

Ephesians 6:5-9 - Gospel Work

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[0 : 00] Thank you guys. A beautiful song. It's a more beautiful hope, isn't it?

The promises of God to be able to trust Him in the midst of whatever life brings. This morning we're back in Ephesians at Ephesians chapter 6. If you want to turn there with me.

It's been a while since we've been in Ephesians. Glad to get back. Before we jump into our passage this morning, I think we may need a little bit of an extended review to get reoriented to where we are in Ephesians. I forgot, so I certainly think some of y'all are entitled to forget.

But so Ephesians started, it's a letter Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, right? In the first three chapters, Paul unfolds the glorious good news of the grace of God to us in Jesus Christ. What he has done to rescue us from our sin, to unite us then to Christ and because of that to each other. He talks about the dimensions of God's love, that it's so wide and long and high and deep that it reaches to the most undeserving of us. Those who couldn't do anything to earn His favor and it invites them to His family to sit at His table because of His grace and nothing else. And in doing that, God creates a people, a family, a community of people who didn't deserve to be together and didn't even want to be together where natural enemies like Jews and Gentiles who hated each other are now a part of this family. Because of their connection to Jesus, they're united together to each other. That's the first three chapters. And then in chapter four, Paul shifts. There's a word at the beginning of chapter four, therefore. Therefore, Paul says, in light of all of these glorious things that are true, in light of what I've told you about who God is and what He's done, this changes everything. All of life is different now. The good news of Jesus changes everything. And so he starts to flesh that reality out in a number of areas. He talks about unity in the church first. He moves to personal morality. He addresses how we engage with those outside the church. Then he speaks to husbands and wives, to parents and children about their relationships. We spent a few weeks talking about those relationships. And in every arena, every time Paul brings up one of these subjects, he walks into that arena and says, Jesus changes this. The gospel makes all the difference in how you view this portion of your life. It's the glory of the gospel, isn't it? That it cannot be contained in a box. It's not something that you can control or contain. It changes everything. Our theology must be practical.

[3 : 12] It must change how we live. Remember just a few weeks ago how the gospel, the story of all of scripture reorients, the scripture reorients our approach to our marriage relationships. It says we think about them entirely differently because of what's true in the gospel. Jesus is not merely a Sunday morning event. He doesn't just impact the way you relate to your church friends, but no one else.

He's not just a box to check every morning before you start your day, right? He's not contained in a box. He touches everything and gives it purpose and significance and eternal perspective.

And so this morning, he reaches to the workplace, to difficult situations and relationships. And Paul helps us understand how the glory of the grace of God changes these arenas of life too. And listen, I know this is a little bit uncomfortable. I feel it. It's difficult to think about Jesus touching every area of my life, my marriage, my money, my job. Jesus is going to change all of this. It's upsetting. It's disturbing in some ways. It doesn't feel safe and controlled, does it? Probably because it's not. It's not safe and I'm not in control of it.

It can feel exhausting to think about what Jesus is going to have to say about all of those areas of life. I just, I can't get my hands around all of them. But remember, it's for our good that he does this. Jesus won't share his glory with my idols. He won't allow me to talk like a Christian and play church on Sunday and then ignore what he loves on Monday to chase my idols. He loves me too much to let me ruin my life and destroy myself by leaving him out of it altogether. He doesn't want me to miss what he's created and redeemed me for. He wants to see me flourish and honor him in all of

life for his glory and for my good, right? That's what he's about. That's why we need to hear this. Ephesians chapter 6 at verse 5. Hear God's holy word.

Slaves, 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 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 slave or free. Masters, do the same to them and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven and that there is no partiality with him. The grass withers, the flowers fade, but these words of our God will stand forever. Join me as we ask for his help. Thank you, Father, for your word. Thank you that it does indeed stand forever. Thank you that because of that it speaks today. It speaks to our lives and to every area of them and it speaks with power always because of your spirit. Father, would we know that?

