

“Who’s Your Boss?”
Pastor John Bronson

(Ephesians 6:5-9)

November 14, 2010

Order of Worship for November 14, 2010
Pre-service Song
Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment: Ruth Bowen and Veterans Day Observance (does she want us to sing a patriotic hymn?)

Call to Worship: Psalm 63 and Prayer

Songs of Worship:

“All Heaven Declares”

Overhead

“I Sing Praises”

Song # 5

“How Great is Our God”

Overhead

“Glorious Is Thy Name Most Holy”

Song # 677

“We Are an Offering”

Song # 678

Offering and Offertory

Special Music:

Message: “Who is Your Boss?” (Ephesians 6:5-9)
by Pastor Bronson

Closing Song: “God Be With You” Song # 232

Parting Word of Grace

Evening Service
“New Beginnings: a Study of the Book of Hebrews”
5:30 P.M. in the Music Building

“The Prayer Closet”

November 14, 2010

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

- 1.
2. **Russel and Sharla Weisner serving in Malaysia:** that the grace of the Lord will empower them for an effective witness amongst Muslims and Hindus, amongst the native Malays commercially active Chinese, and that the volunteer teaching team will demonstrate the love of God to the English language students; that they will be joyful in Christ
3. **President Obama:** that the Spirit will open his heart to the lordship of Christ; that the Spirit will reveal to him both the true condition of his own heart and the love of God for him; that the Lord will preserve him and his family in good health
4. **Angel Tree Ministry and AWANA:** that the Lord will strengthen Tim and Laura Giordano for both ministries; that the Lord will raise up adequate personnel for both ministries; that both ministries will reach far into the community and be used in bring lost souls to Christ
5. **Military Personnel of the Week: SPC Rebecca Wagenaar** (sister of Pam Cervantes):
6. **College Student of the Week: Bethany Sweetman at Butte College** (daughter of Catherine Sweetman):
- 7.

Today we are going to be continuing our study of Ephesians. The passage is Ephesians 6:5-9. The title for today is “Who’s Your Boss?” If you are familiar with this section of scripture, you know that at this point Paul moves from discussing the family, which began in chapter 5 with a long section on marriage and then briefer comments dealing with fathers and children. We have looked at that for a fairly extended period of time because family life in America is under such stress. Now he comes to the issue of work. So “Who is Your Boss” is the question that rightly helps us to walk into what Paul has to say.

It is important for us, when we look at this topic, to remember that when God put Adam and Eve in the Garden He did not put them there for an extended vacation. Rather they were put in the Garden to work; they were to tend the garden and keep it. Since that time, of course, work is no less central to our lives, but the conditions under which we work have changed profoundly. The change in those conditions would have us think about the issues. Recently, if you are aware of the fact, there have been mass demonstrations and even riots in Greece and France and Spain. Do you know why? It is fascinating. You read about those Europeans, that hundreds of thousands and even millions have taken to the streets to protest what they see and claim is an attack on their basic rights. Two issues seem to have rocked these nations. On the one hand the State has declared that their pension plans [long pause]...are fiscally or financially insupportable. Therefore, they will be reduced. And on the other hand the state has said that they can’t retire at 60 any more! They are going to have to retire as late as 61 or 62 and all the way up to 67. You may not know this but for a long time now European workers have enjoyed the prospect of generously financed lives for the last 20 years of their lives. They have come to see this as an “entitlement.” What is an “entitlement”? An entitlement means that they consider it to be a legal and legally defensible right without reference to whether or not they have actually produced in any way the amount of wealth which would underwrite their benefits. That is an entitlement. This is part of a widespread and distinctly modern reality. The relationship between productivity and income, between value given as labor and value received in income and benefits, specifically including retirement income and the cost of healthcare, has been lost. In the minds of many, they deserve what they need regardless of what they may or may not have labored to make, and what they need is measured by what other people have and enjoy.

