

**Manifesting the Manifold Wisdom of God**  
***Gospel-Shaped Relationships: Employees and Employers*** (Ephesians 6:5-9)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on May 22, 2016

## Introduction

- ❖ For the vast majority of you, the reality is that you'll be spending at least 40 hours a week at work for at least 40 years of your life. Now let's say, over that course of time, you average about 3-4 weeks of vacation per year. God-willing you make it to retirement, you will have spent roughly 77,000 hours of your life at work. And honestly, for many of you, 40 hours a week is a pipe dream. You're more like 50-60. And I'm not even including all the hours you spend commuting back and forth. **So out of the waking hours of your life over the course of four decades, you easily will have spent at least a third of it working at work.**
  - ▶ This is why one of the greatest needs in the church – one of the most basic lessons in discipleship – is to help Christians to integrate their faith and their work. **To see how their work matters to God.** We all know the relationships we build at work matter. The opportunities we have to share the gospel, to talk about God, to pray with our colleagues or customers – we know that matters. But what about the work itself? **A key component to making disciples is to help people follow Jesus from 9 to 5.** Your work, no matter what it is, matters to God.
    - **And likewise God matters to your work.** If Jesus is your Lord, if he's your master, if he's your true boss (if you will), then your allegiance to Christ will inevitably shape the way you do your job. **If the gospel has changed you, then the gospel should be changing the way you work.**
- ❖ Is that so? *Is your faith in Christ making a difference in the way you do your job?* What does that even mean? What does it look like to do your job as a Christian? That's what we'll try to answer this morning as we continue in our series through Ephesians. We're still in the *Household Codes* where Paul has been giving instructions for how believers ought to relate to one another within households and to do so in light of gospel realities.
  - ▶ He's been speaking to husbands and wives, parents and children, and now in vv5-9 Paul turns attention to a sizable group in the church, slaves and masters. His concern is how they ought to relate to each other in light of the gospel.
- ❖ Now your initial reaction might be to think these verses have nothing to do with you. **But I aim to show you that the 1st-century slave-master relationship bears a striking resemblance to the 21st-century employee-employer relationship.** I'd say it would even extend to the student-faculty relationship. Everyone here can relate to one degree or another.
  - ▶ **What Paul offers in his instructions is motivation – gospel motivation to do good work at work.** That's what everyone is looking for. Students struggle to stay motivated to study and apply themselves. The same could be said for those of us working.
- ❖ On the other hands, teachers wrestle with how best to motivate them to put in the effort to succeed academically. And employers are always looking for the best ways to motivate their people to increase productivity. Often they rely on things like increasing pay and benefits, holding out a promotion or new title, having a hip company culture, etc. **Or in the end, just offering people a stimulating work environment where you're personally challenged and overall satisfied.**

- ❖ I think many of us long to be in that kind of work environment. Reports say that younger employees are no longer motivated just by salary and benefits. They want to love their jobs. They want to believe in what their company is doing or producing. **They want their job to not just be a job where you get a paycheck – but where you find purpose and where make a difference in the world.**
  - ▶ I get it. It's a good thing. But is it going to be enough? What if you're in a job or on a project that's not very challenging? What if your classes that semester are boring? Do you switch jobs or majors, or just grind it out without any joy or motivation?
- ❖ No, not according to Paul. This is why our passage is so helpful. Remember, he's talking to Christian slaves and trying to motivate them to do excellent work. He can't appeal to job satisfaction, to believing in your work. We're talking about slave labor. So he can't even appeal to salary or benefits. And yet there is motivation. It's called the gospel. **If the gospel can motivate slaves, then it can certainly motivate you to do excellent work at work.**

