

The Theology of Work

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to Ephesians chapter 6. Paul's letter to Ephesians on chapter 6, page 1178.

You'll remember, those of you who were here last Sunday morning at the baptism, that I said we would start chapter 6. We've been going through Ephesians, and we're now at the last chapter.

I hope that you've benefited somewhat from having gone through this book. It's always, as of course you've found with Kenny I in the morning going through 1 Peter, it's a special benefit going through a book in the Bible because simply the Bible is given to us in books, and sometimes our habit of taking random texts from the Bible, although it's quite legitimate to do so. There's an extra benefit, I believe, in systematically going through a book of the Bible as we've been doing. And you'll remember that last Sunday morning, I hope it was appropriate to look at these verses between verse 1 and verse 4, the relationship between children and their parents. And you'll, of course, remember that we stressed that there is an obligation, first of all, on children, and there is an obligation on parents. And I'm not sure which one of these, in whose eyes I got into more trouble last weekend because the parents were all listening eagerly to the part about the children. And the children were listening even more eagerly to the counsel that was given to parents. But the most important thing is everyone was listening. And of course, as always, in the Word of God, what is important is balance. We have to achieve balance. And parents have their duty and children have their duty. And that is highlighted in these verses between the beginning of the chapter and verse 4. In fact, you'll notice it's quite clear that Paul is addressing three categories of relationship. He first of all talks to wives and husbands. He's talking to wives, first of all, but then husbands. Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. But then husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for it. Every relationship that we have as Christians must be modeled, must be rooted and grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ because we have come to know him as our Savior. And he's not simply our Savior, he's our Lord. He is the one who rules the guiding principle of everything that we do. So first of all, wives and husbands, and we've already been through that. I don't want to spend any time in going back over it. But last week, we saw that there was another category, and that was, as I said, children and their parents. And children have their obligation, and so do parents, as we follow the Lord. Remember what I said last week, that children are part and parcel of the church. And that means that we take them with us. We never say to ourselves that church is not for children. Church is for children. It is very much for children. It was because of that that Paul assumed that there would be children amongst the church in Ephesus at that time.

But here we come to the third category of people or relationships to whom Paul is writing. It's a category that we perhaps think might be irrelevant to our day and age, but I hope you'll agree with me that it's not irrelevant. There's nothing in the Bible that is irrelevant. Of course, we don't have slaves and masters in our society. And nevertheless, what we do with a passage like this is we ask ourselves, what principle is the apostle stressing? What biblical theological principle is the apostle laying weight to? And how can we apply that principle in our lives, in our situation, in order to put the word of God in our practice in our lives? So that's what we're going to be doing. So there's the three categories of relationship. But there's a couple of things I'd like to say before we go on to. First of all, there was a problem within the church at that time. And the problem was this, that people were being converted. Well, that's not a problem. That's what you want. That's what the church longs for.

That's what we long for tonight, for people's lives to be changed. As you come to know Jesus Christ, as you come to discover him. And when you do so, you discover that your whole life, from top to bottom, inside out, is changed. Paul says, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. And that means there is a radical change from that person, from his heart, from the inside outward. But the problem was that as these people changed, they began to come to all the wrong conclusions. And the conclusions, they came towards this. Well, if I am a Christian wife, I don't need to listen to my non-Christian husband.

[5 : 24] Or vice versa, if I'm a Christian husband, I don't need to love my... Of course, they were in the habit of not loving their wives as the standard. We saw this earlier on when we were dealing with this, that love was to be rooted on Jesus' love, as Christ loved the church. Now, that was a love that was not common in Roman society, in the society of that day. So they had to put the love of Jesus that they had discovered in the gospel into practice in their own lives and in their own behavior. And they had to be taught to do so and reminded about doing so. And it was the same with slaves and masters. If you were a slave and if you were converted, then you were tempted to think, well, I'm a free man. God has elevated me to the status of being free. He has told me in his word that there is no difference between Jew and Greek, between male and female, between slave and free.