For many of us this is on the order of outrageous nonsense, but in a world where income and benefits are often determined by union and management negotiations or by politically driven policies and tend as often as not to reflect relative degrees of power rather than measurable realities of productivity, the worth of a man’s work, and often the worth of the man, can be obscure and confusing. Beloved, how much is a Wall Street trader worth? Does any man upon the face of the earth produce a hundred million dollars worth of goods? How much is the labor of a Taco Bell line worker worth? How much are you worth?

For the biblically defined Christian other factors properly come first in our perspective on work. I am going to read two important statements from the Bible, one from the Old one from the New [Testaments]. Both of these talk about work. They should help us as Christians to define what we understand work to be about. The first is from the Old Testament and I will put the whole section on the screen: This is what Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 5:18-19,

“Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept this lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God.”

Whatever your situation is, be thankful, just thankful. The other passage is the one that we are looking at from Ephesians, 6:5-9.

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart as you would Christ, not by way of eye-service as people pleasers but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord, and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that He who is both their master and yours is in heaven and there is no partiality with Him.”

If you were to examine or weigh those two statements you would quickly recognize that there is a profound difference being taken on work between the two testaments. That difference hinges on this central and defining reality: the Old Testament member of the covenant people of God had no clarity and less hope regarding life after death than the New Testament believer. For us who are in Christ, our greatest hope and our deepest certainty is eternal life. I so much appreciated what George Kerley had to say: “I am alive! How long will I be alive? Forever!” I will be alive long after whatever pension plan or arrangements are for me. My wife will considerably outlast whatever happens with her surgery on Tuesday. Whatever my present job situation might be, in the long run it will be [by a gesture, “as nothing”], for eternity is a very long time.

But notice that even with so profound a difference in perspective between Ecclesiastes, not having any certainty regarding eternal life, and Ephesians, having complete certainty regarding eternal life, nevertheless both statements have a very positive view of work. Indeed, work is viewed as a gift from God and as perhaps our most effective place of testimony regarding the grace of God. It is an effective place of witness.

This priority on work flows directly from the fundamental truth or reality which governs the whole of Christian life. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians as you will find it in I Corinthians 6:19-20, this is what we read: “*You are not your own, for you were bought with a price, so glorify God in your bodies.*” What was the price with which we were bought: the blood of Jesus Christ. He laid down his life; He paid our ransom; He has the title deed to every one of our lives. We are His for eternity. The reference in I Corinthians 6 is primarily to sexual purity and faithfulness in marriage, but the relationship or principle applies to every area of our lives. Understand that Paul was under no illusion that working will be easy. At times the slave population, by the way, of the Roman Empire was as high as 50% [of the entire population]. The majority of workers were slaves. The general standing of slaves in the Roman Empire was abysmal. Virtually every ancient culture despised manual labor. Therefore it was always reserved for the lowest members of society: slaves. They were despised. As an individual gained skills and education, they moved up the respectability ladder; but a slave was always a slave and could in almost every instance be disposed of at the will of the owner. Giving unrestricted power to any human being is a very dangerous and unwise thing to do, but wise or not, the standard for the Christian worker remains the same at all times.

Think about the way we work. I think I am safe in saying this: that the predominant concerns in the workplace today are with such things as this: making a profit. How many [here today] are small businessmen. How important is it to make a profit, the bottom line? How many of us are employees? What is important to employees: a fair wage! But in addition to these two issues, we worry about the benefits. Then, [we think about] the working conditions. Bottom line, fair wage, benefits, working conditions: At this point I had thought I might throw in government regulations and taxes, but I’d be here till tomorrow! There are not many, however, who in practical terms concern themselves with rendering service with a good will to the Lord, or even in anything more than a general and most vague sense, doing the will of God. Work in America is secular. Furthermore, it is also often contentious. This is the tension we need to recognize. The Word of God says I am to receive my work thankfully. Our culture says, “Argue about it.” As Christians we are supposed to be figuring out what to do.

This kind of adversarial mindset divides works and employers, workers and management, each assuming they must guard their interests against the other. These suspicions can easily become both passionate and bitter.

