

Date: October 6, 2019

Series: *Final Lessons in Neighboring*

Title: *Who's the Boss?*

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Scripture: Ephesians 6:5-9

For the last few years of our moms' lives, Sue and I would make frequent trips to Dover, where they both lived, to check on them. My day off is Thursday, so a couple times a month, after Wednesday night activities, we'd hop in the car and head for Delaware. The next day we'd do errands for them. We'd take them doctor's appointments or to pick up prescriptions. We'd make Sam's runs, etc. and then after a meal together, we'd head back home on Thursday night.

I remember one Wednesday late night trip a few years back we came down the Eastern side of the Bay Bridge about 9:30PM and Sue and I both had the munchies. So we pulled into the drive-thru at a popular Mexican fast food chain on Kent Island with the intent of getting a couple tacos. But the person on the other end of the speaker didn't seem at all happy to serve us. Every time we'd make a selection she'd say, "*We don't have any more of that.*" And she wouldn't give us another option. She gave us the distinct impression she wanted us to give up and go away. She was very rude and it was obvious that she hated working at a place where she had to serve people. Finally, we asked for something they had, she reluctantly filled our order, and we headed onward to Dover.

One the way home late the next day, we again were hit with a case of the munchies. Working for two moms all day really gives you an appetite! So as we came down the Kent Island bridge, we decided to stop again. But this time we headed for the drive-through at a popular chicken sandwich fast food chain. The attitude of those workers was exactly the opposite. The comparison to our experience 24 hours earlier was astounding. The workers were SO welcoming, SO helpful. They were eager to serve us and genuinely seemed to LOVE doing so. We decided that from then on when attacked by the munchies on Kent Island, we'd always head for that restaurant!

How would you explain the difference between these two fast food establishments? Why such a stark contrast? Of course, without actually interviewing the employees at both restaurants I can't answer that question with any degree of certainty. I mean, there could be all kinds of mitigating factors. But with the help of today's text from Paul's letter to the Ephesians I can do one thing: I can share principles that will help make any employee—or employer for that matter—in any workplace, more like those joyful, welcoming workers at the chicken place.

This morning we are beginning a series of sermons called, "*Final Lessons in Neighboring.*" I say "final" because it's the last sermon series before Advent. We are just about finished with our year-long emphasis on neighboring. Next year's vision is....Nope---you'll have to wait until Vision Sunday, Dec 1!

Okay, we begin this final series by looking at a passage of Scripture that I believe will help us to be Godly neighbors in the place most of us spend the most time at work. Take your Bibles and turn to Ephesians 6. Follow along as I read verses 5-9 and if able, I invite you to stand in respect to God's Word as it is read.

5 – Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.

6 – Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.

7 – Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men,

8 – because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

9 – And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that He Who is both their Master and yours is in Heaven, and there is no favoritism with Him.

Okay, before we can glean the “neighboring at work principles” from these verses I think it will help if we try and understand the context. This is especially important when verses like I just read use words like “*slaves*” and “*masters*.” So here goes.

It has been estimated that when Paul wrote these words there were some 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. And the slave population was concentrated in urban areas, where as many as HALF of the populations of cities like Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus, were slaves. This means that the membership of the churches that first received this letter there were probably evenly divided between slaves and masters. As proof I would cite the church in Colossae. Remember? Paul’s other writings tell us the names of two of its members: a slave named Onesimus, and his master whose name was Philemon. Well, there must have been lots of other “Onesimuses” and “Philemons” in the rest of the European churches of Paul’s day.

Think of it. You could have a slave serving as a deacon chair and the slave’s master serving as a deacon. You could have a slave pastoring a church where his master attended or vice versa--both rejoicing in the fact that the Gospel message was for all people and that the ground was level at the cross of Jesus. In any case, when the members of the churches heard this part of Paul’s circular letter read for the first time, I’m sure all ears perked up. After all, these were words that applied to their lives directly. This was “rubber-meet-the-road” stuff. We also need to understand that slavery in the first century was not like we tend to imagine. I mean, most slaves at this point in history were not subject to extreme exploitation. Of course, I am not approving of slavery in any form—but we need to know that back then slavery wasn’t like it was in the southern half of our nation during the Civil War. To be sure, slaves had been subject to severe cruelty in the decades prior to Paul’s life and ministry. For example, hundreds of years earlier Aristotle had written, “*A slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave.*” In the centuries prior to Paul’s day slaves had suffered terribly at the hands of their owners, such as the slave Augustus had crucified simply because he had killed the emperor’s pet quail. It is also a fact that in years past there had been major slave rebellions, like the one that was led by Spartacus seventy years before the birth of Christ. But perhaps because of these rebellions, by the time this letter was written over a century later, sweeping changes had been introduced which radically improved the treatment of slaves in the Roman empire. In fact, by this time slavery was more like indentured servanthood.