And there was a sense, of course, in which that was correct. There is no, in the eyes of God, there is no difference between slave and free and male and female and rich and poor and so on.

There is no difference. We are all equal in the eyes of God. The Bible declares that we are equal. And some slaves were, I were falling into bad habits, were thinking, well, I don't need to be diligent in obeying my master anymore. Some of them were saying, well, I can run or I can rebel because of this new truth that I have discovered in the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have a right to rise up against my master. I don't need to listen to him anymore. And you see, instead of actually putting into practice the humility of Jesus Christ, what they were in danger of doing was upsetting the whole thing and bringing the name of Jesus into disrepute because of their behavior as Christians.

And Paul was concerned that they must not do that. Now, there's an important point here. And that is simply this, that we are tonight where God has placed us.

Have you ever wondered why you live where you live? Have you ever wondered the reason why you do the job that you do? I know that you chose that, you applied for it, you filled in the forms and you did so because of the reasons best known to yourself. And there's a history behind the whole thing.

[7 : 58] But if you look at things as we do so in terms of the providence of God, the overruling power and authority of God, then as Christians, we are able to say with confidence, I am where I am tonight by the providence of God. That means there's no random happenings. There's no senseless happenings.

The place that God has given you tonight is the place where you are. Now, I'm not saying that there's no occasion when you, I'm not saying that, oh, and I must never apply for another job. I must never move house and nothing must ever change in my, I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that when you do consider the possibility of a change in your life or decisions that you have to make, make sure you make them prayerfully and make sure you're not doing it just because of your own discontentment.

Because we live in a world where there's a wish culture. We live in a world so full of a variety of different options and choices. The world is a supermarket, isn't it? It's like going into Tesco's or the co-op and that you're, you're faced with not just one brand of, of cornflakes or breakfast cereal.

You're faced with a whole bunch of brands where you take your choice. And the kind of world we live in is a world that is like that, where everybody would told all the time it's your choice and you have to make the most of it. The problem with it is you make a choice and very quickly afterwards you get discontent with it and you want, you, you wish that you had made a different choice because you see someone else perhaps who's made a different choice and you think they're happier than you are. So you, you start becoming discontent and you wish you were someone else and in their place and you start wanting to change. And you get people who chop and change and, and flit about from one circumstance to another all the time because they're desperately discontent. Well, Christians don't need to be like that. You don't need to be like that.

Because we, we can say with the Apostle Paul, I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances God has placed me in. Now this is enormously important because if you live like everyone else, then there won't be a difference between your life and their life.

[10:19] And if you chase the same things as other people around you who don't have Jesus, then there won't be any difference between your life and theirs. So let's be content. As I say, I'm not saying that you shouldn't change anything about your, but make sure that when you are considering a change, do it prayerfully. Look at what the Apostle says, this marvelous chapter in 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

It's a very intriguing chapter because it talks about, talks about again, men and women unmarried and widows and all the rest of it. But then he goes on in 1 Corinthians chapter 7. Let me read it to you. Verse 17, very, very challenging words. Only let each person, here's what he says, let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his called uncircumcised? This was a big issue, by the way, with the Corinthians. Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor circumcised, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a slave when you were called? Do not be concerned about it.

But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. Of course, if your master comes to you and he's a Christian and he says, I want to set you free, of course you're going to be set free. Of course, you're going to agree to it. But if not, be content in where you are. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he was free when he is called as a slave of Christ. In other words, what Paul is saying is even if you are free tonight, you're all slave. We're all servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a very, very important principle, and it extends to all kinds of discontent. I wake up sometimes in the morning and the rain is battering the window, and it's cold outside, and it's almost June. And it's been like that for days and days and days, and there's no difference between summer and winter, and I'm thinking, why am I living here?