Biblically grounded Christians prize good work. Biblically grounded Christians prize being good workers as a matter of being right before God. It is a matter of their witness and their personal integrity, how they honor the Lord. However, if we recall Paul’s statement in Ephesians, you and I have to ask how often you and I approach our work with fear and trembling.

There are many ways in understanding, or at least catching a glimpse of what has happened to faith in America. Our God is small. Our God is very distant. We simply do not enter into each day’s labor with an intense sense of

the immediate presence of the Lord God who is weighing and examining for the purposes of His own glory all that we do as His servants in whatever place we work; we do not do that! Consequently we act as if we are operating on our own and for our own benefit. Tomorrow morning at ten thirty, I challenge you to ask yourself, “Where is my God?” “Where am I in relationship to Him?”

We tend to view service to Christ as, among other things, an intensely personal commitment. In the context of the workplace what is in view is not merely a paycheck, necessary as that is, but approval, a recognition of service rendered out of a generous heart and full of thanksgiving. The Christian worker rightly desires to be a blessing. That is what I want when I move into my situation: I desire to be a blessing. I want people to say, “Boy I am glad you are here!” The Christian worker wants to be blessed by God, standing in the place where His grace can freely flow right into me and through me to whoever is round about. The Christian worker would hope some of God’s blessings would come to him through his employer, of course! The Christian’s work in the workplace, the shop, the market, the store, the mall, the foundry, the factory, the yard, the project, the worksite, the lab, the office, the office-park, the field, the barn, the plant, the school, the grounds. . .do you think we work a lot? Those are all different places where we work. The Christian understands that regardless of the place where he or she works, work has a distinct spiritual quality.

This priority, again, flows directly from I Corinthians 5:19-20. We understand that we have been bought with a price, that who we are wherever we are is determined by the relationship we have with God through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. We are owned by Him; therefore we are in all situations His servants. Consequently the standard by which we operate is not the standard handed down by the employer; it is the standard which is ours through Christ. My work ethic is not established – by the way, for your interest – by your expectations of me. I have never at any time allowed my congregation –you are the fourth one – to set forth my standard of performance. I always stand before Jesus Christ and I give an account to Him for what I am, for what I say, what I do, and what I don’t do. And when I fail, and I do, I prostrate myself before Him and seek His forgiveness and His renewal. And by the way, some of you know me well enough that if you don’t like what I have to say from the pulpit, I don’t care! Because all I really care about is whether or not it agrees with what God has said. Amen! That is why I like you folk.

The standard, therefore, is with Him. Now you’re all sitting out there saying, “uh huh, pastor John, religious guy, uh huh. You don’t know what it’s like being out here with a bunch of lost people in the world.” But the Bible does. Paul says that we are “*...as servants of Christ doing the will of God from the heart, rendering good service with good will as to the Lord, and not to man knowing that whatever good anyone does he will receive back from the Lord whether slave or free.*” But this is what Peter says in I Peter 2:18-21 – remember most of those he was writing to were slaves – “*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 and 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.*” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a man whose works I have been reading as I have mentioned to you, made this observation: no church thrives unless it suffers. Don’t recommend IPeter chapter 2:18-21 to the ACLU! Slaves did not have unions and there were no civil liberties or rights in the Roman Empire. On the other hand, some slaves did have Christ in their hearts and no empire, whether the Roman or the Nazi or the Communist or America can keep the Lord out of the hearts of those who believe in Him. Every Christian is free.

It is on account of their following the teachings of Christ that today in China Christians are amongst the most highly valued workers in many places. They work hard; they work cooperatively; they don’t steal from the company. All of those are increasingly common behaviors among their atheist, Buddhist, Confucian and animist

neighbors. I read another article recently about the scientific community in China is in shambles because they cheat all the time.

