

Ephesians 6.5-9

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, 6 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. 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.

Introduction

If you've been here for the last few Sundays, you're probably getting the idea that submission is really important to God. Going back to the start of the context in Ephesians 5:21, we are to submit "to one another out of reverence for Christ." Wives submit to your own husbands, husbands submit to Christ in how you love your wife and children submit to your parents. And today is bondservants and masters. These commands from God for submission would have been massively disruptive to a first-century church in the Roman Empire. Because as Nate said a few weeks ago, of course wives should submit to husbands, but the shocking message would have been the corresponding command for husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church. And, sure, children obey your parents, but it would have been stunning to hear "fathers don't provoke your children to anger." And it's the same with bondservants and masters. Slaves obeying was a given, but masters commanded to treat bondservants with respect and not threaten them? That was unheard of.

There are also some extremes in this passage. At one end of the spectrum, bondservants are to submit to earthly masters *as to* Christ. And Peter even clarifies with "not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust." At the other end of the spectrum there's the blessing of God's pleasure and eternal reward for those who obey.

And although there definitely isn't a one-to-one connection between bondservants and masters compared to workers and bosses since in our country workers have a lot of rights and we can quit when necessary, there are a lot of parallels. This passage will challenge us to submit because the majority of us probably think of jobs as something we do, not a reflection of who we are. Whether you are a worker or a boss or both, this passage calls for authentic submission. When we die, God's not going to ask to see our resume. He won't care that you faithfully worked for the same company for 40 years and had continual upward career progression. He won't care that you finished your big project on time and under budget.

God's delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

God will be pleased if we submitted to the authorities He put in our lives, and if we used the authority He gave us with humility.

Too often we derive a sense of worth from our jobs and whether we are successful or not; whether we did something significant or what our title was. For my generation, jobs were mostly a means to an end and a source of social status. You worked hard, got promoted so *that* you could live the American Dream. My generation tends to be motivated by loyalty to the company, hard work and responsibility. But Millennials and Gen Z want work-life balance, diversity and individuality. “Bringing your authentic self” to work wasn’t a thing when I started working. And “Do what you love,” wasn’t even a consideration. There was no “do what you love” it was “Do what you’re told.” That’s what I grew up with.

Our view of jobs and bosses changes from generation to generation, but all of these shifting values are like a honey bee just looking for the next flower to land on. They’re a distraction to what God says is the true purpose of work. Our jobs are a means to serve Jesus because we work directly for Him. The purpose of work whether you are a bondservant or a master is not identity, financial security, power or notoriety. It’s to work with a sincere heart as to the Lord.

How many of you have ever had a terrible boss, someone who handled their authority badly? Haven’t we all? I’ve had bosses take credit for my work, or focus an annual review on one thing I did poorly instead of five things I did well, and threaten me with some consequence they dreamed up. Years ago I turned down a job offer and they threatened me with, “I’ll make sure you never get another job in this city!” First, thanks for confirming my decision, and second I was living in LA at the time and found that a little far-fetched. But it’s true that some bosses want to serve up a threat like a perfect mic-drop.

There are also times that I have been a poor bondservant, very early in my career I wrote an email to my boss pointing out that they were late on a project, and I CC’d a bunch of other people. One time early in my college days I had a job at Der Wienerschnitzel. My very first shift at the restaurant was six hours and I spent the majority of that time filling soda cups. At the end of my six hours I left the restaurant, went back to my apartment and the next morning called my boss to say I was quitting. Didn’t give any notice, I don’t remember even giving a reason. I just quit. The cringe moments on my resume didn’t stop there. I’m still very much in process with these five verses.

As we explore these verses I’d like you to keep a destination in mind, and that is answering the question, “Whose eyes?” Whose eyes are you working for? Whose eyes do you want approval from? Whose eyes assess your “performance?” Who do you *really* work for? Because, if we get to that destination, then this passage will make a lot more sense and you might even stop dreading Mondays.

