

Attitudes to Work

<i>Text</i>	Ephesians 6:5-9
<i>Readings</i>	Ecclesiastes 3; Colossians 3:1-4:1
<i>Theme</i>	Paul describes how slaves and masters must do their work heartily for the Lord.
<i>Purpose</i>	To explain and apply how we should serve the Lord in and through all we do.

The Bible has a lot to say about our callings. We are called to be a Christian. And we are called to serve God as Christians in the place he has put us. He has put us in a variety of situations; we have a number of callings or vocations: you may be a member of this church, a mother, father, husband, wife, grandparent, a teacher, a student, a doctor, a farmer, an engineer, a drain layer; you may own your own business; you may work in an office.

Whatever you do, whether at home or at school or in your workplace, you are to work and study as a Christian, as part of your service to Christ, as if you were serving him directly.

Maybe at times you have asked yourself; how can I serve the Lord in this work? How do I do this work as a Christian? Is this less spiritual than studying theology and preaching God's Word?

The Roman Catholics of the middle ages divided life into a secular part and a sacred part, into work and worship, into what was ordinary work and what was religious activity. They believed the highest work you could do was to withdraw from ordinary life and think about God. Many did that and went into monasteries and nunneries.

The Reformers in the 16th century had a closer look at the Bible and believed that the Roman Catholic Church was wrong to divide life up like this. Rather, they taught that all of life was religious; all we do should be done for God and his glory; all legitimate areas of work are honouring to the Lord.

William Tyndale, one of the forerunners of the English Reformation wrote; "If we look externally there is a difference between washing dishes and preaching the word of God, but as far as pleasing God goes, there is no difference at all." (Modernised)

Martin Luther insisted that every believer had a spiritual calling; "What you do in your home has as much value as if you did it for the Lord in heaven. It looks a small thing when a maid cooks and cleans and does household chores, but since God's command is there even such a small work must be praised as service to God far surpassing all the holiness and asceticism of all monks and nuns." Martin Luther had been a monk – he knew what that was like!

The key matter is not what work you are doing but why and how you are doing it. Are you serving God or yourself? Is your focus upward or inwards? Are you doing this to obey God or out of self-interest?

The Shorter Catechism expressed the true goal of our lives when it asked; "What is the chief end of man?" The answer; "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

In this passage the apostle Paul emphasises that all your work must be done **for the Lord**, as if you were serving the Lord Jesus. He mentions this three times; verse 5b "...just as you would obey Christ"; verse 6 "...but like slaves of Christ"; verse 7 "as if you were serving the Lord."

Paul addressed this to **slaves**.

In the first century AD there were an estimated 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, about one third of the population. Some slaves were very badly treated, but more generally they were looked after and there was not a lot of difference between the situation of a slave and a free person. Slaves earned money and they could eventually buy their freedom. They could own property.

When some slaves became Christians they thought their new faith meant that they did not have to be slaves any longer and that they did not have to obey their masters. But Paul directed Christian slaves to serve Christ in their work.

This has application to all of us. When things are difficult often our first reaction is to look for a change of situation, and that may be a possible solution. But instead we may need to continue to serve the Lord in the position we are in. Many of the 1st century slaves had to do that; they had to continue as slaves and do their work in a Christian manner, and so do we.

So let's consider what Paul wrote about the **manner of our work**.

The key command here is that we are obey those in authority over us in our workplace: "obey your earthly masters". The same word is used in 6:1 for children obeying their parents.

Obey "with respect and fear", or "with fear and trembling".

This does not mean you should be afraid of your boss or that you should have a cringing attitude.

Rather it means that you should work diligently, doing your best, being trustworthy and conscientious. Do your work "with sincerity of heart." Do it as an expression of your service to Christ.

Paul then explained what we should avoid in our attitude to work; vs 6 "not only to win their favour when their eye is on you." Literally this reads; "not according to eye service as men pleasers."

We all know people like this; they only work when the boss is around; they spring into action when they see the foreman coming.

And there are others who only want to make a good impression to win the favour of the boss – they are men pleasers.

Instead you should be working “like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.” (Verse 6b)

Our motivation should not be external, that the boss is watching, but internal from our heart.

Paul reinforced this when he continued (verse 7); Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men.”

We have that saying; “It’s hard to find good help these days!” Sadly that is all too true. We meet too many people who are dragging their feet in their work or their study. They are lazy and reluctant. They are half-hearted and slack. They arrive late, extend their breaks, and leave early.

