

Freedom of Working as a Servant

Ephesians 6:5-9

"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men..."

Colossians 3:23

Introduction: The world is full of paradox - two seemingly contradictory statements that actually reveal truth when carefully examined. Some are simple phrases that we may use every day, like shopping at Costco: "You save money by spending it". In self-awareness and learning: "If I know one thing, it's that I know nothing", "The more you learn, the more you realize how little you know." In dating and relationships: "You say it best when you say nothing at all", "Deep down, you're really shallow", "The more you try to impress people, the less impressed they'll be." In life: "The more you fail, the more likely you are to succeed." In literature, we see it is "Catch 22" and "Animal Farm" where it is said "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

One of my college professors used to say, "If you do not like paradox, you should find yourself a new religion!" He of course was referring to the seeming contradictions of God's sovereign choice and the will of men, the fact that Jesus was simultaneously wholly God and wholly man, and even things like prayer, where we wrestle with God who already knows but we still ask Him as if He doesn't. But one of the most practical issues for true followers of Christ is the SLAVE/FREE paradox. As sinners, we are bound by sin and slaves to sin (John 8:34), unable to break free from our chains on our own. But Christ redeemed us from our sin, "so we are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God." (Gal. 4:7) We are now free from sin and the slavery we were once under (Gal. 5:1). Yet, we are simultaneously made slaves again! "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life" (Rom. 6:22) We are free and slaves all at once. And those who are still slaves to sin THINK they are free, not wanting to come to Christ because they will be restricted in their desires and life, not knowing that they are anything BUT free, but bound by the course of this world and the prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:1-3).

Why is this paradox important to understand? We are called as slaves of Christ, a slave of righteousness (Rom. 6:19), since when we come to Christ we are crucified and our old life is dead. We are slaves of the one whom we obey (Rom. 6:16). In Christ, our life is no longer our own and we live by faith, knowing that He is sovereign over all things, and knowing that THIS world has a shelf life. This world celebrates the temporal according to its own materialistic standards, where God measures the heart, the unseen, and the things hidden which last. This means that whatever situation, circumstance, system of government, age, geographical positioning, marital status, or job we find ourselves in, we can live a life to the glory of God who cares MORE about our heart than mere outcomes, and sees and will bring to light EVERYTHING one day, from motive to desire, from thought to action, from affection to service.

This morning we will look at the last of the outcomes of Spirit filled relationships that of SLAVES and MASTERS, which we will carefully seek to apply to modern day work environments. We will see the same themes as in marriage and parenting, the fact that Christ changes everything, calls us to willing and joyful obedience, and in so doing, calls to radical counter-cultural living that will shine brightly to the world around. Before getting into the text in Ephesians we need to clarify issues. 1) What is the purpose of work? 2) What is an explanation of slavery? This will help lay a foundation to not only understand the text but also apply it to daily living.

1) *What is the purpose of work? Why do we get up and do this every day (or at least 5 days a week)?*

If you've never asked this question, or have never examined it Biblically, you are not alone. Much like the purpose behind being a husband or parent, we take things for granted, assuming they are so normative that we never stop to ask, "why"? Is it simply to make money (or more money), provide for my family, and have enough to retire and travel and buy whatever my heart desires? Some of these are certainly good things and important outcomes of work, but they are NOT the purpose.

To understand this purpose, we must go back to the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:15. "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work and keep it." Notice that this took place BEFORE Eve was created and BEFORE sin came onto the scene. WORK was part of the creative mandate, a way that man would enjoy and understand God and at its core, was a means of WORSHIP. It was enjoyable, expected, and without tension. This is built into humanity, a knowledge that work is what we are made for, which is why when we are out of work we have a hard time. Adam worked the garden, and God made every tree spring up that was pleasant to the sight and good for food (Gen. 2:9)

But, the Fall changed all of this. Work still existed, but now creation was set against man, since it would produce thorns and thistles to compete for growth (Gen. 3:18), since the ground itself was cursed. Work was no longer simply enjoyable, but required the sweat of his face. This type of tension would last until we die and return to dust (3:19), which means it lasts even into retirement. What are the consequences for us today?

- **Work is hard** but the expected reality. We work in the midst of illness, fatigue, busyness, stress, and other people
- **Laziness rules in our hearts** - The sluggard is told to go to the ant (Prov. 6:6), makes excuses (Prov. 22:13) and is compared to a door on hinges as he sleeps instead of works (Prov. 26:14). We can easily knock younger generations for their work ethic, but the reality is that all of us can struggle with laziness or the wrong view of work, especially when we are young.
- **We take the path of least resistance**, seeing what the minimal we can do and the maximum we can get away with
- **Greed reigns** - Some have figured out that hard work yields more, so the motivation for work becomes self-indulgence – Greed is the outcome of the plague of a selfish heart that everyone inherited from the Fall
- **Entitlement abounds** - In an effort to not work at all, some have given themselves over to expectation that someone else will not only provide for them, but they DESERVE to be taken care of, even by the government, violating what God has said, "If a man is unwilling to work, let him not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10).
- **Divided hearts in work as worship** - Even if we get up and work every day, dutifully putting in the time, we are divided in our motives, attitudes, and desires for work. We often disconnect work from something "spiritual", thinking that working for Christ each day is somehow less than working in formal ministry. This is why Christ and the gospel changes everything in our life, even how we approach what we do 40-70 hours a week.

