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Faithfully Serving Our Master

Ephesians 6:5-9

Introduction

1. By the time a person reaches the age of 50, if that person has worked full-time since college, he or she will have worked approximately 56,000 hours.
2. For those who began working straight out of high school, the time is even more — 64,000 hours — and that is figuring 40 hour weeks and two weeks vacation per year.
3. Regardless of where you work or what you do, this is a lot of time.

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4. Long ago, Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 2:17, “So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.”
5. In our text today, Paul addresses the relationship between masters and slaves.
6. This relationship closely mirrors that of employer and employee.
7. The big question we need to ask ourselves tonight is, “For whom do I work?”

[Let’s begin by looking at the concept of . . .]

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I. Slavery in Paul’s Day

A. POPULATION

1. It has been estimated that approximately 60,000,000 were slaves in the Roman Empire.

2. As many as one-third of the populations of Rome, Corinth and Ephesus were slaves.¹
3. Some in the church were masters like Philemon who was a member of the church in Colosse.
4. Many others were either slaves or ex-slaves also known as "freedmen".

Slide 4**B. COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS CONCERNING SLAVERY**

1. Changes in the first century brought about improved treatment of slaves thus doing away with the idea that the average slave was subject to extreme exploitation.
 - a. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle did teach that "A slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave."
 - b. However, in his work titled *Politics* Aristotle conceded that "a slave is a kind of possession with a soul."²
 - c. It is also true that under Roman law, according to the Roman jurist Gaius, a slave was a thing to be owned, bought, and sold — not a legal person.³
 - d. Again, it is true that some slaves had suffered at the hands of their owners (e.g., slave of Augustus who was crucified because he killed a pet quail).⁴
 - e. Finally, while history does record major slave rebellions, such as that led by Spartacus — those were prior to the establishment of the church (between the years of 140-170 B.C.).⁵

¹Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 544.

²John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society*, p. 251.

³Bromiley, p. 544.

⁴William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 213.

⁵Bromiley, p. 544.

- f. By the time of Paul's writing, sweeping changes had been introduced, changes which radically improved the treatment of slaves.
2. The fact that slaves could generally count on eventually being set free contradicted the notion that once a slave, always a slave.
 - a. By the first century, under Roman law, slaves could generally count on eventually being set free.
 - b. Very few continued into old age as slaves.
 - c. Slave owners were releasing slaves at such a rate that Caesar Augustus introduced legal restrictions to curb the trend.
 - d. Still, inscriptions from the time indicate that almost 50 percent of slaves were set free before they were 30 years of age.
 3. Slaves could own property
 - a. Slaves could own property — including other slaves.
 - b. Slaves completely controlled their own property and could invest and save so as to purchase their own freedom.
 4. Being a slave did not indicate one's social class.
 - a. Slaves were regularly granted the social class of their owners.
 - b. It was often impossible to tell a slave from his owner based upon outward appearance.
 - c. Many slaves lived separately from their owners.
- The truth is that Roman slavery in the first century was far more humane and civilized than the American/African slavery practiced in this country two centuries ago.

[In all actuality, the relationships between first-century slaves and masters and twenty-first century employees and employers is closer than we might think. That being said, I would like for us to spend the rest of our time this evening looking at what Paul says to slaves.)

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II. Servants — Be Obedient

A. RESPECT

“Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling” (*Ephesians 6:5a, NASB95*)

1. Obedience first and foremost is the result of our attitude.
2. Paul commanded those Christians in Ephesus who were slaves to obey their masters out of “fear and trembling”.
 - a. This was not a shaking in their boots lest they make a wrong mistake.
 - b. Rather it was respect for their master’s position and authority.
3. For some slaves the temptation would be toward a sarcastic inner attitude — “I know I’m better and smarter than you, but for now I will pretend to be inferior. But if I ever get the upper hand, you’re in trouble!”
5. Paul called upon Timothy to teach believing slaves that, “All who are under the yoke as slaves are to regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine will not be spoken against” (1 Timothy 6:1).
6. Likewise, Peter wrote, “Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly” (1 Peter 2:18-19).

