And I'm going to say yes and no. It's not the same. We're not, we're not, we have contracts, maybe the contracts, almost make people into slaves, I don't know.

But it's not quite the same thing. And yet, there are principles here, which do carry over, into our world of employment. That society is organised, in authority structures, which include labour.

So, if you're employed, you will most certainly have somebody, who is a manager over you, who will ask you to be accountable, for the work you do, and set your agenda, for what you need to be doing, and there will be some sort of structure.

I can't think of any single, field of labour or employment, where everybody turns up, and says they'll just do, what they think is best. It has to have some degree, of organisation.

And I think that is the bit, that Paul would say, that definitely carries over. And let's say one other thing. Work, is an important aspect, of being in the image of God.

[20:01] God is a maker. God is a designer. God is a creator. And we, as his image, are found making things, and designing things, and creating things.

And without going down, this particular route too far, but just to say, it's a particular sensitivity, for men. That work, is an important thing, in the make-up of a, of a bloke.

So, what are, what are the comments, on the text, that we've read, and looked at? Here's one of them. Isn't it amazing?

Well, no. You probably don't think, it is amazing. If you'd been sitting, in the church in Ephesus, with, slaves, maybe, you are a master, and you're sitting next to a slave, sitting next to somebody else's slave.

I mean, that in itself, is pretty, revolutionary. And, in those days, they, if they had thought of slaves, as property, they would not have dreamed, of addressing slaves, let alone addressing them first.

[21:11] But Paul does. He says, brothers and sisters, children of God, some of you are slaves. Hands up those who are slaves. I've got something to say to you first.

And, he addresses, these, objects, these things, as people. As reasonable, responsible, valuable, people, through Jesus Christ.

I think that in itself, would have been, a very radical thing to do. Slaves, you are sons of the king. The king has a word for you, and this is the word, he brings.

And he tells them this, you are really working, for Jesus Christ. That is how you are to understand, your employment. Who is your, you have an earthly master, but as he repeatedly said, serve, as if, Jesus Christ, is, is the one you're serving.

Serve, as you would obey Christ, like slaves of Christ, as serving the Lord, not men. I don't think he's saying, it's a pretense. I think he's saying, that is how you are to understand it.

[22 : 35] You are working for Jesus Christ. Christ. So, please don't think, that the only hours of the day, in which Jesus is really interested, are, is this hour, or couple of hours on a Sunday.

Jesus Christ is interested, in whatever hours you work, nine to five, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, or whatever other hours, you work.

and he is saying, don't think you can only serve me, if you're a missionary. You can serve me, as you stack shelves.

You can serve me, as you work through your spreadsheet. You can serve me, as you design your website. You can serve me, as you troubleshoot your network. Your work, he doesn't use this word, but I think this is the idea of it.

Your work becomes worship, to Jesus Christ. And we can worship Jesus Christ, seven days a week, all the hours that we're awake.

[23 : 44] And he also tells them, that Jesus Christ will remember, and value their work, for eternity. You will, the Lord will reward everyone, for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

And that is a very powerful thought. Because you might say, well the only thing, that Jesus is really interested in, is saving souls. That's the only work, that's worth doing.

That's the only thing, he will reward. But this contradicts that, doesn't it? It says, actually Jesus' scope, of the things he's interested in, is actually of people, being human.

And he saves souls, so that people can be human. And here you are, already being human. And he values that. And he will remember that, and reward you.

That's what it says, isn't it? Am I making this up? The Lord will reward, each one for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. He will reward, the person who does a good job, collecting the tickets, at the station.

[24 : 50] He will reward somebody, for doing a good job, cleaning the house. He will reward somebody, for doing a good job, totting up figures. Isn't that, that just changes everything, in a very quiet, but revolutionary sort of way, doesn't it?

Doesn't it? How liberating. How liberating. I'm stacking shelves for Jesus. I'm baking pizza for Jesus.

I'm cleaning floors for Jesus. It's stopped. It isn't just a chore, and a boring thing, which I hate, and can't wait, to get on to something, that's worthwhile. Jesus says, hold on.