A brief background on work

First, let's lay some groundwork for work. What is it, what's its purpose? I don't think it's any big revelation that work is hard. Work is something for most people that falls in the category of have to do instead of get to do. And this goes all the way back to Genesis 3 when part of the curse for fallen people is that work will be hard, and not just if you choose a career path in agriculture.

Gen 3.17 “cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you”

The curse isn't that being a farmer will be hard. The curse is that however you provide for yourself and your family, to put food on the table, it will be painful all the days of your life.

But notice it's the ground that's under the curse, not work itself. Work is good and God Himself works. Work is a blessing and the gift of being able to work allows us to provide for ourselves and our families. And not only for our provision, but as 4.28 says, that we “may have something to share with anyone in need.” Doing work and earning provision allows us to save for times when work is scarce or when we can no longer work. It also helps us avoid idleness. So, work is good, but work is painful.

I was googling for job data, and I'm not sure if this indicates everyone who uses Google or my own search history, but when I typed, “how many people hate” the top reply was “their jobs” followed by “school” and “math.” The data suggests that somewhere between 50 and 85% of people hate their jobs. One fairly recent Gallup poll reported that 70% of people in the US hated their job, and the number one reason was that they hated their boss. Other reasons include time spent commuting and the ever-increasing pressure to be available. We have a more difficult time than ever being offline from our work. Work is a painful task. And although a lot of memes on Linked In say that what I really need is to believe in myself, I'm guessing it's more than that. We have a fundamental problem with how we view jobs and bosses.

That's because jobs and bosses are hard for external and internal reasons. Things that happen outside of us and things that happen inside of us. Some of the external factors line up with Genesis 3. Work itself is just hard sometimes. Things go wrong, deals fall through, equipment breaks or technology fails us. We live in a broken world. There are times when other people in your own company will undermine you. I've had multiple times in my career when I was responsible for a project and another team started a competing project and intentionally undermined what I had been doing. I've heard multiple stories of employees going out of their way to make someone else look bad. It's not uncommon.

Work is also hard for internal reasons. Things happening in our own hearts, whether we are aware of them or not, cause us to be discontent in our work. Maybe you've worked hard on a task, done it well and then someone above you changed their mind and you did all that work

for nothing. It can feel demoralizing. Or you work for a large tech company and there's the constant worry and fear of the next re-org that will put you out of a job. Or maybe your job is just boring and doesn't provide job satisfaction or growth opportunities. Whatever it is, these five verses will point us to the only true satisfaction in our work and also provide us with hope and peace for the journey. So, let's jump into this very relevant passage.

Bondservants

We can understand from this passage that the early church had both bondservants and masters as members of the same body. It's mentioned in Colossians, Philemon and here in Ephesians. Slavery was pervasive in the first-century Roman Empire. Most bondservants were captured in battle or bought elsewhere and brought to Rome. It was also sadly not uncommon for impoverished parents to sell their own children into slavery. It was a harsh system where slaves were legal property and could be treated in any manner the owner desired. According to Aristotle, a human bondservant was nothing more than a tool and had the same rights as a shovel or an ox. One small hope for bondservants was the ability to earn their freedom, but even this would have required money that was hard to come by for them.

Broadly speaking, slavery in the Roman Empire was despicable and unbiblical, just as it was in our own country's history. Any practice based on human trafficking and forced labor is contrary to God's will.

1 Timothy 1.8-10 Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9 understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, 10 the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine

Slavery is contrary to the gospel of the glory of God. So why doesn't God just say, "Stop it." To the Corinthians He does say take advantage of your options, but again doesn't directly condemn the practice.

1 Corinthians 7.20 Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. 21 Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) 22 For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. 23 You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. 24 So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

If you're a bondservant and you can get your freedom, do it. If you're not a bondservant, don't become one. But God doesn't say, "Masters, give all your bondservants their freedom" and I believe the reason is that the goal of the gospel is not social change, but heart change.