As Christians we must serve wholeheartedly, with zeal and enthusiasm. Be willing and eager in your work and study. Make good use of the time and talents God has given you.

This was a key emphasis in the protestant Reformation, so much so that it became known as the “protestant work ethic” and it was especially characteristic of the Calvinists. The St Bavo Kerk in Haarlem in the Netherlands has stained glass windows, but the men pictured are not the Roman Catholic saints but the members of the town council – they were the Calvinistic saints, serving the Lord in their daily job and calling.

Do you have a biblical work ethic?

Are you working, doing something useful with your hands, so that you may have something to share with those in need? (Ephesians 4:28)

If you are a student or a teacher are you loving God with *all your mind*?

Are you a good witness to unbelievers in the manner of your work? Are you working diligently and wholeheartedly?

Paul concluded his words to slaves and to us by explaining **the motive** for our work: “because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.”

Most of you are doing a lot of good in your families, in the church, in your workplace, and in society. The good you do may go unnoticed; it might pass unrecognised and sometimes unappreciated and often unrewarded.

But don't be discouraged "because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does." Jesus knows everything you do so keep working; don't give up; "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:48)

Keep in mind the big picture.

A man walked past three other men who were all shaping rocks. He asked them what they were doing.

The first man didn't even look up but said, in an irritated voice, "I'm cutting rocks!"

The second man paused to say; "I'm making 100 pounds."

The third man looked up and said with pride, "I'm building a cathedral!"

The first man could only see the rocks; the second man could only see his pay cheque; the third man could see the broader significance of his work.

You might be changing nappies and feeding your children.

You may be welding and manufacturing, or selling seeds, or teaching at school, or managing staff, or processing accounts, or building cabinets – whatever you do, do it as serving the Lord and extending his kingdom, and he will reward you.

Paul then addressed **masters**. (Verse 9)

He did this more briefly because most of what he wrote to the slaves also applied to masters, and to employers. Literally the Greek reads, "Masters, do the same to them."

But Paul addressed the **particular temptation** of masters, which is to use the weight of their authority. Employers may be tempted to pull rank and to threaten their employees. This sometimes happens in industrial relations where there is tension between employers and employees. Paul warned masters and bosses and employers, "Do not threaten" those under you.

He supported this with **a reason**; "since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him."

We are all serving the same master, the Lord Jesus.

From his position in heaven he sees everything that is going on; he knows what is happening in the world, and in your home, and at your school, and at your workplace.

He is in heaven and so he is almighty and all-powerful; he can do what he pleases.

And there is no favouritism, no partiality with him. He is not biased one way or the other. He will do what is right and just and fair.

This is a warning and an encouragement to us.

It is a warning because all of us will one day have to give an account of how we have used our time and talents, our gifts and opportunities. We will have to account for how we have served those over us, and how we have treated those under us. The Lord will punish those who have done evil.

It is an encouragement because we know that God is just and righteous and one day he will reward those who believe in Jesus and serve him with all their heart and do what is righteous.

Earlier we asked whether each of us can serve God in our various callings. The answer to that is: Yes! We are called to serve the Lord in our particular place, whether that be at home or some place of study or work. Every one of us is in fulltime Christian services because we are to serve the Lord Jesus in all we do.

Someone has noted that the shepherds who visited Jesus, the new born king, did not throw down their staffs and go off to seminary; they went back to their sheep!

Some areas of service are more strategic than others; yet all God's people are to serve the Lord in his church and kingdom. You can do that in your place and position.

Luther said that the work of a maid was honouring to the Lord, more than that of the monks and nuns.

Listen to this poem written by such a maid:

“Lord of all pots and pans and things
Since I've no time to be
A saint by doing lovely things
Or watching late with thee,
Or dreaming in the dawn-light,
Or storming heaven's gates,
Make me a saint by getting meals
And washing up the plates.
Thou who dost love to give men food
In room or by the sea,
Accept this service that I do,
I do it unto thee.”

This all-of-life perspective is also expressed in a well-known hymn:

“Fill thou my life, O Lord my God,
in every part with praise,
that my whole being may proclaim,
Thy being and thy ways.
Not for the lip of praise alone,
Nor e'en the praising heart
I ask, but for a life made up
Of praise in every part.

“So shall each fear, each fret, each care,
Be turned into a song,
And every winding of the way
The echo shall prolong.
So shall no part of day or night
From sacredness be free,
But all my life, in every step
Be fellowship with thee.”

Amen.