[6 : 48] Would we experience that this morning? Holy Spirit, come and speak to us through the word and change us forever. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. I hope you noticed as I read this passage and I've been talking about the gospel for the workplace that the words employer and employee and boss are not in the passage.

Instead, we read about slaves and masters and it raises for us a very important issue to address as we begin this morning. One that I think is a question we have to ask. Why did Paul address slaves and masters rather than just declaring that slavery should not exist at all? Do you feel that tension in your own heart? It's a fair question. A lot of people ask it. Why didn't Paul just say, I can cut five verses out of my letter? Masters don't have slaves. Slaves be free.

Feels right. Might have been what we think we would have written. Historians estimate that when Paul wrote this letter to the city of Ephesus, a third of the city would have been slaves. We may have one idea of slavery in our minds when we hear that word used, but it meant a range of things in the Roman world. Slaves were a part of the household under the rule of the powerful father. Some of them did manual labor. Others were tradesmen, city treasurers, many other occupations. As you would expect, some were treated well, others cruelly. So there were differences from slavery in this country, but let me be very clear.

Any man owning another is evil. Being treated as property rather than a person is evil because, among other things, it disgraces the image of God in every man. It denies one the freedom that he has as one created by dignity, for dignity, by the king of all. And it's important for us to say that this morning because we need to remember that in many of our lifetimes, in this state, in churches like this one, pastors like me speaking to congregations like you have misused the Bible, have misused God's word to justify or defend segregation, racial injustice, and disgraceful hatred of those made in God's image.

And that should break our hearts. It must break our hearts. Amen? Amen? That's happened. It's part of our history as God's people. And we need to grieve that. We need to repent of that. And the question in light of that stands all the more. Why didn't God just speak unequivocally through Paul that all types of slavery should be done away with? Without claiming to know the whole mind of God on this or any issue, let me make a couple observations. First, in this passage and in others, we see God's word clearly undermines the culture and the institution of slavery, in this case in the Roman Empire. We'll see how some of this plays out in the passage later. But in Galatians and Colossians, Paul writes that in Christ there's no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, that we're equally valuable because our value is in the image of God we were created in and are being redeemed and renewed in Christ for.

[10 : 48] In fact, in Paul's short letter to Philemon, he tells him because of the gospel he should have an entirely new relationship with Onesimus. That's Philemon's runaway slave who has found Paul.

And Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon how? You remember Philemon verse 15, Paul writes to the slave owner, Philemon, this perhaps is why Onesimus was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother to me and to you.

No longer as a slave, Philemon, but more than that, as a beloved brother. Pastor and theologian John Stott writes that in the first century, sweeping humanitarian change was improving the status of slaves in the Roman Empire. And then the growing impact of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I'll quote Stott, lit a fuse which at long last led to the explosion that destroyed it. While Christians in

many cultures since then have likewise worked against slavery with great success, once again we must acknowledge that some Christians since then have to our shame misused these same biblical principles to support various forms of slavery and racism. But the gospel clearly stands against this and so must we. It's vital for us to understand that. But secondly, why would this passage sound the way it does? The reality of a passage like this reminds us that this is true too. That while the gospel does change systems and structures as its truths are applied in spheres of societies. The gospel brings hope and purpose even before change in circumstances.

It does change structures. It does change systems and how governments operate and how systems function, but typically, typically what it does first is bring hope and purpose even before there's change.

Paul urges slaves to seek freedom in several places. But writing to slaves, obviously here in the Christian community in Ephesus, he focuses instead on how to honor Christ where they are. Slavery in Ephesus was a functional part of the culture of the present evil age, we might say. And even though it was unequivocally a sinful manifestation of the fall, it didn't prevent Christ from being at work and Christians from being faithful to him, it didn't prevent them from living with hope and purpose in the midst of unspeakable mistreatment. Hasn't that very principle been modeled so well by so many slaves in this country?