Tim Keller said it like this,

“I am struck by the simple fact that cultural change is always a by-product, not the main goal. The main goal is always loving service. If we love and serve our neighbors, city, and Lord, it will definitely mean social changes, but Christians must not seek to take over and control society as an end in itself.”

Whose eyes matter to us? The eyes of society and culture change as often as hair styles. The eyes of our masters and bosses can change quickly too. I’m sure we’ve all had a boss that didn’t know what they wanted except that it’s not what you just gave them. The only eyes that matter are Christ’s. And we see this in Ephesians 6 with phrases that describe how we should submit to our bosses “as you obey Christ” and “as slaves of Christ” and “as to the Lord.”

The first of these three commands in verse 5,
“Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ”

I’d guess that a lot of us have some sort of earthly master, and God says to give them your respect with a sincere heart as you would Jesus Himself. This doesn’t mean that if you’re a cook you prepare a meal as if Jesus were going to eat it. You could do that with a totally self-righteous heart. It means that if the chef told you how to cook the meal, and to use ingredients you didn’t like and serve it in a way that you disagreed with, that you obeyed with all respect and sincerity as if Jesus Himself gave you those directions. There is no room for complaining or grumbling or eye-rolling here, even though I’ve done all of those things in the not too distant past. Would you talk bad about Jesus behind His back? No. Would you make veiled comments about how Jesus isn’t as smart as He thinks He is? No, never. Treat your earthly master in the same way. That’s what “fear and trembling with a sincere heart” means.

However, this doesn’t mean we become people who agree with anything our bosses ask and never raise questions. There is a way to respect your earthly master and still make an appeal for a different course of action. Joseph makes an appeal to Pharaoh via the cupbearer to be released from the dungeon. Daniel makes an appeal to the chief of the eunuchs not to eat the king’s food. He gets told no, and then appeals again with a plan that removes any responsibility from the chief, and gains approval. Paul also, in Acts 16, refuses the decision of his earthly masters to release him from prison in secret. Basically, he says, “Oh, you want to release Roman citizens that you publicly beat, in secret to save face? No. You need to do it the right way.” That was bold! But there was a lot at stake and Paul made a valid appeal.

The next example in verse six is,
“not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ”

This verse is the heart of the passage, and where the question, “whose eyes” comes from. There is a humility here that says, as a Christian I submit to my one true Master and I don’t want to do anything for anyone’s approval unless it also pleases Him. We are bondservants of

Christ and only His eyes matter. We can humbly resist the temptation to fake looking good to our boss or anyone else by remembering whose eyes matter most.

You know how this happens. Jiggle the mouse every few minutes so that your online status stays green. Send a Slack or email after 10:00pm to show you're dedicated. Mention how late you were up the night before meeting with another region. Drop hints about how busy you are. I recently heard someone at work say that they, "had to decline a meeting because they were already double-booked." And someone followed it up with, "Oh, you're only double-booked?" Why say that unless you're trying to impress people? I don't think Jesus is impressed by a full calendar.

I've even seen this taken to some dangerous levels. I was meeting with a woman who was struggling with some issues in her marriage, and one situation was while they were driving her husband would ask her to hold the steering wheel so that he could respond to work messages on his phone. What value was he placing on his wife and kids in the car? It seems likely that looking good to the boss was more important than his family's safety.

The question of whose eyes shows up in many ways in our bondservant roles. For example, how do you feel when someone takes credit for your idea or work? Maybe you do some work then hear that your boss passed it off as their own. Or how many of you have had this experience? You're in a meeting and make a suggestion or share an idea and it gets overlooked. Five minutes later, someone else shares pretty much the exact same thing and everyone can't believe how great the idea is. If we weren't so concerned about the eyes of people, I don't think this would bother us so much. We are bondservants of Christ and His eyes see everything perfectly. Whose eyes really matter to us?