Historian Murray Harris wrote a book about what slavery was like in the 1st century Greco-Roman world. And he points out a few things to help us understand the difference.

1. First, he says that slaves were not distinguishable from anyone else by race, speech, or clothing. They looked and lived like everyone else and were never segregated off from the rest of society in any way.
2. Slaves were more educated than their owners in many cases and many times held high managerial positions.
3. Third, from a financial standpoint, slaves made the same wages as free laborers and therefore were not themselves usually poor. In fact, they often accrued enough personal capital to buy their freedom.
4. Fourth, very few persons were slaves for life in the first century. Most expected to be freed after about ten years or by their late thirties at the latest. This---old world slavery was more like an employer/employee relationship.

In contrast, New World slavery—17th, 18th, 19th century slavery—was race-based, and its default mode was slavery for life. Plus, the African slave trade was based on kidnapping, which the Bible unconditionally

condemns (1st Timothy 1:9-11 and Deut 24:7). These differences help us understand that while the early Christians discouraged their version of slavery, they didn't go on a campaign to end it. But 18th and 19th century Christians, when faced with New World-style slavery, did work for its complete abolition, because it could not be squared in any way with biblical teaching. The fact is, the Bible does not condone slavery in any form.

Anyway, when Paul uses the words "slave" and "master" he's speaking to the culture of his day in a way that called those people to a higher standard. And in doing this, God uses Paul to share timeless principles that help people in any culture to understand how they can live out their faith in the workplace--live it out such that they can find joy and fulfillment in their labors--whatever they may be. He's talking about how to be a good "work neighbor." And let's be honest, there are times in the workplace where people feel they are enslaved.

- This is why gloomy songs like "*Monday, Monday*" became popular.
- It's why people say, "*Thank God it's Friday!*"
- It's why our culture has designated the hours right after the workday ends as "*Happy Hour.*"

This week I came across the results of a global poll conducted by Monster.com. It says 76 percent of respondents in the U.S. report having "really bad" Sunday night blues. Do you ever deal with the "Sunday night blues?" Have you ever felt that way about your job?

- I mean do you ever find yourself taking four or five coffee breaks BEFORE lunch?
- Do you keep a large calendar on your desk at the office and use a big red marker each day to cross off the days until your next vacation?
- Every fall do you avoid getting the flu shot in the hopes that you'll get sick and have an excuse to stay home?

Well, it doesn't have to be that way because the principles in Scripture help us to change our attitude toward work such that it goes from being a chore to being something that brings us joy. Paul shares two of those principles—things that I believe both employees and employers must embrace in order to be good neighbors at work.

(1) First, Paul says we must have the right ATTITUDE.

Look at the phrases he uses. To slaves he says, "***Obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart...Serve wholeheartedly.***" To the masters Paul says, "***Treat your slaves in the same way.***" So to bring this into the 21st century—wherever we are in the corporate hierarchy Paul says we are to sincerely respect one another—and the different rolls we play in the workplace.

On top of that we are to embrace an attitude in which we always do our very best on the job. We must work hard, we must strive for excellence. Ecclesiastes 9:10 puts it this way: "***Whatever your hand finds to do—employers and employees—do it with ALL YOUR MIGHT...***"

Unfortunately, this kind of work ethic has become more and more rare in our society. I mean, many workers—supervisors and supervisees—most are like those workers at Mexican food place in that they do the least they can, just enough to get by. The attitude is to just get through the day, do enough to collect that paycheck and no more. Tardiness has become an artform. Anything to lessen the work day!

This week I came across a Washington Post article that listed the most popular excuses for being late to work. You've heard of most of them:

- 51% blamed traffic,

- 31% said they were late because they overslept.
- 28% faulted weather.

But among the most unique excuses bosses have heard are these:

- *“I was here, but fell asleep in the parking lot.”*
- *“My fake eyelashes were stuck together.”*
- *“An astrologer warned me of a car accident on a major highway, so I took all back roads.”*
- One male employee explained his tardiness by saying, *“I had morning sickness.”*

Referring to these excuses, the Post article said, *“One thing for sure: innovation is not dead in America.”* We chuckle—but poor attitudes, lazy attitudes in the workplace are really no laughing matter. By the way, did you know that employee theft is one of the greatest threats to business today reaching upwards of \$50 billion a year? Time theft—arriving late, leaving early and playing sick—accounts for an additional \$150 billion.

But it’s worse than that. As the late Dr. Elton Trueblood once put it, *“Deliberate mediocrity is a heresy and a sin.”* And unfortunately, it is a POPULAR sin. The writers of the book, *The Day America Told the Truth* reported that only one in four workers say they give their best efforts. Most admit to spending about 20 percent of their time at work goofing off. Almost half of American workers admit to calling in sick, when they are not sick. And the sad fact is that studies show Christian workers to be just as guilty of this kind of behavior as anyone else.