Why choose to live in the nordest part of Europe when you could be, you watch the television, and you see it's 32 in Paris and 34 in Rome, and you're thinking, why am I living? And it gets to you. Some things get to you, don't they? And then as a Christian, I say to myself, I'm here because God wants me here. Now, I know that's a trivial thing, but there is a serious point to this, that we are where we are. If you're a Christian, you can say with confidence that I am where God wants me to be, and I don't want to move, and I don't want to change unless God makes it clear to me. And we should all be like that. So, that's why he says, slaves, obey your masters. The second point is this, do you not find it very strange that the apostle never questions the culture of slavery which was in existence at that time? Isn't it extraordinary that here was a culture where masters actually owned their slaves? It wasn't about an employment situation. It wasn't a workplace. It wasn't a company in which you were employed, and you clocked in at nine o'clock, and you clocked out again at four o'clock, and you got your wages at the end of the day. That's our privilege. But in those days, you were 24-7 at the beck and call of your master. He could do, again, I said this last week with respect to children and their parents. I kid you not, their master could do what he wanted with you.

And I mean what he wanted. No limits. He could kill you if you wanted. If you looked the wrong way up, he would kill you.

[14 : 30] Think nothing of it. Do you not find it strange that Paul at no time in his writings ever questions that what to us is a cruel and a despicable way of living?

He doesn't. Now, you could speculate all night about why he doesn't. But all I want to say is this, that Paul is talking to the church, and he's saying to the church, Paul has a one-track mind when it comes to the church.

And he says that the reason the church exists is to proclaim the riches of Jesus Christ, not to become a lobby group, a political lobby group against slavery.

Now, I'm not saying it's wrong to campaign against slavery. Some of the greatest figures in the last 200 years in British society, they were the ones who did campaign.

Interestingly, William Wilberforce, the most notable of all of them, did so because he was a Christian. I'm not saying that that's wrong.

[15 : 41] Of course it's wrong. Quite the opposite. It's right. But he did so as an individual Christian. He made sure that he got into a position of influence where he was able to make a difference.

We must seize the opportunity if that opportunity is given to us as well. But as far as the church is concerned, the church's job is two things. First of all, to share Jesus Christ.

Because at the end of the day, our world will not be changed until people are changed from the inside as they come to the truth and as they are set free by the power of the gospel.

And the moment the church becomes a political lobby group, it's lost sight of its main function, which is to preach Jesus, to take Jesus into the world and to make him known.

Because as people come to know the Lord, they're changed from the inside. And then there's a real difference. A lasting difference. A profound difference.

[16 : 42] Not just a political one on the outside, but a profound difference. And then as people, as Christians, they make their way and they're salt and light in the world. Then they can change things.

Our first and foremost prayer tonight is that God's Spirit will move in a mighty way. I hear people praying. And I've done it myself and I do it.

I hear people praying for politicians that God would raise up men who would stand, men and women who will stand for him. I always think to myself, I wonder what it would be like if a politician somewhere all of a sudden took a stand for him.

It wouldn't last five minutes. Be out on the rear. Why? Because our society doesn't want the Christian faith at present. And until the society in which we live is changed from the inside, ordinary people like you and I, how's that going to happen?

It won't happen until we share the gospel. We bring people to know Jesus. And as society from the grassroots is changed, then its leadership will reflect the gospel and will lead in power.

[17 : 56] So although I quite agree with that, we should pray for our leaders. We must pray for our leaders and pray that they will indeed be responsible to God for the laws that they make and the statutes they pass and all these things.

The greatest need, I believe, is change from the inside. And do you know how that change takes place? As people see the radical difference that Christ has made to our lives.

Do you know how this would take place? It would take place in the context of husbands who started loving their wives as never before, and that love became so evident that the neighborhood would be shocked.

Wives whose relationship with their husbands all of a sudden transformed because they were conscious of Jesus Christ having changed their life, and the neighborhood would look in and they would say there's something radically different.

There's a happiness and a contentment between that man and his wife that they never had before. There's not the nastiness. There's not the jealousy. There's not the bitterness that there was before. There's not the cruelty.