### **How the Gospel Topped the Institution of Slavery**

- ❖ Now before we go on, I don't want you to be thrown off by this talk of slaves and masters. Some people will stop listening at this point because they can't get past this appearance of the Bible condoning slavery. But I don't want you to miss what Scripture has to say about faith and work. So let me take a moment to address this issue of slavery in the Bible.
- ❖ The Greek word that Paul uses for "slave" is *doulos*. I know some bibles prefer to translate *doulos* as bondservant, but it's essentially the same thing. **A *doulos* is someone placed in servitude under the will and control of another.** Even if you put yourself in that situation. Even if you make yourself a *doulos*.
  - ▶ **Now that right there is a major difference between New Testament slavery and New World slavery.** By New World slavery I'm referring to the practice of slavery during the 17th to 19th-century where black Africans were kidnapped from their homeland and sold to white masters in the New World. They were trafficked.
- ❖ **But in NT times, it was common for people to sell themselves into slavery.** It was never a desired choice. Usually a desperate one. But becoming a bondservant was a means of employment, unpaid for course. It's comparable to what was later known as indentured service. Sometimes you would enter into this arrangement as a way to pay off a debt or as a way to obtain Roman citizenship.
- ❖ **Another difference is that a NT slave could reasonably expect eventual freedom.** Under Roman law, slaves could be and were often set free. It was rarely lifelong like in New World slavery. **And most importantly, NT slavery was not race-based.** You couldn't tell someone was a slave simply by looking at the color of their skin.
  - ▶ So when the Bible speaks of slaves, keep in mind that it's in the context of a societal system that was not racially-motivated, was rarely life-long, and was viewed as a viable means of improving your position or status quo.

- ❖ But having said that, in no way am I trying to justify the practice or deny the abuses that certainly took place. **Slavery itself is morally evil.** 1st-century slaves were treated as property. Aristotle is quoted as having said, "*A slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave.*" So even though New World slavery was a much more evil institution, NT slavery was equally dehumanizing and just as wrong.
  - ▶ So I get it. You're confused as to why Paul wasn't more outspoken about abolition. You find his silence troubling. He addressed masters directly. **Why didn't he use his apostolic authority to command Christian masters to free their slaves?**
  
- ❖ What we see him doing was to regulate the practice among Christians. But you have to make a distinction between regulating a practice versus endorsing it. **Nowhere in Scripture is slavery celebrated or rooted in God's good design for creation and human order.**
  - ▶ And understand that the household was the most foundational unit in Roman society. Stable households were crucial for a stable society. So any new religion or philosophy introduced to Greco-Roman society was judged by whether it strengthened or subverted household relationships. **So early Christian leaders were careful not to confuse the Christian faith with a socio-political movement that sought to overturn the entire social order by force of will.**
  
- ❖ But that's not to say NT writers like Paul weren't subversive. He didn't call for abolition, but he certainly did lay a seedbed for the institution's eventual demise. In two ways in particular. **First, by the way he addresses slaves as persons and not property.** Don't overlook the simple fact that Paul speaks directing to slaves. He's treating them as responsible moral agents. That would've been unheard of in those days.
  - ▶ If you had something to say to a slave, you talk to his master. It's like if your neighbor's dog barks too much at night. What do you do? You don't go talk to the dog. You talk to your neighbor, to the dog's owner. If you start talking to the dog, you're crazy. You're treating the dog like you would a person. *Exactly.*
    - Paul is making the point that the slave is a person, just as any free man, and is responsible for his or her choices – to trust Jesus and obey Jesus in the gospel.
  
- ❖ **The second way Paul planted seeds that eventually toppled the institution is by showing how the gospel unites slaves and masters under one Lord and Father.** That's been a consistent theme through Ephesians – about how the gospel unites vastly different people under one head (Christ) in one body (Church). It's torn down the dividing wall of hostility.
  - ▶ If you're in Christ you share a profound unity with everyone else in Christ. So it comes at no surprise to read in v9, Paul telling masters they share, with their slaves, a heavenly master. In Christ, we all stand on equal footing.
    - In the book of Philemon, Paul sends a recently converted slave back to his Christian master and he tells the master to receive him as a "*beloved brother*". **Brothers don't own each other.** If you start calling someone "brother", it's indefensible to keep treating him as property. Something's got to give.