In his book, *Your Work Matters to God*, Doug Sherman says we’re in the midst of a, *“‘moral mudslide’ in the American workplace and Christians are caught in the drift and in many instances are instigating the slide.”* Another writer sadly concluded, *“The so-called Protestant work ethic is long gone from today’s American workplace.”* Well, Paul says that part of being a Christ-follower is going against this “flow” by striving to be effective at work.

And of course, he is right.

We must always give our best—whether our job is to vacuum an office—or supervise the workers in that office. And this is not a burdensome rule. The fact is we enjoy our work more when we strive to do our best.

I can’t help but think about the work ethic of the Shakers—a sect of believers that existed until the late 19th century. They had some odd doctrines and practices, but they built some of the world’s best furniture. Here is what they taught their craftsmen: *“Make every product better than it’s ever been done before. Make the parts you cannot see as well as the parts you can see. Use only the best of materials even for the most everyday items. Give the same attention to the smallest detail as you do the largest. Design every item you make to last forever.”* It has been said that every Shaker chair was made fit for an angel to sit on. Their recipe for lemon pie is still world-famous. They were Christians who were known for the way they loved their work—and they loved it because they did it with the right attitude! They learned that when we give our all at work—whether we are boss or employee—our labors become more fun and more meaningful!

But there are other benefits to be found in striving to do our best at our jobs. For example, when we team up with God in our work by using the talents and abilities He has given us we develop CONFIDENCE in ourselves and our Heavenly Father. You see, when we discover the good work He prepared in advance for us to do and then strive to do it, we learn to trust our Creator more! We also grow and mature SPIRITUALLY in other ways. I mean, if we stay at our jobs until they are done right even when it is frustrating to do so, we develop PERSEVERANCE.

When we resist the temptation to yield to some unethical practice we develop HONESTY. By working alongside of irritating co-workers we learn TOLERANCE and PATIENCE.

So our jobs can indeed help us to develop as disciples of Jesus, which makes us better WORK neighbors. As someone once put it: *“The marketplace can provide graduate-level instruction in character development that can transform our lives and free us to be the men and women God wants us to be.”*

But the BEST reward of doing our jobs with the right attitude is seen in the fact that we are then given an opportunity to SHARE OUR FAITH. Hard workers are rare so when people see us giving our all we earn their respect and the right to do so.

A few years ago, Jamie Winship wrote an article in DISCIPLESHIP JOURNAL in which he told of his career as a police officer. Knowing that as a policeman he would often be dealing with people who were faced with extreme crisis, he said that it was his deep desire to share his faith on the job. One of the first fellow workers he talked to about Jesus was his street-hardened sergeant. Winship said, *“I was barely able to tell him I was a Christian before he interrupted and asked what kind of police officer I would be. Startled by this question, I said that I didn’t know yet. ‘Neither do I,’ the sergeant replied. ‘When and if you prove yourself to be a good cop, then you can come talk to me about God.’”* Winship said that at the end of his second year he was named OFFICER OF THE YEAR and at the ceremony he gave credit to the training he had received from superiors. He also explained that he wore his uniform every day in service to Christ. Following the event, that street-hardened sergeant congratulated him and said he was now ready to talk about God.

To be good work neighbors we must obey the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount when He said, ***“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your GOOD WORK and praise your Father in Heaven.”*** We must do this because our co-workers are the congregation God has given us--those specific people for whom He has called us to be salt and light--and if we do our work in a Godly fashion, if we embrace this first principle that Paul cites, we will get a “pulpit” from which we can share God’s love. All disciples of Jesus should labor in this way for as Jerry White reminds us: *“Ethics to the government is law. Ethics to the philosopher is a concept. Ethics to religion is morality. But ethics to God is OBEDIENCE.”*

God commands us to do our best!

So, to be a good neighbor at work, we must first embrace the right ATTITUDE.

(2) And then we must also strive to please the right BOSS.

Look back at verse 7 where Paul says, ***“Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. And masters---do not threaten [your slaves] since you know that He Who is both their Master and yours is in Heaven, and there is no favoritism with Him.”***

Paul is saying that as Christian workers we must remember Who our ULTIMATE boss is and with that in mind, we need to think of all our labors as service to Him. You see, in the final analysis, we are not working for our earthly boss—or for the company that prints our paychecks—no, we are working for God.