[19 : 02] What has happened in that person's home? And it was the same with slaves and their masters. And Paul is saying, don't be rebellious against your master.

Don't be bitter against you. Don't try and pull a fast one and get away with what you can. That's the way that they would do. I guess it was a jungle, a bit of a jungle, where a slave would have to keep out of his master's way.

He would have to try and figure out what kind of mood. Is he in a cruel mood? Is he in an angry mood? I'm just going to keep out of his way. And a slave would think to himself, well, you only live once. My master could kill me at any point in time.

I've got to make life as pleasant for me as I possibly can. And he would steal from his master. He would use any opportunity to go behind his master's back and trick him and deceive him and do all kinds of things to make his life as pleasant as possible.

No, Paul says, no, your life is now different. You have to live differently. So what happened then was, when a slave became a Christian, he would start living differently. And the way he would do that is, his work would become all the more diligent and sincere, and he would put 100% into serving his master.

[20 : 16] He would become trustworthy like Joseph. You remember Joseph? We saw this a few weeks ago. Joseph, when he was a slave, and when he made perfectly clear that his life was, he was like no other slave that anyone had ever seen.

He was so diligent and so trustworthy and reliable. All of a sudden, these slaves became the same, and their masters would say, what's happened?

What's happened? And then Christ would be honored and glorified. And that's the way we must live as well. The difference in the way that we work, even in circumstances which are sometimes horrendous and difficult and unjust and dark and don't make any sense.

That's the way we have to work as well. Now, while, of course, slaves and masters no longer exist in our society, I believe that we can extract from this the principle of a working relationship between the Christian worker and his or her boss in a framework, in a place of work, in which we are.

I think it's really important because most of us here tonight either have done or continue to do a job of work. That's where we spend a good part of our 24-hour day, and eight hours of that, a third of that is spent in the workplace.

[21 : 47] And here we have some guidelines, some important guidelines as to how we regard the workplace in the positive way, the constructive way in which the Bible encourages us.

It's not a necessary evil. For too many people, their work is a necessary evil, and for them, they go in, they do as little as possible, they long for their tea break, they extend their tea break as long as possible, and then they long for their lunch break, extending that as long as possible, they long for five o'clock when they really start living.

That's not the way it's to be at all. In actual fact, the Bible says work is our privilege. Not only so, it's part of our human makeup. It's why we were created in the first place.

It is how we reflect, or at least part of how we reflect, the image of God. That's why I read Genesis chapter 1. And the way in which God said, let us make man.

Our distinctive character is that we, you and I, bear the image and the likeness of God. And part of that likeness is the way in which we can apply God's creativity and his industry in the world in which we live.

[23 : 09] God's action in Genesis chapter 1 is replicated, it is reproduced in our, the way in which we can apply ourselves, our minds and our skills and our bodies and our gifts to the task that we are given in this world.

It's enormously important. And I want to just suggest very briefly, within five minutes or so, I want us to suggest that there are three, sorry, four important reasons why we work.

Now again, as I said, with husbands and wives, children and parents, not everybody falls into this category. Some people are unemployed, some people are not able to work, some people are retired and so on. And I'm not only talking about paid employment as well, I'm talking about perhaps someone who's a homemaker, a housewife, or whatever.

But these four principles apply to any form of work. Any form. Number one, our work reflects the creativity and the character of our Creator.

Have you ever read Genesis 1 and you notice the busyness? It's a hive of activity. Can you close your eyes and imagine the Lord creating the heavens and the earth.

[24 : 34] It's truly marvelous. Let there be light. Let there be an expanse in the heavens. Let the dry land and the water come into one place. And then He creates the animals and the vegetation and last of all, there's this marvelous.

And you know, have you ever gone through Genesis 1 and have you ever thought for a moment that there's a tedium to it? No, it's not. God is thrilled with every movement that He makes.

There's a joy in Genesis 1. There's an excitement. You don't know what's going to come next if you haven't read it before. There's a marvel in it. When God saw what He had made, He took pleasure in what He had made.