2) *What are we to think about slavery, especially when it is not condemned in Scripture?*

When we are dealing with the issue of slavery, we must understand the context. The slavery experienced in our countries past, which included kidnapping and enslaving people against their will, and that which is experienced today in terms of sexual slavery, are sinful, gross, and absolutely wrong.

In fact, Exodus 21:16 speaks against kidnapping and enslaving anyone against their will. However, in the Old and New Testament there were some benefits to people within the system of slavery, only in non-abusive situations. A person who stole property and could not pay it back could be enslaved to pay his debt, and those who became poor could sell themselves as slaves (Lev. 25:30). Israel could have slaves from other nations but would treat them rightly or would have to release them (Ex. 21:26-27). If an Israelite became a slave to a fellow Israelite, they were treated as hired workers (Lev. 25:40-41, 46), and could not be enslaved for more than 6 years, since every 7th year all slaves were free, given gifts before their release (Ex. 21:2, Deut. 15:3-4). Every 50th year, called the year of Jubilee, all slaves were returned to their families (Lev. 25:10). Those slaves who ended up loving the master and family they were a part of could choose to stay, and were ceremonially marked with their ear pierced with an awl (Ex. 21:5-6)

The Bible never condemned slavery, but always the abuse of it. Slavery indicates subjection and bondage and lends itself to a great many abuses. In the NT, slaves could not represent themselves, could have their property seized by anyone, had to work for their master, and only live where the master wanted to live. There were some advantages to slavery, since it made up a large middle class and one could actually end of buying or gaining their freedom as citizens and freemen. There was job security as opposed to freemen, and opportunities for education, management, and social climbing. Slaves in Rome could manage vast wealth, become doctors, teachers, and philosophers. Though abuses were prevalent, much of the slave population of Rome functioned like a modern middle class, yet with limited freedom given from master to master. Paul did not denounce slavery, but taught how to function within it. The church was a place of freedom, as there was no difference between men and women or slave or freeman (Col. 3:11). Here they found equality. But they still functioned in the place they found themselves, as the gospel calls us all to do. This does not mean a Christian slave could not gain his freedom, but that was not the ultimate goal. The goal was that in any and every place a Christian found himself, he would glorify God in Christ through the filling of the Spirit. It is the same today.

Spirit Filled Servants (6:5-8)

“Bondservants, 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 bondservants 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 bond servant or is free.”

Attitude of Spirit Filled Obedience (6:5)

The first things we notice is the pattern is similar here to the home, where there is a lengthy explanation to children and a shorter one to parents/fathers. Here, slaves were called to the SAME obedience as children, with Paul using the same word. The command and expectation of those who were currently slaves in the culture was obedience, particularly to their earthly masters. Again, obedience is the fruit of a redeemed life (1 John 5:1-3), and for the follower of Christ, the expression of the freedom of a new life. Both children and slaves may have been in situations that they did not choose, but the act of worship and pleasing God was the same, to obey those that God had placed over them. This was not a sheer act of the will or a begrudging duty, but rather an **opportunity to function from the inside out**, as new creations where old things had passed away. Two qualifiers help us see if our attitude living up to the call to obedience:

- **Fear and Trembling - 1 Pet. 2:18** - *Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust*

A servant of Christ knows exactly who they are: we are those who SERVE our Master, knowing He sees and knows all things. How do we even begin to have a good attitude at work when we deal with other people who do not share the same values? We walk in the **fear of Christ**. This kind of fear is motivating, not because of punishment but in light of the fact that we give an account for everything, and we desire to please Him in everything.

- **Sincerity of Heart - Titus 2:9-10** - *Bondservants are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be **well-pleasing, not argumentative, 10 not pilfering**, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior*

In Christ, *why* we do and *how* we do is just as important as *what* we do. God never needs our service or outcomes, but always desires our fully devoted heart (Matt. 15:8-9). *So how do I get a temperature gauge as to whether I'm working from the heart?* We seek to please our employer, or customer, or whoever we are working with. Do we do this because the customer is always right?!? No, we do it because it IS right. We seek to be compliant, to restrain from complaining, and to work hard and willing to do what is needed and even what is not asked. We also do not pilfer or steal from our employer. Does this mean office supplies? It has more to do with time! Whether you work in an office, in your house homeschooling or out of your house online, a true servant will not steal time while they are getting paid just because they can get away with it. **Our work life is where we display the true knowledge and goodness of God, and it is the place where what we truly believe is revealed.** Is work a place of selfish gain or selfless display, a place where Christ is magnified or our belief in Him covered by a mountain of complaining and drudgery?