- ❖ And eventually it did. The 19th-century abolitionists were committed Christians who constantly appealed to Paul and passages like ours. **So granted Scripture doesn't explicitly call for abolition, but it certainly laid the seeds that grew into a massive, formidable oak whose roots uprooted the very institution.**
  - ▶ I don't want you to have the wrong impression of how the Bible views slavery. And for that to cause you to miss the point of how this passage is applicable to us. Think about it. Many of us work because we're in debt. A lot of us don't like our jobs. We'd rather do something else, but we work because we owe.
    - Some of us have indentured ourselves in a sense. Your company paid for your training or that graduate degree, and now you're obligated to work for them to "pay off" that debt, if you will. So when Paul addresses Christian slaves in relation to their master, it's appropriate to apply that to our work.

### How the Gospel Shapes the Way You Work

- ❖ So let's do that. Let's start by addressing the majority of us who are students or employees. Let me show you how the gospel shapes the way you work. **It has to do with fear, but the right kind of fear that motivates you in the right kind of way.** Look at v5. Paul tells slaves to "*obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling*".
- ❖ Now it's quite natural for a slave to fear his master. Just as many of us fear our supervisors. They could fire us, dock our pay, or simply make life at work a living hell. But I don't think that's Paul's point. That's not the kind of fear that ought to motivate us to do good work.
  - ▶ **I believe the "fear and trembling" here is not to be directed at our earthly masters but our heavenly One.** Paul usually used that phrase "*with fear and trembling*" in reference to God. Last week we looked at the most famous usage in **Philippians 2:12** where we're told to work out our salvation "*with fear and trembling*" knowing it's God who works in us. And if you look in **Colossians 3:22** (a parallel passage), Paul clarifies when he says for slaves to obey "*not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord*."
- ❖ We're not talking about being scared of the Lord. It's not a fear of his wrath. That's the kind of fear we usually have towards our boss. **We try to do good work to appease our boss's wrath.** To stay on his good side.
  - ▶ But when it comes to God, his wrath has been appeased once for all at the cross. **Those who trust in Jesus have no need to fear God's wrath. Christ bore the wrath so that you wouldn't have to.** So when Christians say "we fear the Lord", that doesn't mean we're afraid of God. It means we revere him.
    - **When you come to the Lord through the gospel, your paralyzing fear of punishment is transformed into a liberating fear of reverence.** The fear of the Lord is liberating! It has the power to release you from the grip of lesser fears. There are three fears, in particular, addressed here.

- ❖ **First, the gospel sets you free from the fear of man.** If you believe in the gospel, you no longer need to be motivated by fear in order to do good work. That's usually what gets us going. We're afraid not just of losing our jobs but afraid of what other people think of us. We fear the loss of respect or approval from our peers or our boss. We fear the opinion of man.
- ❖ **So we end up as people-pleasers.** Exactly what Paul is warning against. He says don't obey your earthly masters "*by way of eye-service as people-pleasers.*" (v6) Don't just apply yourself and do good work when the boss is around, when he or she is looking.
  - ▶ **That's called obedience by way of eye-service.** It's where you're so concerned with what your teacher or your boss thinks of you. It's where you're always trying to impress, to curry favor, to get on their good side. Or you're just giving eye-service to avoid their bad side. **Either way – whether you're trying to gain approval or avoid consequences – you're really just serving yourself.**
- ❖ And that always leads to half-hearted, insincere work. Which is why Paul emphasizes obedience "*with a sincere heart*". **To have sincerity of heart means literally singleness of heart.** It means you give wholehearted, sincere effort in your work or in your studies.
  - ▶ **Students**, that means you give your best in every assignment even if you never win any recognition. It means you don't cheat or plagiarize when no one is looking, even if you know you can get away with it. Why? Because you fear God more than man.
    - **Workers**, this means when you're on the clock, you put in your whole heart. Not half it in your work and the other half surfing social media or sneaking in a nap or even prepping your bible study. Why? Because you fear your heavenly boss more than your earthly one.
- ❖ The fear of the Lord releases you from the grip of lesser fears of lesser authorities. What can man do to you if the Lord is on your side? (Ps. 118:6). **Christian, why are you slaving after the approval of man, why fear their opinion, when you already have God's approval?**
  - ▶ Why does he approve of you? Because you're saved by the blood and righteousness of his Son. **Because God looks at you in Christ and approves of you no less than he approves of his Son.** That's how the gospel frees you from the fear of man.
- ❖ **Second, the gospel shapes the way you work by setting you free from the fear of boredom.** Maybe you don't struggle with seeking approval at work. Maybe you're struggle is with boredom. You're not motivated to do good work because you don't really care about the work. You don't care about the class. It doesn't challenge you. It doesn't inspire you.
  - ▶ You're not alone. **If you're struggling to find motivation to get out of bed in the morning to go to class or work, try putting yourself in the shoes of 1st-century slave.** Just think how deflating it must be to be treated like property. To have your boss use you like a tool. Actually some of you know exactly what that's like. It doesn't inspire productivity. It doesn't make you want to do your best work.

