

Faith at Work: Integrating Christ and Your Career
Gospel-Shaped Work (Ephesians 6:5-9)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 8, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ So far in this series on the intersection of your faith and work, we've been stressing that, for Christians, what you do for work is a large part of your discipleship to Christ. Which means, if Jesus is your Lord – your Highest Boss – then your allegiance to him ought to shape the way you do your job. **If the gospel has changed you into a new creation, then it should also change the way you go about your work.**
 - So is that true? **Is your faith in Christ making a difference in the way you carry out your vocation?** Has it made an impact on your approach to work; on your attitude at work; on the quality of your work? Now for some of us, these questions are fairly new. We're not used to making these connections. So we're not sure what it looks like for the gospel to have a shaping influence in the way work we at work.

- ❖ But that's what we're trying to help you do in this series. **Now this morning, we're going to look at a passage that's addressed to bondservants and masters.** It's found in a section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians that's commonly known as the Household Codes. It's where Paul gives instructions for believers in a typical first-century Greco-Roman household on how they ought to relate to one another – and how to do it in light of the gospel.
 - He starts off by addressing husbands and wives and then parents and children. But in chapter 6:5-9, Paul turns attention to a sizable group in the church. To bondservants and masters. He's talking about household slaves and their masters. He's urging them to relate to each other in light of the gospel.

- ❖ Now you might've assumed these verses have little to do with the topic of faith and vocation. **But when studied carefully, we see a striking resemblance between the 1st-century bondservant-master relationship described in the text and the 21st-century employee-employer relationship we experience today.** That could be extended to the student-teacher relationship. So everyone here this morning can relate to this text in one degree or another.
 - **What Paul is offering in his instructions is motivation – gospel motivation to do good work at work.** And isn't that what everyone is looking for? Students struggle to stay motivated to study and apply themselves. Especially when they face a seemingly never-ending barrage of assignments and exams. It gets so tiring. And it's not like things get easier when you finally move into the workforce. The struggle to stay motivated gets harder. Especially if you don't enjoy what you do for work. How do you stay motivated to go to work every morning?

- ❖ **And, on the other hand, for those who are in positions of authority over others – how do you keep them motivated?** Teachers wrestle with how best to motivate their students to put in the effort needed to succeed academically. Employers are always looking for best practices in motivating their people to increase productivity. They might rely on increasing pay and benefits; dangling the prospect of a promotion; or creating an exciting company culture. **It's all about offering a stimulating work environment where employees are personally challenged and overall satisfied.**

- ❖ I'm sure we all long to be in that kind of work environment. **But the reality is that even the best of jobs – the best work environment – will eventually lose its shine.** There will always be aspects of your job that frustrate you. People at work that irritate you. Overall, you might enjoy your line of work, but on occasion, you'll be assigned projects that aren't exciting. Or as a student, you're going to have classes this semester that are just plain boring. What do you do? Is it time to switch jobs or majors? Or do you just grit your teeth and grind it out without any joy or encouraging motivation?
 - No, not according to Paul. **Remember, in our text, he's talking to Christian slaves and trying to motivate them to do good work.** But he's not going to appeal to concepts like job satisfaction or believing in your work. They're slaves! Which means he can't even appeal to the prospect of greater pay or benefits. And yet there still is motivation. It's called the gospel! **Friends, if the gospel can motivate slaves, then it can certainly motivate you to do good work at work.**

How the Gospel Undermines 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. So my first point is going to address (1) how the gospel actually undermines slavery. And then I have two more points about (2) how the gospel shapes the way you work and (3) how the gospel shapes the way you manage.
- ❖ 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.** Now it was never a preferred option. It was always a desperate one. But becoming a bondservant was a means of employment – unpaid, of course. It's comparable to what would later be known as indentured servitude. Sometimes you'd enter into this arrangement as a way to pay off a financial 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 social status.

- ❖ But having said that, I'm in no way trying to justify the practice. **Slavery is a moral evil.** 1st-century slaves were still 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.
 - I get it if you're confused as to why Paul wasn't more outspoken about abolition. You find his silence troubling. He wrote to household masters. **Why didn't he use his apostolic authority to at least command Christian masters to free their slaves?**

- ❖ Now it's true that nowhere in his letters did Paul ever outright call for the abolition of slaves. But he was still subversive in his approach. You could argue that Paul laid the seedbed for slavery's eventual demise. In two ways. **First, by the way he addresses slaves as persons and not property.** Don't overlook the fact that, in his letters, Paul directly speaks to slaves. He treats them as responsible moral agents.
 - **In those days, if you had something to say to a slave, you would 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. Talking to the dog would be crazy. You'd be treating the dog like a person. Which is Paul's point.
 - **He's treating the slave as a person.** As someone responsible for his or her choices – especially to trust Jesus and obey the gospel.

- ❖ **The second way Paul undermined the institution of slavery is by showing how the gospel unites slaves and masters under one Lord and Father.** That's been the theme of Ephesians – how the gospel unites vastly different people under one head (Christ) in one body (the Church). And that doesn't just apply to Jews and Gentiles. Gospel unity applies to Christian slaves and masters. In v9, Paul tells believing masters that they share, with their believing slaves, a heavenly Master.
 - In the book of Philemon, Paul sends a recently converted slave back to his Christian master – to Philemon. And he while doesn't directly command Philemon to free him, he does tell Philemon to receive him as a "*beloved brother.*" **And the implication is clear – brothers don't own each other.** If you start treating someone as "brother", it's indefensible to keep treating him as property. Something's got to give.
 - And eventually it did. The 19th-century abolitionists that we so admire were committed Christians who consistently appealed to Paul. To passages like ours. **Because Scripture laid the very seeds that grew up into a formidable oak tree whose roots uprooted the institution of slavery.**