Altitude of Spirit Filled Obedience (6:6-7)

- **Not eye service or people pleasing**

A Christian with a Biblical work ethic should advance in their craft and work environment, since every employer looks for reliable, hard working, non-complaining workers. *However, that is NOT our primary motive but a gracious outcome.* If we work harder or change the WAY we work when people are around or our boss comes by, it signals we do not understand the purpose of work and are not worshipping Christ but rather indulging ourselves. When I was in college I used to work maintenance at a church with another man who was newly married. My heart was revealed about work when we figured out that during the evenings when AWANA was going on, we could hide out in an empty classroom, keep the lights out, and hang out together instead of actively cleaning and helping. The reality is, no one ever knew (until now). But God did. And it revealed that we were selfish and prideful. FYI, I believe we will rarely hire a new pastor if they have not learned how to work at a job of service. Working maintenance or janitorial or food service is a great training ground to learn how to work hard to the glory of God in a position where there is not fanfare, thanks given, or title to revel in.

- **For the Pleasure of Christ alone**

We are slaves of Christ and live for His pleasure. Both the acknowledgement of others or the opportunity to advance are gifts, not entitlements. Jesus taught that a servant works to the pleasure of his master and may not even receive thanks immediately (Luke 17:7-9), since we are willing to say, **“we are unworthy servants, we have only done what was out duty”** (17:10). This is why Martin Luther would talk about a Puritan work ethic, which defines a Christian cobbler not by putting a verse on the shoes he made but by making quality foot ware, since he was doing all things to the glory of the Lord and the pleasure of Christ.

Aptitude of Spirit Filled Obedience (6:8)

- **God sees and rewards - 1 Pet. 2:19-21** *For this is a **gracious thing**, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a **gracious thing** in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, **leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps***

Here is the consistent principle in terms of work: We seek to please God, and what pleases Him is our attitude that springs from the fact that we **know** that He sees everything and it is **commendable to Him when we trust Him in every circumstance**, enduring tough realities with exemplary attitudes because that is an **expression of faith in Him**. When we work hard, especially in relation to suffering, we are **following the example of Christ!** That is why we not only have been given a MODEL to follow, but a GOAL to attain to, and the POWER to do so.

- **God sees and deals justly - Col. 3:25** *For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*

But what about justice!!! What about the overbearing boss, the one who yelled at me or cussed me out, or had it out for me??? The answer is simply this: *no one gets away with anything and God sees, knows, and will mete out justice in His own time.* The goal of a slave was not a fight for justice but a fight to yield his heart in obedience, not to change circumstances but bear up under them by faith, not complain about treatment but to follow the example of Christ, entrusting Himself to God His Father who always judges righteously.

Spirit Filled Masters (6:9)

“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.”

Consistent Realities for masters – The word for “master” here is the word “lord”, the same word that was used for Jesus. It was an appropriate word, since in Greco-Roman culture; the master had total control and ownership over the slave. But notice that Paul did not call the masters to free their slaves, rather to play by the same rules (*do the same to them*). This is where the mutual submission of **Ephesians 5:21** comes in, as the one who has authority STILL is submissive to Christ and seeks to do well from the heart to those of who they are in charge. The revolutionary part of this would be the fact that a Roman master had NO MOTIVATION to be loving to their slave, or treat them above the minimum, so a believing master would shine brightly

Gracious Realities for masters - Col. 4:1 *Masters, treat your bondservants **justly and fairly**, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven*

Clearly in the culture of slavery, there was heinous and reprehensible treatment of slaves. But the standard for believers was categorically different. They were to treat their slaves **justly and fairly**, as a fellow image bearer and brother/sister in Christ, but also were to STOP LEADING out of fear and intimidation (“STOP YOUR THREATENING”). Leading by threats is effective but NOT Christ-like. Lording ones positional authority over others will get things done, but is not an act that pleases the Lord. If your employees are scared of you or walk on eggshells when you are around, it is leadership that exemplifies the world, NOT a redeemed life in Christ.

Just Realities for masters - Rom. 2:11; James 2:9 – Again, every person in the world is in submission to Christ, and is accountable for their actions and desires. Every master would have to answer for how they treated their slaves. Every employer or those who have oversight over another will do the same.

What do we walk away with in understanding this section?

- 1) This is impossible to do without being filled with the Spirit
- 2) Our workplace is an opportunity to exemplify Christ, since we work for Him. This is not by overt evangelism per se, but by showing a consistency of our belief and daily practice so those around will see our good works and wonder why we work differently.
- 3) Each day we have an opportunity to worship Christ in our workplace, to make much of Him, to check our attitudes, to work without complaint. We seek to work hard and produce out of excellence NOT as a means of moving up the corporate ladder but as a means of glorifying God who created us to work for Him.

When Christ is the center of all aspects of our life, we no longer have to live a separate, divided life, but see all of life as a means of worship and opportunity to make disciples. Our homes, marriages, parenting, and work should humbly exemplify the reality that Jesus is Lord that we are His slaves, and we no longer are seeking our own glory but His.