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B. SINCERITY

“... in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ;” (*Ephesians 6:5b, NASB95*)

1. Sincerity literally means “singleness of heart”.
2. There should be no ulterior motives or hypocrisy in our obedience.

3. In order to have such singleness of heart, our focus must be upon Christ — “as to Christ” (v. 5).
4. A solitary focus on Christ was to dominate all relationships between slaves and masters:
 - a. “as slaves of Christ” (v. 6)
 - b. “as to the Lord” (v. 7)
 - c. “this he will receive back from the Lord” (v. 8)
5. For each of us as Christians, the realization that we are serving Christ when we serve those over us is to be the motivation behind our work.

Slide 7**C. CONSCIENTIOUSLY**

“not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart” (*Ephesians 6:6*).

1. If you ever watched a gym class doing push-ups you can understand Paul’s point here.
2. As the coach calls out “up-down, up-down” everyone is doing as they should until his back is turned — at this moment some students go on “hold.”
3. In the same way there are employees who are all action when the supervisor or owner is present, but who stand around the water cooler when he or she is absent.
4. This may have been what happened with the one talent servant in the Parable of the Talents in *Matthew 25*.
 - a. Upon the master’s return he praised the five and two talent men saying, “Well done, good and faithful slave” (v. 23).
 - b. However, when it came to the one talent slave, who buried his talent and did nothing with it during his master’s absence, he responded, “You wicked, lazy slave” (v. 26).

- ❑ From our heavenly Father's perspective, there is no such thing as a lazy-faithful servant.
- 5. You or I may be working at what someone might call a "nothing" job — nevertheless, God expects us to work energetically all the time — whether our supervisor is present or not.
- 6. This is true whether we are a part-time or full-time employees.
- 7. This kind of work makes a difference not only to God, but with men.

Slide 8**D. PLEASANTLY**

"With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men" (v. 7)

1. The NIV translates this as "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people."
2. The HCSB renders it as "Serve with a good attitude, as to the Lord and not to men."
3. We are to go about our work with a certain pleasantness.
4. Share example of Jeff Wright.

I conducted a funeral this past Wednesday for a member where I used to preach in Hickman County. This man had been a GM employee until his retirement in 1995. His three oldest sons followed in his footsteps. His second oldest son retired about last year and just to stay busy he began working with a friend and his crew this year mowing yards up in Michigan. He told me that his friend asked him if he would be coming back to work with them next year. Jeff told his friend that he was thinking about it. His friend told him, "I need you. The guys you work with work together as a team now. They didn't before you came. You have made the difference."

5. What I didn't tell you is that Jeff obeyed the gospel last year after his mother died.
6. God calls upon us to do our work with enthusiasm because "whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord" (v. 8).

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III. Masters — Be Considerate

A. THE MANAGERIAL GOLDEN RULE

“Masters, do the same things to them” (v. 9a)

1. Treat your slaves/employees the same way you want to be treated.
 - a. If you want respect, show respect.
 - b. If you want sincerity, show sincerity.
 - c. If you want conscientiousness, demonstrate the same.
 - d. If you want pleasantness, model pleasantness.
2. Show the same interest in your employees and their lives as you hope they will show you in your life.
3. Today, in the workplaces where this is in place there is harmony and productivity.

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B. UNDERSTAND YOUR SPIRITUAL EQUALITY

“give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him” (v. 9b).

1. The master/employer must not use his superior position to bully those under him or her.
2. While he holds superior authority, he must view himself and those who serve under him as equal before God.
3. Because God is his judge, the Christian employer must be “careful to pay fair wages and benefits, must care about his employees’ illnesses, must be concerned for their marriages, for their children, for their education and future.”⁶

⁶R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, p. 211

Conclusion

1. Today, whether we are employees or employers, we have a responsibility before the God we serve.
2. The example we set will either draw others to Christ or push them away.
3. May we be such faithful employers and employees that those in this community will either want to work for us or have us work for them.
4. It all begins with our focus on Christ.