You are doing something worthwhile. Do it for me. I value that. They're my shelves. My pizza. Master. Let's look at the second.

Did you get that point? I mean, it's really just one point, isn't it? I'm just saying it over and over again. But it's such a powerful point. Here's the second text. This is the other side of it.

[25 : 51] 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.

Again, treat your slaves in the same way. Now, just think how quietly revolutionary that is. I've just told the slaves to remember they have a master in heaven, and you masters are to think the same way.

You have a master in heaven. You're accountable. You're not just, they're not just your things to do with as you see fit. You have a master in heaven too, in the same way.

And he says, that means that you're not going to be threatening your slaves, and abusing them, and exploiting them, and shouting at them, and working by frightening them, so that they live in fear.

That's not how you're going to work. Because you know that they have a master in heaven who is the same as your master. And don't think that you get treated differently because you are the master, you are the boss, you went to a boss school and they didn't, or whatever it might be.

[27 : 11] He says, you won't get into heaven by saying, well, you know who I am, don't you? And Jesus will say, well, if you're not a sinner saved by grace, then I don't recognize you at all, actually.

There is no, what it says, there's no face taking. He doesn't say, ah, famous face, oh, come on in, treat you specially. And, in saying this, we can see how Christian principles are about to spill out into the world, into the world of the Roman Empire, and in due course across Europe, and in due course across the world.

This is how you treat people. This is how you treat your employees. Because, I don't think Paul is saying, masters, this is how you treat your slaves as long as they're Christians.

I mean, he is talking about if your slave is a Christian, this is how you're to treat them. But he, he couldn't possibly be saying, but the other ones you just treat like dirt, could he? He's saying this is a whole principle for bringing your faith into the way you live in this present evil age.

[28 : 37] And here is the guide for employee, employers, and it's still a guide for Christian employers. Treat your employees as you would treat someone who you are sitting next to at communion, or who you are sitting next to in a prayer meeting, or who you are sitting next to as you sing God's praises.

That's how you're to treat the people that you have charge of. So, those are the, those are the points.

Just to bring it to a conclusion, this is really, I think, quietly revolutionary. If you let this principle go, if you let it run in, in Reformation Switzerland, and Reformation Germany, and Reformation Netherlands, and Reformation Scotland, and Reformation England, going back those hundreds of years, how things would change, and how things did change, makes you want to pray that God would do the same deep work again across our nation, how things would change.

Even Max Weber noticed it. And how revolutionary for our Christian lives. The workaday world, whatever that is for you, might be the world of retirement.

Might be the world of study. Might be the world of changing nappies, and running children to and fro in the car all the time. But, it says that this world has a meaning.

[30 : 18] That Jesus is there, watching, noticing, valuing, all those things. What a good prayer to pray. Lord, I've got to pick up so and so there, I've got to take them across to there.

I've got to feed the children here, I've got to then go back over there. What a good prayer to pray. Lord, help me to do all those things for you. Help me not to forget, as I'm so likely to, I'm doing these things for you.

Christ counts this as worship. Christ gives eternal rewards. And here's just a footnote. We're talking about being a slave, we're talking about obedience, we're talking about doing work, and if I may say, that thought is at the heart of our salvation, because Jesus became an obedient servant, didn't he?

Being in very nature God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself of no reputation, taking the very form of a servant, and humbling himself, he became obedient, even to death, death on a cross.

He obeyed. That's how we're saved, through our obedient servant. And in John's Gospel, for example, Jesus says, when they say to him, you must be hungry, he said, my food and drink is to do the will of him who sent me and finish his work.

[31 : 46] I've been given a task to do, and I'm happy to do that, and I'll do it whether I think somebody's watching or not, but that's what I'm going to do. And Jesus in John 17, which we started off with, I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.

Culminating in the cry on the cross, where Jesus said, it is finished. And the work that he had to do was to clear up all the mess that we'd made, to cleanse away the dirt that we'd left, to do that by shedding his blood on the cross.

And he did it successfully. Isn't that brilliant? He finished that work. And it's only by that that any of us can come to God.

Let's sing together. Let's sing together.