Now, that pleasure is replicated to some extent in us. God has given us a lesser ability, but nevertheless, it's an ability to create and construct and to manage, to discover.

Now, every one of us has different gifts in this respect. Some people are scientists, naturally. They love chemical formulae. They love working out mathematical structures.

[25 : 38] Other people hate it. That's not their gift. But some people, they love, they ask questions all the time. They're looking at things, they're observing things all the time and they're working out for themselves.

They're reading books about nature and about physics and about biology and the human body. It's absolutely much. Some people have an insatiable hunger for it. And of course, it depends on how clever you are as well, how much you can absorb and remember at any one time.

Some people are not able to, but other people are. But all of us have an interest in some aspect of the world. God has given us that instinct. Now, sin means that we're lazy and we end up doing everything to please ourselves.

but God has given us a marvelous capacity to learn and to discover. That's what it means when he says, go and subdue the earth to manage the earth.

What did he say? Bless them. And God said to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

[26 : 41] Now, what does that mean? It means that we are to categorize, that mankind was to name and he was to analyze the different species of the animals and the structure of geology, the mountains, the trees, the structure, every aspect of the life he saw around him.

And he's done that. He and she has done that. Humankind has made so much advances in his knowledge and not only his knowledge, but his technology.

The way in which he takes science and applies it. Last week, and I know you've, you've probably seen all this before, but our church moves very slowly.

Last week at the assembly, foreign missions night, international missions night, for the first time ever, there were these screens on the wall and Alistair Wilson, who is the head of the Dumasani Bible Institute in South Africa, he appeared live.

Everybody could see his face. Now, I don't know about you. I'm sure we're all, we Skype all the time with our daughters in Peru. But I have never, ever, maybe something to do with the age I'm at, I've never, ever lost sight of the marvel of being able to do that.

[28 : 02] I think that is so, so wonderful. Being able to speak face to face with someone who is six, seven thousand miles away. And for that man to address the General Assembly of the Free Church and everybody to see him doing so, I think that's absolutely incredible.

So, see, humankind has been able to do that and he's not only being able to acquire knowledge but he's able to apply that knowledge to his own good and to his benefit.

Sadly, sin has meant that he applies that knowledge on all the wrong things. That's a tragedy, isn't it? It's what we do with technology, isn't it?

sometimes tragic, awful, it's disgusting. And yet again as Christians we have to be different. We have to use it to the glory of God.

But it's marvelous, isn't it? I sometimes, you know, we think we're so clever having achieved so much and I sometimes wonder what God would say about our achievements in this world in the year 2011 AD.

[29 : 09] We think we've achieved so much, we've got it made, haven't we? We've understood so much. I sometimes wonder what God would say to us if he compared humankind in sin with what we would have been if we hadn't fallen.

We would have been a million times more advanced than we are today. I sometimes wonder if God would say to us tonight, is that all you've done? Is that it?

You could have progressed, you could have been streets ahead by now if you hadn't been so foolish and catastrophically evil in falling away from the command that I gave to you.

Because we've been held up, haven't we? We've been hijacked by sin which has brought misery into the world. In any case, I could speak on, and this is something that really fascinates me.

We reflect the creativity and the character of our creator. The second thing is this, and time is gone, we exercise our talents. I guess I've hinted at this already. We exercise our talents.

[30 : 22] God has given us talents and abilities. Every single one of us tonight has an ability. It may be one thing, it may be another thing. As I said before, everyone's different. Let me say a word to young people tonight.

And I'm not here just to say to you what your parents are always saying to you to work hard and all the rest of it, but I'm saying to you this, that this world is full of the most marvelous opportunities.

And right now, your brain cells are at their most active. Your memory is at its most active. You're at your best right now. When you get to my age, you won't remember half of what you can remember now.