The next section says,

["doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man"](#)

I worked with a person once that went on a business trip and turned in their hotel receipt to get reimbursed. But then it came to light that they contacted the hotel and said that they meant to use loyalty points for their stay, then got a refund and pocketed the cash. Can I just say that's not rendering service with a good will? That is using the company to serve yourself.

I once worked with a sales guy who visited a client that wanted to golf, so he bought himself a new set of clubs and turned in the receipt as if it were a legitimate business expense. That's not doing the will of God from the heart. That's like the last verse in the book of Judges, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

What we do in our jobs should be from the heart, actually from the soul. The phrase translated "rendering service with a good will" is literally "with benevolence serve as a slave to Christ and not man." God's will is that we work in our jobs with kindness in servitude. Not serving ourselves, not asserting our own rights.

I've had employees who didn't get the raise they thought they deserved or they were asked to do more than they wanted, and for the next several months they were disengaged and not working to their potential. We now have phrases in our vocabulary for this like Quiet Quitting and Act Your Wage. There was a reputable survey recently about quiet quitting, counting workers who reported being neither engaged nor actively disengaged at work. They found that quiet quitters make up at least half of the U.S. workforce. This is not the will of God.

God wants us to respect our masters, work as if only God were watching and do His will by rendering service as unto Him.

1 Peter 2:18-21 Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, *mindful of God*, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 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.

Our jobs and our earthly masters give opportunities to follow the example of Christ. And it's not without reward. Look at verse eight in Ephesians.

“knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free”

Honestly, it ought to be enough of a reward that we can please Christ in how we submit to our masters. We don't work for ourselves and our advancement, or so that people would think well of us, we work in a way that simply follows in His steps. That should be enough, but God does more for us. This is the hope of working for His eyes. He sees the heart, He sees the submission as bondservants, He sees the injustice and says whatever good we do, we will receive back from Him. This is why the question, Whose eyes, matters. If we work with a “What's In It For Me” attitude, we have our reward in full. But if we work as to the Lord and not to man, God sees and rewards.

Jobs are hard. If that weren't true I wouldn't get emails so often offering the freedom of being self employed. Be your own boss! Yeah, because that is so much easier. Or all those credible emails from a NASA Scientist or a Harvard professor with easy ways to make money that will SHOCK me. The point isn't to make work easier, it's to submit and work as to the Lord.

Masters

Paul then turns to masters in verse 9 and says,

“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.”

How do you treat people under your authority? This isn't just formal employer-employee relationships. Americans employ servants much the same way that early Romans did, but instead of a house-servant that does a lot of tasks, we farm them out to a whole cadre of people. We go out to eat and effectively are hiring cooks and servers to take care of us. We employ people to clean our houses, cut our hair, mow our lawns. We employ hotel staff and contractors and financial advisors and mechanics and childcare. We are earthly masters very much in the way that Ephesians 6 means. How do we treat the people we employ? Are we demanding, hard to please, threatening not to pay, leaving bad Yelp reviews?

Paul says masters "do the same to them." Meaning the same way that bondservants should treat masters with respect, authenticity in our work and kind service is how masters should treat bondservants as well. Earthly masters are nothing special, they have the same temptations as bondservants to look good in front of other people. We all want that. I had a boss once that would use a lot more corporate-speak and a manager tone whenever a peer or superior was in the same meeting. Jesus says, don't do that. Masters also should obey with a sincere heart, as servants of Christ, with a good will in the same way as bondservants. And in addition to that, masters, stop threatening. Stop abusing your power because you also have a Master.

Several weeks ago I was traveling in Melbourne and needed to rent a car. Can I just say that renting a car is my least favorite part of traveling? Why do they have to treat their customers like marks in an elaborate con? As I was standing at the counter for twenty minutes saying no to all of the upsell, I overheard the conversation of the couple next to me. They wanted a special deal that they saw online, although mysteriously they couldn't find it to show the rental agent, who was very polite and patient throughout the barrage of demands. Finally the couple left in a huff and said on their way out, "I will be leaving multiple bad reviews." That is someone in an employer role threatening the worker.