[13:55] Haven't they endured mistreatment at the hands of men while singing of and longing for a heavenly home? While laboring day after day in a system that disgraced their dignity? Did many of them long for freedom? Absolutely. Did many honor the name of Christ even before obtaining their freedom?

Absolutely. So the most heinous sinfulness of mankind has never been a match for the purposes and power of God working in and through his people. The gospel is so big and so not able to be contained in a box that it enters even into the worst situations, into our worst sin, and says there's hope and there's purpose there. It matters and transforms things even in the evil of slavery.

These Ephesian believers have already been told, think of them, the slaves hearing this letter, they've already been told that they're indwelt by God's Spirit. They're connected to Christ and have a power in them greater than every rule or power or dominion or authority. They know God is powerful to work in the midst of sin and brokenness. They know he can work in their situation. So there's hope and purpose already. And that's where Paul focuses in writing to God's people. That's what he wants them to hear loud and clear, that things may change, but in the meantime there's hope and purpose where you are. And if that's true, that God works in the midst of sin and brokenness like that, I think a fair question for us this morning is how much more can he work in our employer-employee situations? Even the worst ones, the most frustrating situations we have. But listen, there are still men and especially women and children enslaved in our world today. And we should take this as a reminder that the gospel calls us to speak up for them and fight for their dignity and deliverance wherever we can.

We also live with systems that virtually enslave people generation after generation, keeping them from realizing the dignity they have as image bearers of God. We have a group here at Southwood investigating alternatives to the predatory payday lending system that is all through our culture to say, how would the gospel change this? Jobs for Life is a great opportunity for us to engage and serve and helping people get free from generational cycles of not just poverty, but not knowing the dignity of work and the power of a God who loves them and who cares for their plight, who meets them where they are. So don't skip over the slavery part of this passage straight to the workplace and miss God's heart for those enslaved and for our responsibility to them. God's heart is for the downtrodden and the oppressed and His Word speaks in no uncertain terms about their value and their dignity. So with what I hope are some very clear distinctions, I do think it's valuable for us to consider as well how this passage addresses the settings we walk into Monday to Friday. That in some ways is a huge beginning to a sermon. But I don't want it to let us forget where we're going to show up tomorrow morning. We might show up and have opportunities to encounter slavery, literal, virtual slavery. We may show up in situations that we find unfair or that seem less than ideal to us and we too have the promise of the Holy Spirit that the Ephesians had, right? The promise of the Holy Spirit and His power working in the midst of our broken relationships and broken work situations. I don't know what every one of you spends much of your time doing during the week. I'm hazarding a guess we have an engineer or two perhaps in the room. Some of you feel like professional chauffeurs for good reason. It's just where am I driving today and who will be with me

when we get there and will I remember to pick them all up?

Some of us work by ourselves. Others work for massive companies. But whatever it is, many of us have said things like these. Have you ever asked yourself, why am I doing this? What's the point? This is not what I dreamed of doing, what I thought life would be like. Have you ever said to a friend, well, I mean, it's a job.

[18 : 59] It pays the bills after all. I mean, you've got to pay the bills. So, I mean, yeah, I mean, I don't love it, but I mean, it pays the bills. That's good, right? I mean, that's all it does, but it does that.

Or my boss is so unreasonable. He doesn't even understand. He's out of touch. Why should I even care anymore working for him? Most of us have said or thought things like that at some point. I was going to ask for a show of hands, but in case your boss is in the room, that's awkward. We've felt those things. We've felt the apathy, right? Building up inside of us feelings of insignificance. How could this possibly matter in the grand scheme of things? Shouldn't I be doing something more important, you know, more spiritual? Someone said to me recently, I'm currently working on a project the government has already cut the funding for and decided we'll never use. Seems pointless, huh? I thought recently, I'm currently working on saying to my toddler the same thing she has already ignored a dozen times and has apparently decided she'll never use. And it seems pointless.