If you're a Christian young person today, please make the most of what God has given you. Please make the most of it. I know that I'm nagging, I'm just saying what you've heard so many times about your teachers and all the rest of it, but I'm telling you if I could turn back the hands of time, if I could go back to school tonight, I would be so different to what I was.

Why? Because I see things in a different perspective tonight. I see there's so much opportunity in the world to serve God and to fulfill our function as human beings for the glory of God.

[31 : 43] And that's what I mean by the importance, the pleasure, and the preciousness of work.

So that's the second thing then. We're to exercise our God-given talents, and there's nothing like the kind of job in which we're able to do that, and we're able to come, we're able to put into practice what God has given us.

Thirdly, we work, and as we work, we come into contact with others. Now, I'm not, again, some people work on their own, but not many people do that. Most people, they work as part of a team.

You go into an office, or you go into a place of work, and there are other people, and you get to know you. You spend eight hours with these people. You can't spend eight hours with somebody and then not getting to know you and not getting to know your bad points as much as your good points, and there's your, there's your opportunity to develop a relationship with people, to get to know people, and for them to see what a real Christian is like in real life.

You get to develop a relationship, and you get to make friends with people, and as time goes on, you get to know more and more of them.

[33 : 00] Don't ever despise any opportunity you have to get to know someone, because every person, you ever, again, I'm going back to what I said before in terms of God's providence, the people who you work with are the people God has given to you in his providence.

They're there because he's put them there. I know they're a pain, or some of them. Maybe not, but sometimes you have to contend, and you have to say to the Lord, sometimes you have to say to the Lord, if only I didn't have to go and work with that person.

You do, because God has given them to you. He's put them there in his own providence, and sometimes the reason that they're a pain is to test you, to make you more reliant on him, to bring you to your knees, and to ask him for the patience, and for the humility to be able to show the Christian, ask yourself, what would Jesus do?

How would Jesus act? How would he respond when someone does the dirty on you, and when they deceive you in some way, when they go behind your back, and when they talk about you behind your back, don't, don't, I've been there.

I spent 12 years in industry. I know what it's like. And when you seem to, great, you seem to rub each other up the wrong way, it's the wrong chemistry, and you're always ending up arguing, and falling out, or whatever.

[34 : 30] Ask the Lord to use all these situations for your growth as a Christian to become more and more.

It's through adversity, believe me, it's through the hard experiences of life that God develops our character as Christians. And it's through experience that God brings us on.

He develops our sense of dependency upon him, our commitment to him, our witness to the world of what Jesus has done for us, and how he has saved us from our sins, and how he has brought within our hearts a new existence all together.

And so let's go into work in the morning. I don't have to go into work in the morning. My day is different from yours, but I know what it's like with a new attitude.

If you've lost sight of the importance and the significance of what you're doing, let's regain it. and ask the Lord to make us fulfill, to help us to fulfill our purpose, his will, his purpose for us in this life so that he is glorified, so his name is glorified in the life of his people.

[35 : 54] Who knows what God will do with us? We don't know. It's the little things that God uses, not the great things in life, the things that we think are great. It's the little occasions, the tiny wee circumstances of life, things that nobody ever knows about except you and him.

These are the things that God uses in ways that you never expect. Let's pray together. Father in heaven, once again, we ask that you will bless your word to us as it challenges us and as it comes to us where we are.

And we ask, Lord, that you will, we pray for anyone who is going through difficult experiences, things that they find almost impossible to deal with, particularly in their place of work or in their homes or in any other circumstance.

We ask that you will use these circumstances and that we may see that in your own providence, like Joseph, in the most horrendous experience that he had, he was brought to see that you had a greater, bigger picture.

And as he tried to look at that bigger picture, that it made him more and more diligent and more and more reconciled to the will of God, even although that was painful and difficult.

[37 : 10] We pray, Lord, for anyone who's like that tonight, who feels that they're in an impossible situation. We pray that you will draw them close to you and give them to live each day, one day at a time, one moment at a time, and that you will lead them and guide them into all truth.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.