- ❖ Paul gets it. He understands the problem. **The problem is that we care far more about *what we do for work than who we work for*.** We prioritize the *what* over the *who*. Paul's solution is the reverse. He's telling slaves that what matters in the end is not *what* you do for work but *who* you're ultimately working for.
  - ▶ Look at v5. He says to obey your earthly masters "*as you would Christ*". Or look at v6. Slaves are to see themselves, "*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.*"
  
- ❖ They need to grasp their true identity. You're not just a bondservant. You're a bondservant of Christ, a slave of Christ. No matter who you report to at work, Christ is your highest boss.
  - ▶ **Too many of us try to find our identity in what we do for a living.** You meet someone and what's one of the first things you ask? *What do you do?* We're tempted to define ourselves by what we do for work. **But the Bible says you find your true identity in *who* you work for.**
  
- ❖ When this sinks in, it totally changes your motivational structure when it comes to work, even boring work. **This is why Christian slaves were actually sold at a premium in the ancient world.** They drew higher prices in the market because they were known to be better slaves. It's not because they were more compliant than the average pagan slave.
  - ▶ No, it's because their masters could tell that – when these Christians worked, when they gave themselves to the menial, boring work of a slave – they seemed to be working for someone else. A greater cause, a higher authority seemed to be motivating them to produce good work.
  
- ❖ That's what enabled them to endure a job where you're constantly being treated like a tool. Because in the end, they're rendering their service to the Lord. It didn't matter what they were asked to do. **They were doing it for the Lord out of faith and obedience. Out of love for Jesus – as they saw themselves ultimately serving him.**
  - ▶ So if you're a **housewife**, your work won't be mundane if you see yourself as doing it for the Lord. If you have the attitude that I'm going to cook this meal as if Jesus were going to eat it. I'm ultimately serving him. And if your job is to **clean houses**, it may not sound very fulfilling, unless you go about cleaning as if Jesus were coming over to visit. Render your service as to the Lord and not to man.
  
- ❖ **Educators**, go about your business teaching as if Jesus were your principal, as if he were one of your students. **Doctors**, see patients and do paperwork as if Jesus were your attending physician, as if he were one of your patients. **Engineers**, design things, build things, improve things as if Jesus were on the receiving end of that product. **Artists**, hone your craft and make beautiful things as if Jesus is your audience and the only critic you care about.
  - ▶ **No matter how difficult your work, no matter how under appreciated, no matter how menial or mundane – you're set free to do excellent work because you know you're ultimately doing it for the God who loves you.** That's how the gospel liberates you from the fear of boredom at work.

