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# Christians in the Workplace

## Ephesians 6:5-9<sup>13</sup>

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Is this your experiences at work?<sup>4</sup>

- You attempt the obviously impossible task of doing a new job without training or time to learn new skills, but that work is never good enough for the boss
- Surprise meetings are called by your boss with no results other than further humiliation
- Everything your tormenter does to you is arbitrary and capricious, working a personal agenda that undermines the employer's legitimate business interests
- Others at work have been told to stop working, talking, or socializing with you
- You are constantly feeling agitated and anxious, experiencing a sense of doom, waiting for bad things to happen
- No matter what you do, you are never left alone to do your job without interference
- People feel justified screaming or yelling at you in front of others, but you are punished if you scream back
- HR tells you that your harassment isn't illegal, that you have to "work it out between yourselves"
- You finally, firmly confront your tormentor to stop the abusive conduct and you are accused of harassment
- You are shocked when accused of incompetence, despite a history of objective excellence, typically by someone who cannot do your job
- Everyone -- co-workers, senior bosses, HR -- agrees (in person and orally) that your tormentor is a jerk, but there is nothing they will do about it (and later, when you ask for their support, they deny having agreed with you)
- Your request to transfer to an open position under another boss is mysteriously denied

The Phd's at the website who have given us this interesting list also say that one of the main reasons workplace bullying takes place is because it is illegal. Well, it might be good that there are legal consequences for being a terrible employee or boss, the Bible comes at this from a different perspective. Listen to what the Scripture says about the workplace.

<sup>5</sup> Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, <sup>6</sup> not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, <sup>7</sup> rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, <sup>8</sup> knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. <sup>9</sup> 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.

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<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise designated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

What jumps out at us right away is that he is talking to masters and slaves. Well, we don't have masters and slaves in our culture so does that mean this isn't speaking to us today? How do we relate it to our own situation?

In Paul's day there were three primary kinds of employment in the Greco-Roman world. You could work for the state in some way, the most prevalent being as a soldier. You could work for yourself, in partnership or an employer in what we would think of as a company. Or, you could work for a master as a slave.

I think Paul does two simple things here:

He addresses masters and slaves as an accepted part of the Christian community. There were both in the church and that was a normal part of life and living. As such, then slaves and masters are being treated as equals in the church while their roles outside the church are being acknowledged.

He addresses the lowest form and most prevalent form of employment. He gives the instructions on how they are to be pleasing to God. Those are worded in such a way that they are applicable to all similar relationships.

Furthermore, much of our understanding of slavery is seen through the distorted lens of the slavery of that era. The worst examples of the abuse of slaves were painted over the whole institution. This has been true as well of those writing of the history of slavery in the New Testament era. Slavery was a very different institution in the world of Paul than it was (and is) in the modern world. Slaves could have and often had, Roman citizenship. They could and did own property. They often were rich in their own right.

Here is an extensive quote from Kent Hughes on this subject. This is from his commentary on Ephesians, p.205-206.

In order to understand what the directions meant then, so we can apply them helpfully to today's relationships, we need to know what slavery was like in New Testament times. This will involve the exploding of some common misconceptions. The greatest of these is that the average slave was subject to extreme exploitation. This simply was not so! To be sure there was the traditional ancient teaching such as in Aristotle's *Nichomachian Ethics* that "A slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave," which rendered a slave a thing, although in his *Politics* Aristotle did concede that "a slave is a kind of possession with a soul." It is also true that under Roman law, according to Gaius, a slave was a thing to be owned and bought and sold and not a legal person.<sup>4</sup> It is true, too, that some slaves had suffered terribly at the hands of their owners, such as the slave of Augustus who was crucified because he killed a pet quail. It is also a fact that there had been major slave rebellions, such as that led by Spartacus, but those were pre-Christian (between the years 140-70 B.C.).

The fact is, by the time of the Christian era and the writing of this Ephesian *Haustafel*, sweeping changes had been introduced which radically improved the treatment of slaves. Slaves under Roman law in the first century could generally count on eventually being set free. Very few ever reached old age as slaves. Slave owners were releasing slaves at such a rate that Augustus Caesar introduced legal restrictions to curb the trend. Despite this, inscriptions indicate that almost 50 percent of slaves were freed before the age of thirty. What is more, while the slave remained his master's possession he could own property — including other slaves! — and completely controlled his own property, so that he could

invest and save to purchase his own freedom. In fact, the *nouveaux rich* extravaganzas of ex-slaves scandalized the “old money” Bostonian Romans!