It's funny, you can laugh, but it seems pointless. It hurts. It's real frustration. Look back at what God has to say about our work and our attitude towards it. Verse 5, Slaves, 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 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's a slave or free.

[20 : 50] First, he says, who you work for is more important than what you do. And that's not original with me, but so many people have said it, I don't know who gets credit for it. It doesn't just mean who you work for, who your boss is, is more important than what line of work you're in. It's not just that.

In this context, who you work for is more important than what you do means that bumper sticker you've rolled your eyes at a hundred times. My boss is what? A Jewish carpenter, right? You've seen that one before? Oh man, seriously? Yes, seriously. Look at every directive God gives in this passage.

Each time he says something, why are you going to obey with a sincere heart? It's as you would Christ. Not for them who are watching you to please them, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God.

And then verse 7, render service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man. What does Paul say is most important about what you do? What's he hitting from different angles? He's coming back at the same point, who you work for? You work for the Lord. Paul says it elsewhere too, right? Colossians 3.23, one of my favorite verses, whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men. 1 Corinthians 10, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, it's for the glory of God.

[22 : 19] Paul is saying over and over and over, it's who you work for. Remember who you work for. Be mindful of the fact that the things you do are done unto Christ, even when you don't work at a church.

It should change our attitude, according to this passage, toward our work and our bosses. We're now to respond even to unreasonable bosses with the respect due to Christ. We're now to do our jobs as though we are building a house or cleaning a room, designing a spacecraft for the very one who laid down his life for us, to whom we owe everything, right? Work that way like he's the one you're working for. Have you told yourself it's okay to cut corners when the boss is out of the office? Have you told yourself you only need to do excellent work when someone will notice?

You mow the grass better for the woman always working in her garden than you do for the elderly man who never gets out of his house to see his yard. I used to do that when I was in high school. Man, I cut that grass real carefully when she was standing out there. God says you've forgotten who your boss is. Christians don't work to please people who happen to be watching, but to honor Christ who sees even the heart. I love this passage in Titus where Paul says he's talking about the same things and the attitudes that are going on as we work. And he talks about how we're to work so that in everything we may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior. I love that image. That we would make

the gospel beautiful. That the way we work, the attitude with which we approach everything we do would make the gospel beautiful, would adorn the doctrine of God and that he's our Savior. That's the beauty and the value of our attitude towards our work that's described in this passage. It really matters.

And that leads us to the second principle. Last one. Because of who you work for, what you do counts forever. Look at verse 8. Knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. Whatever situation you find yourself in, Paul says, however pointless it feels. It's valuable. It counts forever because of who you work for. This is true in at least a couple of ways. You may think what you do is merely temporal, menial, insignificant. Martin Luther said, think of it this way. He said, the Bible tells us that the hand of God feeds his people. And so what does that mean?

How does God do that? If it's true that the hand of God is responsible for feeding his people, then he does that through the milkmaid, the farmhand, the truck driver, the guy flipping burgers. These are not at this point Luther's exact words, but it's in our context. All of them then are God's fingers. If it's God's hand feeding his people, those people then are the very fingers of God. So are mom and dad making grilled cheese.

[25 : 46] They may be doing things our society doesn't value highly, but they are the very fingers of God through which he cares for his people. The Bible says God makes our cities secure, and he does that through those working in defense, in health care, in city planning, in lavatory cleaning. The fingers of God through which he cares for his creation, doing something significant for his purposes in the world.

Do you think of your Tuesday afternoon schedule that way? Is it that important to you? It is to him. It is important to the king of heaven. He's at work. So the eternal significance of everything you do is true not only in those places where you feel insignificant, but in those places where you think no one notices, where you feel invisible. Verse 8 says, God sees. He values the single mom who's tender and patient with her infant at three in the morning. He sees and values the guy in cubicle 323 who's diligent and ethical when no one would know any better. He was lazy. He was dishonest. He'd get away with it.

