

## *What's an Employee to Do? • Ephesians 6:5–8*

Sixty million slaves populated the first century Roman Empire. In many places, the slaves outnumbered the free citizens. Many slaves were treated with honor and respect. Some lived in comfort if not in luxury. The ranks of philosophers, physicians and political advisors were filled with slaves. Some of the key people in Caesar's household were slaves that had been transported from conquests of Greek territory.

But we're misinformed if we imagine that generally the lot of the slave was good because far more slaves were treated with brutality and contempt. When we read the literature of the first century, we discover just a glimpse of what it must have been like. For example, Kato gives some advice to a man who was buying a farm and tells him that he should go over the farm and throw away everything that is past work. Old slaves should be thrown out on the scrap heap to starve to death. When a slave is ill it is sheer extravagance to issue him normal rations.

Gaius, the Roman lawyer, wrote in his Institutes, "We may note that it is universally accepted that the master possesses the power of life and death over the slave."

Fugitive slaves were either executed or branded with an "F" on the forehead. Augustus one day crucified one of his slaves because the slave was guilty of killing Augustus' pet quail.

Hardly can we imagine what it must have been like to live under those conditions.

Many of the millions of Roman slaves were Christians. Try to imagine their interest when the word came that God gave specific personal advice on how to cope with the realities of life as a slave. Try to imagine yourself as a slave listening during a Sunday service in a first century house-church as you heard for the first time the words of Ephesians 6: 5-8:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with

respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 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. 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.

It seems strange and discomfoting to us that the Bible does not come out and condemn the practice of slavery. To us it may seem that God's stance of neither condoning nor condemning slavery is compromising and unjust. It may be hard for us to understand.

Suffice it to say that God is more concerned about changing individuals than institutions. While he never approves unjust systems, he recognizes that they are a by-product of sin and must be attacked more through transformed lives than through any other means.

By God's grace we are not slaves as were

so many in the first century. The most difficult of work circumstances we experience are far better than the norm

in Roman times. While it is obvious that the words to ancient slaves are applicable to employees in our time and country, it is equally obvious that these principles are far easier for us to apply than our brothers and sisters of 20 centuries ago.

Because our basic rule of relationship in the Christian life is Ephesians 5:21 where we are reminded to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ", we look to God's Word for the answer to our question, "What's an employee to do?" What is to be our response when given orders, when treated unfairly, when dis-

*You are not primarily working for your earthly boss; you are primarily working for Jesus Christ himself!*

couraged in our job?

Teacher, laborer, secretary, physician, salesperson, builder, executive, employees one and all — listen to God’s message to us all: Christian workers, demonstrate your reverence for Jesus Christ through your obedience to your employer.

That is a big order! But God tells us how to fill this order through three practical principles.

The first of these principles is that you and I always view our work as being work for Jesus Christ. Verse 5 says, “. . . obey your earthly masters . . . as you would obey Christ.” Verse 6 says, “Obey them . . . like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.” And verse 7 says, “Serve . . . as if you were serving the Lord, not men. . . .”

Do you see what God is saying about your job? You are not primarily working for your earthly boss; you are primarily working for Jesus Christ himself!

Knowing, believing and practicing this principle will revolutionize your job. You are laying brick for Jesus. You are selling real estate for Jesus. You are driving a truck for Jesus. You are teaching school for Jesus. You are managing the company for Jesus. You do not work for Control Data, 3-M, Honeywell, Pillsbury, Cargill or the government - - - you work for Jesus Christ and HE has placed you in the job where you are!

Living this truth will change your attitude, improve the quality of your work, alter your testimony, release your frustration and give you a purpose on the job you never had before. If you don’t like your job, if you have some gripes, if you want a raise, if you need some help — then go talk to the top boss, Jesus Christ!

I’m just like you are. I need to remember this principle in my work. When there is too much to do, when people are unfair, when the ends don’t meet, when the critics are talking — I need to remember that my work is not just a task to be done. My work is for Jesus Christ. And the exact same thing goes for you, no mat-

ter what your job may be!

But all of this presupposes that you belong to Jesus Christ. Do you? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your redeemer from sin? Are you trusting in Jesus Christ alone to get you to heaven? Have you acknowledged him as the absolute Lord of your life?

If not, then first things first! You must first become a born-again Christian by trusting Jesus Christ as Savior and acknowledging him as Lord. That is basic to this life and to eternity. And it’s something you can do right now through prayer. Just talk to God and tell him that you have sinned against God and that you claim God’s forgiveness for those sins through Jesus’ death for you on the cross of Calvary. Tell him that you accept Jesus as your Savior.