We also must understand that being a slave did not indicate one's social class. Slaves regularly were accorded the social status of their owners. Regarding outward appearance, it was usually impossible to distinguish a slave from free persons. A slave could be a custodian, a salesman, or a CEO. Many slaves lived separately from their owners. Finally, selling oneself into slavery was commonly used as a means of obtaining Roman citizenship and gaining an entrance into society. Roman slavery in the first century was far more humane and civilized than the American/African slavery practiced in this country much later. This is a sobering and humbling fact!<sup>5</sup>

The effect is that this text is applicable to the job and to the school. I will speak primarily to the job. Students, as you listen you will hear how God expects you to interact with your teachers and other authorities and how you are to approach and do your school work. We will look at this briefly today and then with a great deal more in depth explanation and application in next spring when we come back to it.

## Slaves and Employees

(v. 5-8)

<sup>5</sup> Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, <sup>6</sup> not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, <sup>7</sup> rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, <sup>8</sup> knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free

### What the Lord requires...

The Lord requires that you do what your employers want you to do, except when they require you to sin. You are to do so because you are a servant of Christ. You are to do your work as though Christ were your ultimate boss. You are to engage your supervisors and bosses with respect. You are to treat them honorably but not be driven by a fear of man or being a people pleaser.

You are to do your job with a good heart, a genuine desire to do well. You are to work hard at what you do. You are to work hard even when the bosses are not looking. You are to treat the work you do as the Lord's will. It is what he requires.

Your motivation is that God will reward you even if the job does not. You will receive back from the Lord what you are due. Now the Lord's reward may not be monetary. He may reward you in other ways. But, He will reward you for the good, honest, hardworking effort you put in.

### How we apply it...

Now let's think through this in a bit more detail.

Whether you like your job or your employers is not in view in this text. Regardless of your work or your bosses, you are to do your job in a way that pleases the Lord. Certainly, you are free to change jobs in our culture and in our setting. You are not a slave or a servant. So in the freedom to choose another job, you must work in a way that pleases the Lord. You are to do your job as doing God's will from the heart. Grudging, complaining, resistant work displeases the Lord.

Because you are a Christian and understand godly submission, you should treat your employer, your boss, your supervisor with respect and deference. You must not allow subtle insubordination toward your employer. You must guard your heart for cleverly concealed contempt or sardonic humor. (Hughes, p. 207)

You must strive to do the best job you can, regardless of whether your employer sees it, cares about it or rewards it. You are to be as good as you can. You are to work as hard as you can. You are to have the same level of dedication and attention to your work whether your supervisor is around or not.

You must be careful to give your employer his full time. You must guard against stealing your employers things - pens, pencils, paper, disks - all the stuff that ends up at home in your lunch pails or briefcases or backpacks. You must be honest about your expense accounts. How much time do you spend on Facebook, twitter, Amazon, Google, blogs, Fox News - when you ought to be working? If your employer was standing behind you all day, how much different would that day be?

You must realize that you are actually working under God. He is your ultimate master. He is not your employer; He is your King, your heavenly Master. You are His servant, his son, his subject. This is how you must think. If you recognize that you are working under God's eye and with His approval, that will radically change the way your work.

One phrase that strikes me here is "with good will from the heart". This phrase points to cheerfulness. You must not be the kind of unhappy, complaining, grumpy, sour-puss person that unfortunately disgraces our Lord in so many work places. The Lord wants to go about your work with a general sense of being pleasant. Do people at your job like being around you? Do you know Christians who are unhappy, mean, evil spirited, negative, or constantly complaining? Are you that kind of employee?

Now, if you are pleasing to God in your work, in many shops you are going to get into trouble with your fellow employees. This standard of Biblical excellence may expose low ability and low effort. There will be pressure to lower your standard, to not show anyone up, to accuse you of brownnosing. Working in a union shop may make this even worse. As a Christian, please remember that you do not work for your union - your work for your employer. And even if you did, you must still seek to rise above their standards and achieve the level of excellence that is pleasing to God.

So in workplace you may have a difficult time. But while you are working for that employer, you are to carefully and faithfully serve God while you do your work.