Now very likely those Christian workers will prosper on account of this, and their prosperity will be their greatest danger. Beloved, it is easier to be a good Christian worker as a slave whether due to extreme poverty or as one oppressed and despised than it is as a free agent. When people are free and equal in society in general and in the work place more specifically, they “get notions”. The little phrase “get notions” is a euphemism for pride. Now this is tricky business. Freedom is understood by most people to be a birthright to all. One of the most powerful appeals of Christianity is that it sets people free. Jesus made these statements. The first is John 8:31-2, Jesus said, *“If you abide in my word you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”* Yes! Verse 36, a few verses later He says this: *“So if the Son of Man sets you free you will be free indeed.”* Paul echoes the same. 2Corinthians 3:17, *“The Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”* Then again he says it in Galatians 5:1, *“For freedom Christ set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* But Paul also gave a warning. In Galatians 5:13 this is what he said: *“You were called to freedom, brothers, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another, for the whole law is fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* The whole issue comes down to this; do I place more value in, and do I draw more comfort and strength from my standing in and before Christ, or my standing in my society and before man?

I got this far and I thought this is so relevant to me. How many have been to a pastor’s conference. Those of you who have know what it is like. In an era of entrepreneurial pastors who plant churches, and you have “seeker-friendly” churches, and you have mega-churches, it becomes very, very tempting to talk about how magnificent your ministry is, how large you are getting, how fast you are growing, all the new techniques and methods you are using, and talking and talking and talking about...Moi!!!! The magnificent, irreplaceable, always desired, sought after... whereupon heaven gags. Of course these temptations are not limited to people such as I. The great question which confronts all of us, whether slaves or masters, employers or employees, workers or supervisors, breadwinners or home makers, independent contractors or entrepreneurs, venture capitalist or retirees or whatever, the question is always the same: Am I a slave to God? Or, am I willing to sell my soul for a good standing with men?

Mammon is usually and rightly most closely associated with money, but it actually includes all possessions. Jesus said this about mammon in Matthew 6:34. *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”* The word for money in Semitic was “mammon.” Mammon as a god puts a price on everything. All things can be bought and sold, including your soul. Those seduced by mammon will often think they can buy off God, just like the rich men in Jesus day did. Jesus spoke about this in Luke 21:24. *“Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins, and He said, truly I tell you this poor widow has put in more than all of them, for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty gave all she had.”* In that act the widow demonstrated that she placed all her hope not in money but in the Living God. Meanwhile some of those rich men were Pharisees and Jesus said this about the Pharisees in Luke 6:14-15, *“The Pharisees who were lovers of money heard all these things and they ridiculed Jesus and Jesus said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.’”* One of the ways that those who love money justify themselves is by giving seemingly large amounts of it away to capture the imaginations of men. Of course that is virtually always done with money after doing what money is wanted for, that is the accumulating of possessions, and beyond that, the gaining of power.

Beloved it was one of the essential accomplishments of the Reformation to recapture the world of work, the common man’s occupations whether as a laborer, a craftsman, a merchant, a farmer an artisan as a true and legitimate means for glorifying God: good work, doing good work in the world and advancing the kingdom of God

on earth. The Medieval Catholic Church had almost totally blended with the culture of the landed aristocracies in Europe. They had adopted the pre-Christian and pagan social values of the ancient world that considered working with one’s hands as demeaning and unworthy of nobility, the buying and selling of goods as despicable. A notable exception to that were the monastic orders. The monks and the nuns understood that working with their hands was an essential part of living a godly life. Against the Medieval prejudice against work, the Reformers argued for the Cultural Mandate, that is that God had made humanity to be stewards of the earth, to make of it, figuratively speaking, a garden for human habitation. The production of well tilled ground and productive fields, well made clothes and houses, furniture and all of the accoutrements of daily life were seen as the fruits of godly labor. The material prosperity that resulted from that was received as the reward from God. God has no argument with gracious living and comfortable circumstances. But such disciplines lead to material prosperity, they lead to money.