I work for a software company and part of the role is in Tech Support. We get threats and called awful things on a somewhat regular basis. Some customers believe that since they bring the money they are the boss. Threats like, "Do you even know what you're doing? If this isn't fixed today I'm demanding a refund."

Making threats reveals an abuse of power, even if it's only perceived power. If you're a boss, use your power with humility because God is not impressed, there's no partiality with Him. God will measure the slave and the free in the exact same way. It does not matter at all to God if you are a master or a bondservant. There is no partiality with Him.

So, how do you treat the people that serve you, the people you employ to take care of tasks in your life? Do you see them as creatures made in the image of a loving God? Do you see them as people who in many ways very likely have a harder life than yours, and they should get respect and kindness even if they botched your haircut?

We shouldn't underestimate the impact we have on those who work for us, and how much this matters to Jesus. About six months before Linda and I were married her father, George, died suddenly in his mid fifties. He was a hard worker, super smart and an exemplary husband and father to seven. He's one of those men that I wish I could have had more time to get to know. After he died multiple people that worked for him wrote letters to Linda's family. Here's one of them.

Dear Mrs. Haugland and Family,

This is just a note to express a small portion of the loss we feel. George treated everyone -- his managers, peers, and inferiors (and all of us were his inferiors!), with kindness, courtesy and respect. We were never made to feel stupid for asking questions or advice. His door was always open to help us. His fine character and talent were an inspiration to us. His work was always done correctly and on time. He gave clear, written instructions. We enjoyed his quick wit and keen sense of humor. He was a leader, and he led by example. His life was an anthem of praise to God. We miss him and will never forget him.

Another person that worked for him said, "Although I am not a dedicated Christian, George has made me respect the faith and study it, since a man with his intelligence and integrity would not believe in a faith of weak foundations."

George was a nuclear engineer working on power plants for General Electric. Pretty heady stuff, but he didn't let it go to his head. He was a faithful earthly master who worked with a sincere heart as to the Lord and was known for kindness, courtesy and respect.

Whose Eyes?

How can you tell whose eyes you're working for? One of the best ways for me is to step back and look at my thoughts and emotions when I don't get the recognition or approval I feel I'm owed. You know the feeling. A little bit frustrated, disappointed, angry.

For example, my last year of work has been super challenging in multiple ways. Our team lost a person to cancer, we had two people resign and another on maternity leave for seven months. My company also went through its first cyber security exploit and breach of our product. It was a hard year and I had lots of long days to keep everything moving in a good direction. A week and a half ago I had my annual review and got a 'performing' rating. One of my first thoughts was that I could have worked half as hard and gotten the same rating. That is factually true, but it's also 100% caring about my boss's eyes instead of God's. God sees everything right down to the deepest thoughts of our souls. If I did anything good, He saw it and I will receive back from Him.

What triggers you to be tempted to disrespect your boss or at the other end of the pendulum, do a little kissing up? Times when you're either miffed you didn't get their approval, or when you're trying too hard to get it. Those are the times when God's eyes matter too little. Maybe one good application is in the last phrase in verse 7, "rendering service with a good will as to

the Lord and not to man.” Find something you can do to serve your boss or someone who works for you, and don’t let anyone know. Do something with benevolent kindness that only God’s eyes can see. This will be a good test whose eyes are important to you, and whose bondservant you really are.

There’s a value in today’s culture to speak truth to power, be a whistleblower, don’t let your employer take advantage of you. Our entitled American minds don’t like the extremes of what is being said here. Jesus is telling us to submit to our earthly master because He is our ultimate Master who has allowed authorities to be placed in our lives, and it pleases Him when we submit to them.

This week ask yourself, whose eyes matter? Who am I really working for?