### **The motivation for doing it....**

You will work like this because you are working for the heavenly reward. Your earthly job provides for your living. It may be satisfying, useful and productive work doing what you love. But many times it is simply how you will provide for your family. *And that is OK.* You should not be getting your identity from your work. You are not what you do. You should be living out your identity through your work. Your work place is where you express that you are God's servant and God's son. You are willing to serve this way because you know that one day, the Lord will reward you.

Employees and students, work hard at your work as though the Lord were your boss or your principal.

## **Masters and Employers**

**(v. 9)**

As shocking as it may sound to us now, many Christians in the New Testament era owned slaves. Once again, Paul is instructing believers on how to be pleasing to God in the situation they are in.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

### **Bosses as servants...**

Christian bosses are to respond to their employees in much the same way. They are to recognize that the owner or supervisor or boss must also set the example for the employees. Apply yourself to your work. Treat your employees with respect. Realize that God is looking out for them and respond to them accordingly. Do not use threats and fear causing tactics to get employees to do what you want.

As a Christian who owns a business or is supervising others, the Lord calls on you to set the example. It does not matter whether your employees are Christians or not. You are to set the example of all that a Christian employee is to be. "Do the same to them..." implies that as a boss you still have the same responsibilities to the Lord as an employee. Diligence and integrity is required of you as well.

For those of you who own your businesses, how does this text land on you? Does ownership free you from this sort of careful attention to your responsibilities? No, I think that since people are dependent on your doing well in order to have employment, you have a greater responsibility to stay engaged and do all you can to make your business go. I would challenge you to think carefully about what I hear many business owners say, "I work for myself." Not as a Christian you don't. You are working directly for God. There is not owner, boss or supervisor between you and God. You serve God directly.

### **Creating an environment to thrive in...**

Notice that the Lord requires a certain kind of working environment. As a master, a boss, a supervisor, a teacher, an owner, you are to avoid a certain kind of business culture. You are not to drive your employees or those who report to you with intimidation and threats. Your employees should respect you but they should not be afraid of you. You are to create a working environment that primarily focuses on encouraging and rewarding hard work. Poor work needs to be corrected. Lazy, inept, incompetent employees should be corrected and when necessary, fired. But that should not be the primary motivation for your workers. They should want to work for you or your company. It should have a positive, motivating environment where good workers set the pace, are recognized and rewarded. Bad workers get a chance to change but are dealt with. Do not primarily use threats as a way to get the work done.

### **The reason to be like this...**

Why should you be this kind of master? You do so because you have a Master in heaven. You will give an account to Him. And you do so because you and your Christian employees all are on equal footing before God at the cross. You may be their employer, their master, their boss, but they are your equal.

Employers, treat your employees the way you want to be treated by God. Treat employees the way God does treat you.

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## Reflect and Respond

God calls us to glad submission in all the spheres of our lives, even in the work place. Submission in the work place is an expression of our submission to God.

Brothers and sisters, your conduct at your place of work is one of the strongest testimonies of God's grace, or not. You will be thinking differently from nearly everyone around you,. You will be behaving differently from everyone around you. What a testimony to God as our heavenly master is your careful, diligent and respectful behavior at work.

For some our students, you know this is not how you are at school. But this is what the Bible calls you to. To be respectful of your teachers because being respectful to them is a way of honoring and pleasing the Lord. You are to work hard at your school work, whether the teacher is around, the work is easy or even whether you are going to be graded nor not.

For some of you, you know that you need to repent. You are not God's kind of employee at all. You are disrespectful or unsubmitive. You do not work hard – doesn't matter if the earthly boss cares; the heavenly boss does. You have taken things from work. You have used the bosses' time for your pleasure. You know that you do not think of yourself as working for God. You need to repent of the way you are thinking. You need to turn away from sinful attitudes and actions at work. You may need to re-think your involvement in unions. You may need to go to your boss and confess your sins against him and ask his forgiveness.

Owners, bosses, supervisors, managers – what kind of work environment have you created? Do you need to address your own attitudes and actions? Teachers – what is your classroom like? All of you, as much as it is your responsibility, do those under you see Christ in you?

Is this radical? Yes. But God did not put an easy path of holiness in front of us. We will be different. We may not be accepted or even may be opposed. It will often be costly. We may well suffer. But as we serve and please our heavenly Master we will bring Him glory in our daily work.

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<sup>4</sup> From "Early signs of Bullying" page at [www.workplacebullying.org](http://www.workplacebullying.org), by the Workplace Bullying Institute, Dr. Gary Namie and Dr. Ruth Namie, et al.

<sup>55</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990.