Money and possessions are the tokens of mammon and can easily seduce the soul away from God. Today this caution is rarely heeded. The world of work has become driven by the pursuit of mammon’s tokens. In mammon’s world, it is not the excellence of one’s work that is praised, rather in mammon’s world it is what a person makes, what they get and have that is the reason for boasting. Those who serve mammon willingly use people and seek to bless themselves with wealth; but those who serve the lord honor honest labor as a testimony to their Creator-Redeemer and use the wealth they gain to bless others.

Paul concludes these few verses on work and work relationships with a warning. At first it seems directed to Masters, but reflection makes it clear that it is directed equally to all: “*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.*” When Paul says “...do the same to them...”, he is simply indicating that Masters or employers or supervisors – whoever exercises directive authority over others – are to approach their position and its responsibilities with the same quality of fear and trembling as the employee.

Now, how many of you are arguing with me at this point? There is big a counter-argument, isn’t there? After all, you all know who my employers are, don’t you, the people who determine my entire financial future? Why, they’re the elders, and they are a bunch of mamby pambies. They are nice, kind, considerate, thoughtful, generous, and would never ever cause any problems. But you’re situation is different. You are employed by greedy, awful, terrible people. Or maybe all your employees are thieves, or you are in a competitive working situation where if you don’t go for it, the other guy will. The counter argument is, if I don’t look out for my interests, who do you think will take of me? I’m just fallen enough in nature to know how you think. I had a terrible time with this issue. When I was first a pastor I said to myself, “O man, what happens if they, if the saints, don’t give Nini and me enough money to live on? I am on principle incapable of going and arguing about how much money I’m getting. What am I supposed to do?” (I am not making this up, by the way. It was one of the big issues that I wrestled with when I was first in the pastorate.) As you can tell Nini and I have struggled and starved for most of the years! What happened? Well we found the right answer to the question: Jesus!

These are conditions of the heart. I would never advise anyone not to go to their employer and say, “You know, I need a raise.” That is not the point. The point is you talk it over with God, you seek His face, and you trust His guidance. And whatever the answer is, you simply say, Thank-you God, this will be sufficient. I know you will take care of me; I do not need to be afraid.

Some weeks ago I was preaching and I contrasted pragmatic reasons for moral decisions with acting by faith. I noted that for the pragmatist ignorance – he really doesn’t know what is going to happen, combined with the law of unintended consequences –I thought this was going to be the result, but man, this is what actually resulted from what I did – undermine the pragmatic approach to life. There is a great struggle, our greatest challenge is remembering, and our saddest failure is forgetting, the power and presence of God. I have two examples – I won’t read them now – that illustrate what happens when a believer ceases to rely on the God he knows. Trust in the Lord in all your ways and do not lean on your own understanding. He has never failed to care for His children, and He never will.

Please pray with me: Our gracious Father, these are hard lessons, I know they are. I know the power with which our economic culture shapes us, forces us, rearranges us, and drives us. It is no easy to not become reshaped to the shape of a mammon worshiper. That saddens us. Thank you so much our God that you have made of us part of a body of believers that encourage and comfort one another and remind one another of the basic truths by which we live our lives. We pray for one another and up hold one another that we don’t lose our way. Be pleased with us, your hand be over us, may Your Spirit our Father, be the Spirit that dwells with us. We ask this, our Father, in the name of Your Son. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. How does the Old Testament’s view of work differ from that of the New, and how are they the same?
2. What are the dominant concerns of the workplace in America today? How might these differ from the Bible’s perspective and priorities?
3. What sort of motives properly motivate the Christian worker?
4. What “fundamental reality” needs to control our workplace priorities: see 2Cor.6:19-20?
5. What is the spiritual danger associated with being a good worker and why is it a danger?
6. What warning did Paul give relative to freedom in Galatians 5:13 and how might this danger relate to the workplace?
7. How does becoming a valuable worker or a successful business person relate to mammon?
8. For the most part, what drives work in the modern workplace?
9. What is the right answer to the frequent lament, “If I don’t look out for my interests, who will?”
10. In the end, what was the difference between the two kings of Judah, Asa and Hezekiah?