- ❖ **Third, the gospel shapes the way you work by setting you free from the fear of exploitation.** I know some of you are not happy at work. You feel like you're being unjustly treated or unfairly compensated. They're overworking you. Or they're cutting your hours. They're passing you up for promotion. They're not giving you the raise. Whatever it is, you feel exploited. Under appreciated. Under paid.
  - ▶ But regardless of how bad your situation is at work, I think we'd all agree that a 1st-century slaves has plenty more reasons to complain. So what's Paul's encouragement to them? Because it would just as well apply to us.
- ❖ Look with me at v8. He says to keep obeying and doing good work because you know "*that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.*" **Jesus is the good Boss who's coming back, and he's going to make everything right.** He'll payback the wicked for their wickedness and the righteous for their righteousness.
  - ▶ You can endure unfair treatment and being exploited by your earthly boss – because your heavenly Boss is one of kind. **Jesus is the only boss who doesn't treat you like an employee.** By that I mean you don't have to work your tail off or outperform others to get on his good side, to be in his favor.
    - **Jesus is the only boss who works for you.** All other religions have gods who demand you to work for them. But Jesus works for you. **He literally worked himself to death for you.** He was treated unfairly; he was exploited for you. He received death while you receive life everlasting.
- ❖ If you become a Christian, if you put your trust in Jesus, if you render your service to him, it'll set you free from the fear of man, the fear of boredom, and the fear of exploitation.

### **How the Gospel Shapes the Way You Manage**

- ❖ Now in our last verse, Paul shifts attention from those who work to those who manage. He speaks to those in the church who were slave masters, the employers, those in authority. He essentially reminds them that they're accountable to a higher authority.
  - ▶ **If you're a man or woman in a position of authority – a manager, an attending physician, an executive, an owner – recognize that yours is a delegated authority.** You've been given the responsibility to steward power on behalf of God for the good of those under your supervision.
    - Listen to what Paul says in v9, "*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.*"
- ❖ **Notice first how the gospel changes the way you motivate others to do good work.** Our instinct is to rely on threats, to appeal to their fears. We try to effect change by force of will, by external constraints. It might get immediate results but never lasting results. **Those under you will eventually either balk at your authority and revolt OR be crushed by your authority and wilt.**

- ❖ If you want employees who are self-motivated and internally compelled to do good work, then look to how God effects change in us through the gospel. He does so by his grace. **He doesn't motivate us by coming down to push his weight around. He does so by coming down to serve us.**
  - ▶ That's what Paul's getting at when he tells masters to "do the same" to their slaves. If you want the respect of your employees, then you need show them respect. If you expect good service from them, then humble yourself and serve them.
    - That's how God motivates us by the gospel. **Not by driving us with a stick or by leading us with a carrot. No, in the gospel God comes down to our level and serves us.** He changes us and inspires us by his grace, by the undeserved kindness that he shows us. Masters, do the same to them.
  
- ❖ **And lastly notice how the gospel changes your own motivation to do good work.** To be a good boss or manager. This is where Paul reminds earthly masters in v9 that they share a heavenly Master with their slaves. One who shows no partiality.
  - ▶ The gospel is the great equalizer. It brings down the high and lifts up the low. **The ground is completely level at the foot of the cross.** All who comes to Jesus are on equal footing. In Christ there is neither slave nor free (cf. Gal. 3:28).
  
- ❖ **So that means if you're in a position of authority at work, it doesn't speak to your greatness but to God's grace.** He's the One who put you there, so that means you ultimately answer to him.
  - ▶ If you believe that to be true, then you're more likely to treat your employees justly and fairly. You yourself won't show partiality. You'll be sure that your people are fairly compensated. You'll be concerned and more compassionate when they get sick. You'll take an actual interest in their family and personal life. You'll become a much more effective manager of people.
  
- ❖ **The gospel reminds us that we're all accountable before God, and those with greater authority have greater accountability.** To be a leader, to be a person of authority, is no small matter and should not to be treated as a privilege for your own benefit. Rather it's a responsibility for the good of others.
  - ▶ Jesus exemplified this better than anyone else. He's the only boss who's here to work for you. He worked himself to death for you. **So let's stop trying to find an identity in our work or gain a reputation by what we do.** Instead let's submit ourselves under Jesus's lordship and embrace the identity as slaves of Christ.