Dallas Theological Seminary professor Howard Hendricks once told of a time when his flight was delayed. His fellow passengers were getting more and more irritated, and some of them began to take out their frustrations on the flight attendants. Hendricks noticed how gracious and poised one of the flight attendants was, and when they finally took off and she had a minute, he called her over and commended her. He told her that he wanted to write a letter of commendation to the airline to tell them what a good job she had done.

Her reply: *"I don't work for the airline; I work for Jesus Christ. And this morning before I left for work, my husband and I prayed that I would be able to serve Christ in my job."*

We are all really servants of Christ, and we must approach our work as if God were our boss---because He is. Whether we are behind the pulpit or in front of it we are working for God. We are doing the good work HE prepared in advance for us to do. Thinking this way changes everything about our work from the morning commute all the way through to the evening one.

As Calvin Miller put it, *"The man who is 'job-centered' has more anxieties about his work than the man who is 'God-centered.'" The fact is, our work changes in a wonderful way when we embrace the fact that whether we be supervisor or supervisee, whether we are sweeping floors or running a company---we are children of God, working to please Him.*

Before the Civil War, some visitors from the North were watching a group of Africans taken from their homes and forced into slavery in the port of New Orleans. After surviving their brutal voyage, the slaves were wearily shuffling along the dock. But one slave, in striking contrast, strode among the rest with his head held erect. He had the dignified bearing of a conqueror. One of the northern observers asked, *"Who is that fellow? Is he in charge of the rest or something?" "No,"* was the answer, *"That fellow just can't get it out of his head that he is the son of a king."* And that's exactly what he was. He was the son of an African King and he had been taken into slavery when he was a young boy. His parents were rulers and had taught him that he was no ordinary person. Even now, after a lifetime of abuse and hardship, which had broken the spirit of other slaves, he still thought of himself as the son of a King.

Well, as Christians, that's what we are! The King of the Universe has claimed us as His children. He is our true "Supervisor" and we need to work according to that mind set. Another thing, when we look at work in this way---when we think of God as our Employer, our jobs become much, much more than jobs. They become one of the ways that we worship. Our job site---our office---even the carpool we ride in---becomes a "temple." Each project we undertake becomes an offering to God. Remember how Paul puts it in Romans 12? He said the way we live our everyday lives---which would of course include our jobs---should be considered a spiritual act of worship. That's how we're supposed to think of our work. So, as 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, ***"...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."*** Strive to please Him in your labors. When a Christian walks on the job site he or she should be thinking about more than making money, impressing the boss, or even how much he enjoys his work. He should be embracing a mind set in which he constantly strives to honor God. As Colossians 3:23-24 says, ***"Whatever you do work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for men---since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. IT IS THE LORD CHRIST YOU ARE SERVING."*** You see, wherever we work, whatever our job description, our ultimate boss is Jesus Christ. When this life ends---when the REAL quitting time comes---He is the One we will want to please.

I've been quoting Ephesians 2:10 all day. Well, the New American Standard translates it like this: ***"We are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should WALK in them."*** Now, the word "walk" suggests our common everyday experience, not the unusual and heroic. I point this out because we all have a tendency to rise to the special "heroic" occasions of our lives, but as Jerry Bridges writes, *"God has created us to do our good works in the midst of the humdrum of daily living."*

We need to look at the "humdrum" of our jobs, even the little things we have to do day in and day out, as an opportunity to please God. Hudson Taylor, the great 19th century pioneer missionary to China once said, *"A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a big thing...[to God]."*

The truth is when we do our jobs in the right attitude—whatever we do big or small furthers God’s purposes—His eternal kingdom. When we embrace this mind set our work takes on great meaning because we come to see that if we do everything FOR GOD, then we are part of the big picture, we are where the action is...on the front lines, fulfilling God’s purposes in this world! We come to see that we are a part of God’s great plan—drawn up before the dawn of time!

A few years ago in an article in *Christianity Today* Philip Yancey told of a PBS series based on interviews with survivors of WW II. In these interviews, the soldiers recalled how they spent a particular day. One sat in a foxhole all day. Once or twice, a German tank drove by, and he shot at it. Others played cards and frittered away the time. A few got involved in furious firefights. But, mostly, the day passed like any other day for an infantryman on the front lines. Later, these soldiers learned that on this particular day they had participated in one of the largest, most decisive engagements of the war, the Battle of the Bulge. It did not feel decisive to any of them at the time, because none of them had the big picture of what was happening elsewhere. It was just like any other day of the war. But like all great victories, this one was won as ordinary people executed their assigned tasks. We need to think of our work in the same way.

As we allow God’ Spirit to bear His fruit in our workplace...in our Christlike interactions with others...God’s kingdom grows. Our acts of kindness...our striving for excellence...our honesty...our integrity...our witness both non-verbal and verbal—has eternal consequences! In our work—we can further one part of God’ eternal kingdom.

LET US PRAY