- ❖ Friends, I gave a lot of attention to the Bible's treatment of slavery, because I don't want it to distract you from the main point of this passage and its relevancy for us. Think about it. **Many of us work because we're in debt. Some of us don't like our jobs.** We'd rather do something else, but we work because we owe. We're not free. And some of us have indentured ourselves, in a sense. Your company paid for that graduate degree, and now you're obligated to work for them to "pay off" that debt. **So when Paul addresses slaves in relation to their master, for some of you, it's not that far off from your situation.**

How the Gospel Shapes the Way You Work

- ❖ So let's flesh out that connection in our second point. Let's address those of you who are currently students or who work under the authority of a manager, supervisor, or boss. That covers the majority of you. 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 boss. They could fire us, dock our pay, or simply make life at work a living hell. But that's not Paul's point. That's not the kind of fear that should be motivating Christians to do good work.
 - **I believe the “fear and trembling” in v5 is not to be directed at our earthly masters but our heavenly One.** Because when Paul use that phrase *“with fear and trembling”* in his other letters, it's always in reference to God. In **Philippians 2:12**, we're told to work out our salvation *“with fear and trembling,”* knowing it's God who is working in us. And if you look at **Colossians 3:22** (a parallel passage to our text), 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.”*
- ❖ And let's be clear: We're not talking about being scared of the Lord. It's not a fear of his wrath that should motivate. 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 or her good side.
 - But when it comes to God, we know that his wrath has been appeased once for all at the cross. **That those who trust in Christ have no need to fear God's wrath. Jesus bore the wrath so 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 in our text.
- ❖ **First, the gospel sets you free from the fear of man.** If you trust in the gospel, you no longer need the fear of man to motivate you to do good work. Like we said, that's usually what gets us going. We're driven – not just by a fear of losing our jobs – but a fear of what others at work might think of us. We fear losing the respect or approval of our peers or boss. We fear the opinion of man.
 - **That turns us into people-pleasers.** What Paul is warning against. Look at v6. He says don't obey your earthly masters *“by way of eye-service as people-pleasers.”* Don't just 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 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 punishment – you're really just serving yourself.**

- ❖ And that 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 your studies.
 - **Students**, that means giving your best in every assignment even if you never win any recognition. It means you don’t cheat or plagiarize – even if you know you can get away with it. Why? Because you care about pleasing God more than pleasing parents.
 - **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 on 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 others – why fear their opinion – when you already have God’s?**
 - And why does he approve of you? Because you’re saved by the blood and righteousness of his Son. **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 struggle 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 a 1st-century slave.** Just think what it must be like to be treated like property. To have your boss use you like a tool. Actually some of you would say you know 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 still care 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. But the Bible says you find your true identity in who you work for.** When this sinks in, it totally changes your motivation structure when it comes to work – even boring work.

- ❖ **This is why, in the ancient world, Christian slaves were actually sold at a premium.** 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 do good work.

- ❖ That's what enabled them to endure a job where you're constantly treated like a tool. Because in the end, they were rendering their service to God. 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. Since they saw themselves ultimately serving him. Think about what this would mean for us.
 - If you're a **homemaker**, your work at home won't be mundane if you see yourself as doing it for the Lord. Preparing those meals and keeping the house tidy might feel like never-ending, thankless tasks. But what if you adopt the attitude that you're cooking that meal as if Jesus was going to eat it? What if you went about cleaning as if Jesus were coming to visit? Render your service as to the Lord and not to man.

- ❖ **Educators**, what if you did your job as if Jesus were your principal? What if you taught as if he were one of your students? **Doctors**, what if you labored as if Jesus were one of your patients? What if you completed your charts as if Jesus were checking them? **Engineers**, what if you designed or coded or built as if Jesus were on the receiving end of that product? **Artists**, what if you honed your craft and made beautiful things as if Jesus was your audience and the only critic you cared about?
 - **No matter how difficult your work; no matter how menial or mundane the task you're doing – the gospel sets you free to do excellent work because you know you're ultimately doing it for the Lord 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 aren't 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 that raise. Whatever it is, you feel exploited. Under appreciated. Under paid.
 - **But regardless of how bad your situation 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 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'll 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 a 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.
- ❖ Friends, 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. That's how the gospel shapes the way you work.

How the Gospel Shapes the Way You Manage

- ❖ Now let's look at v9 and consider how the gospel shapes the way you manage. Notice how Paul shifts attention from those who work for others to those who manage others. He speaks to those in the church who were slave masters – to the employers, to those in authority. And 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, a supervisor, an attending physician, a company executive, a business 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. Now it might get you immediate results, but they're never lasting results. **Those under you will eventually balk at your authority and revolt. Or they'll be crushed by your authority and wilt.**
 - If you want employees who are self-motivated and internally compelled to do good work, then consider how God effects change in us through the gospel. He uses grace. **He doesn't motivate us by coming down and pushing his weight around. No, he comes down and begins to serve us.**
- ❖ That's what Paul is getting at when he tells masters to *“do the same”* to their slaves. If you want the respect of those who work under you, then show them respect. If you expect good service from them, then humble yourself and begin to 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. Managers, do the same for those who work under you.

- ❖ **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 come to Jesus are on equal footing. In Christ, there is neither slave nor free (cf Gal. 3:28).

- ❖ **So that means your position of authority at work doesn't speak to your greatness but to God's grace.** He's the One who put you there. That means you ultimately answer to him.
 - If you believe that to be true, then you're more likely to treat your employees justly. You won't show partiality. You'll make sure that your people are fairly compensated. You'll be more compassionate when they get sick. You'll take a real interest in their family and personal life. You'll be 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 be treated as a privilege for your own benefit. It's a responsibility for the good of others.
 - And Jesus exemplified that 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.