In addition to viewing our work as for Jesus Christ, it is important that we work well regardless of our circumstances. The slaves who first heard these words had it pretty tough. Maybe you do, too - - - unfair boss, poor working conditions, high pressures, ungodly co-workers, inadequate pay, unjust treatment. Knowing all of these things in advance, the God who dearly loves us says to work well in spite of circumstances.

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear.” God is not making it easy! He calls on us to have such a deep concern that we do well that it appears to be almost outright anxiety. As Christian workers we are to be committed almost to a fault to please and obey our bosses. This is the kind of employee to whom the boss says, “Hey, take it easy. It’s okay. I know you’ll do your best. Don’t worry about it!”

“. . .with sincerity of heart. . . .” This means absolutely honest and conscientious. Everybody knows when someone is half-hearted in doing something; and everybody knows when a worker is wholehearted in doing something. What a marvelous testimony for Christ when an employee wholeheartedly works at doing even the things he would rather not do!

Rudyard Kipling wrote:

Creation's cry goes up on high

From age to cheated age:

'Send us the men who do the work

For which they draw the wage!'

That is what every employer is looking for. Hard work and honest work should be the mark of every Christian employee! The Apostle Paul said that whoever doesn't work shouldn't eat. Work is to be the norm of the Christian life. God expects that we will keep working for Christ even when it is no longer necessary to work for financial reasons. We are not released from the biblical mandate to work 6 days out of 7 just because we have adequate investments, inherited money or have reached 65. Work is to be part of the fabric of the Christian life.

Set your mind and heart and hands to the job God has placed you in and conscientiously perform that job for the glory of God no matter what the circumstances and no matter what the job!

Paul goes on to tell us in verse 6 that this business of working well regardless of circumstance means that we are not to work for human inspection. "Obey them not only . . . when their eye is on you . . ."

Do you know employees who behave differently when the boss is around? Dress differently when the manager will be in the office? Quickly hang up from a personal phone call when the supervisor comes by? Work harder and do a better job when it's getting near time for an annual review? These are the types of things this verse is talking about.

William Barclay wrote, "Every single piece of work the Christian produces must be good enough to show God." Excellence! Excellence must be the invariable watchword of the Christian worker. After all, we are doing our work

for Jesus Christ. How dare we do less than our best?

That means then, secretaries, you type every letter as if it were to bear the signature of Jesus Christ himself. That means schoolteachers, you teach every class as if God's Son were in your class every day. Salespersons, write

and negotiate every contract as if it were to be reviewed by the Lord and required his initials up in the corner. Professionals, treat every client or every patient as if God were watching. Laborers, produce every piece and perform every

service for God's eyes to see.

It is a sad commentary that our money-impressed society causes us to be more prone to judge people by their possessions than by the quality of their work. Christian employee, your workmanship is the tangible evidence of the kind of person and the kind of worker you are!

Verse 7 tells us that we are to be wholehearted in our service. The Christian employee is to have a good attitude and loyalty toward his job and his boss. This often may not be easy. We may need to ask God for grace. But it is not an option. God expects us to always work wholeheartedly.

"But, you don't know the people I work with!" "You don't know how I've been feeling lately!" "You don't know the way they've treated me!"

No, I don't know, but God does! And it is he who calls on you and me to "serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord . . ."

The last principle is in verse 8. We are to remember where our real reward comes from. God will properly reward you for your work! Think about it. That is quite a promise! Some of the reward may come now. Most of the reward will come in and last for eternity. God is

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good. God is generous. His wages are high and the benefits are marvelous!

Give highest consideration to God's rewards. Your job is your divine calling. God has placed you where he has placed you so that you can represent him well there. Do not stoop to make money your primary concern, but rather make certain that God is your primary concern. When Christian employees are more concerned about dollars and hours than about work and workmanship, something is seriously amiss. You may be underpaid, you may be misunderstood, you may be criticized, you may not be appreciated, but God knows and God will provide and God will give the reward. He guarantees it!

William Barclay wrote:

The great message of Christianity to every man is that it is where God has set us that we must live out the Christian life. The circumstances may be all against us, but that only makes the challenge greater. Christianity does not of-

fer us escape from circumstances; it offers us conquest of circumstances!

In the days ahead, go to work for Jesus Christ and bring him the glory!

*Faith Matters* is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
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