God says there's an eternal weight and value that we could never calculate, but that God assures us he has well in hand. What we do and how we act towards those with whom we interact counts forever.

Why? Because our boss is at work. Because we work for him and he's at work in ways we don't even know. Everything we do matters because of who we work for.

Lastly, God has words to masters. If that's what he says to those who are working, there are also those of us who may not think of frustrating bosses and difficult work environments, disappointing employees, disgruntled subcontractors or disobedient people who are under our charge. And here's where the countercultural language really develops, isn't it? Look at verse 9.

[28 : 03] Masters, do the same to them. Stop your threatening knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven that there's no partiality with him. You may have seen this coming already at the end of verse 8 where God rewards slave or free the same, but verse 9 is unequivocal. God says, Masters, the way your slaves are to treat you, treat them the same way.

What? That may not be shocking to you in this culture. That's radical. Stop threatening to use your position or power to hurt them. Stop thinking you're more valuable than they are because of your salary or rank. Just using the word same in this context is radically subversive of the whole social system, but it's radically consistent with the gospel, isn't it? Isn't it exactly what we've learned all the way through Ephesians is the result of all sorts of people being identified and valued by their connection to Jesus? They're united to each other, equally valuable, equally significant because their value and their significance comes from their relationship with him, from being made and being remade in his image. Remember what Jesus did to the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles back in chapter 2? Because Jesus is our peace. He made them one, broke down the dividing wall of hostility.

He made one new man in place of the two. There was peace there. He reconciled Jews and Gentiles both to God in one body. Killed the hostility through his cross. He preached peace to those far off and those near. How?

Because through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. He destroyed the differences by giving them one spirit and the same Father. They're now brothers, like Paul wrote to Philemon.

They're fundamentally equals despite all their differences, despite all of the things that could distinguish you from each other. Paul says the one that matters most is you're now brothers in Christ. And we see the outworking of that gospel truth here with slaves and masters, bosses and workers. You have the same master who is no respecter of persons, who's not impressed by how much you make or how big your office is. You're valuable to him.

But so is the lowest ranking person in your office. Do you value those under you as people? Are they means to an end for you or do you care about them personally?

[30 : 45] Do you see both them and their work as meaningful? Because God does, right? We just saw that. And again, the reason that this is so important is that God sees and cares.

He's in heaven and he's ruling impartially. Because he sees, because he's at work, this matters.

The great encouragement for all of us is that Christ, who is to be the focus of all of our work, is already at work even when we don't see him. There's no boss, no employee, no work environment, no life situation that is out of sight from him or beyond the reach of his redemption. That's our great hope. There's no situation such that the hope of the gospel is extinguished entirely or that the eternal value of our engagement in it is neglected completely.

The God of the gospel reaches through your heart, beyond your family, past the walls of this church, into the mundane, frustrating, exhausting, unfair world of everyday life.

He loves you too much to leave you alone in it. That God reaches in and says, this matters. I won't leave you alone there.

I'm at work. May that give us hope and encouragement to live with purpose every day to his glory.

Let's pray. Father, your word is good.

[32 : 23] It's good to remind us that this is not the only important hour of the week. That we don't have to walk into this building to be before your face.

Father, that your presence goes with us. That your work is happening out there even while we are in here. That you send us forward to be your people in a culture that is not always easy, in situations that are often challenging.

But you don't send us alone. You are with us and you are at work. We thank you for that. Father, open our eyes. For those of us who are discouraged, show us where you're working.

Show us how you're using us. And give us hearts that desire to work for Christ. And not for man.

May we do everything that we do for your glory.

You alone deserve all the praise. Would every moment of every day, not just when we sing songs and pray and read your word, would every moment we live be for the glory of Jesus.

[33 : 37] We ask it in his name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at [southwood.org](https://yetanother sermon.host).