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Sunday Evening Service
Series: Ephesians
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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THE WORTHY WALK AT WORK Ephesians 6:5-9

Why do you get up in the morning five days a week and arrange your schedule day after day around your job? We have several pithy sayings that explain our motivation. One is that we need to “keep the wolf away from the door.” That simply means that we are motivated to go to work because we all have certain bills we have to pay. The electric bill, water bill, mortgage, insurance, food, vehicles, and on and on the list goes. All the “wolves” demand feeding every month. Along that line, I think about a bumper sticker I saw one time that was a take-off from the famous song the “vertically challenged” guys sang in the movie “Snow White.” The bumper sticker said, “I owe, I owe, so off to work I go.”

Wouldn't it be great if we had a higher motivation to go to work than the fear of the bill collector knocking on our door, or at least calling our cell phone with nasty threats? Well actually there is a far superior motivation of the followers of Christ. We go to work for the Lord's glory. Really? How can that be?

There is a paradox in Scripture. In the beginning work was a good thing. When God created the beautiful garden named Eden, He placed the man and woman there to *work it and keep it* (Genesis 2:15). Working and taking care of God's creation was good, proper, and righteous in Paradise before sin ruined everything. But sin did ruin everything. As a result, God cursed the ground and told Adam that the lot of every human is “*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; and you shall eat the plants of the field*” (Genesis 3:17b-18).

The world in which we live and work is cursed. But the principle of work is not cursed. Your job is not cursed (though you might think your boss is). God's principle for us as we get up every morning to go to work is, “*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men*” (Colossians 3:23). “*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:31). “*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might*” (Ecclesiastes 9:10a). Relationships in the workplace that are influenced by, focused on Christ will qualify as the worthy walk of us who are part of His Body, the Church.

Historical Background.

The opening word of our text arrests our attention. In fact, that is an understatement. The opening word hits us like a stick on the head. Why is a letter about life in the church talking about slaves? Obviously, it is good and right for us to understand the setting.

We can be sure that the setting regarding slaves is not the same as the setting in Western civilization. That being said, we need to briefly address the concept of slavery in Western civilization, or more precisely, slavery in our culture. Apparently our association with slavery began very early on in our history. Some say that it all started in 1619 near Jamestown when slaves were brought to Virginia from a captured Portuguese slave ship. That was only the beginning. By the middle 19th century (1860) in a total population of over 31 million, nearly 4 million were slaves, or almost 13% of the population.

Where did all those slaves come from? Some slaves came to America as captives from European wars. The majority of them ended up in the New England states in the 17th century. However, most slaves came initially as victims of kidnaping and wars on the African continent. Then in latter years, many were born into slavery as second, third, fourth generations of slaves.

That kind of slavery, American slavery, is not the background for this text. The primary difference is that slavery in America involved almost entirely one race of people. Another difference was that slavery in America was primarily agricultural. This was not the case in the first-century Roman culture, the context of Paul's letter.

It is true that especially in the first-century church, there would have been some influence of the Old Testament Israelite practice of slavery. The Mosaic Law spoke to the issue of slavery. Therefore, it is good for us to remember that the Church began with Jews who would have been quite familiar with the Mosaic laws regarding this matter.

The rules of the Mosaic Law regarding the practice were quite precise and applied to Hebrew slaves and foreign slaves differently. Hebrew slaves were limited to six years service. The seventh year would be a Sabbatical year in which Hebrew slaves were released. The most common reason a Hebrew would become slave to a fellow Hebrew was because of debt owed. Another rule stated that a man who became a slave and then was married and had children would leave his family behind if he took his freedom at the end of six years. Therefore, a man would often become a permanent servant to his master, especially if he liked working for the master.

In the year of Jubilee (every 50 years), all Hebrew slaves were released and their property was to be restored to them. The Law also stated strict rules for humane treatment. This institution was so unlike what is known of American slavery in that typically the person who became a slave also became part of the larger household of the master. An example of that is seen in Abraham's servant Eleazar to whom Abraham expected to give the family inheritance (Genesis 15:2). Those rules are found primarily in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

The Jews' relationship with foreign slaves was not quite as friendly or family-like. According to the Law, a Hebrew could own a Gentile slave permanently. However, even in those cases, the Gentile slave became a part of the nation in every way. That meant the Gentile would receive the blessings of God along with His chosen people.

But, even the ancient Israelite practice of slavery is not the principle behind this text. That would be unlikely because it seems that only the wealthy Jews would have had slaves in the first century. In fact, they were more likely to be slaves. The Jews were inaccurately proud not to be slaves to anyone. The argued with Jesus that, "*We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?*" (John 8:33).

Granted, when their relatives were slaves in Egypt, Israel was not a recognized nation yet. But many of the Jewish people had been enslaved as exiles in the fifth and sixth century BC.

The New Testament of slavery we run into in our text was practiced according to Roman culture. Roman culture just assumed the existence of slavery. It was extremely common. Accurate estimates propose that as many as one-third of the entire population were slaves. That was more likely the case in Italy than in the remote parts of the empire. In the city of Rome, it is estimated that 300,000 of the 900,000 residents were slaves.

Mark Cartwright wrote, "Slavery, that is complete mastery (dominium) of one individual over another, was so imbedded in Roman culture that slaves became almost invisible and there was certainly no feeling of injustice in this situation on the part of the rulers." (Mark Cartwright, *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, "Slavery in the Roman World.")

In practice, much of the slavery was related to agriculture. It was not uncommon for slaves to be professionals such as doctors or lawyers or craftsmen who sold themselves because of debts. In most of Jesus' references to slaves in parables, they were significant people who performed important tasks for the master's household.

Where did they all come from? Unlike America's history, the slaves in the Roman Empire came from every race and people group. Some were slaves by birth having been born a slave because the parents were slaves. Some had been orphans or even children sold by parents into slavery. Many were slaves voluntary due to an unpayable debt. Then there were penal slaves, people condemned to slavery by sentence from a judge having been found guilty of a crime. And there were slaves who were victims of war, kidnaping, or piracy.

Slavery was subject to some pretty extreme philosophy in Rome. One Roman writer divided agricultural instruments into three categories: 1) Mute (machinery) 2) Inarticulate (cattle) 3) Articulate (slaves). The Roman statesmen Cato wrote that worn-out slaves should be thrown away. When Pliny the Elder grieved over the death of his slave, it was considered a very rare response. Slaves were generally considered to be just pieces of property to be owned and disposed of at will.

That is why this text makes us bristle. Christians have a hard time accepting that a person made in God's image is equal to a piece of property. That is also why the attitude toward slavery evidenced in the Church was radical compared to the rest of the first-century world. The New Testament teaching assumed but discouraged slavery. Slavery was expected because of the culture. Or as some folks say today, "It is what it is." Paul evidenced that attitude when he wrote to Christians in Corinth, *Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it (1 Corinthians 7:21a)*.

With so much of the population caught in the institution, many of the slaves would become Christians. The teaching of the church was to encourage the victims to rise above current circumstances and serve Christ whenever, wherever possible. But at the same time, Paul did not require Philemon to release Onesimus from slavery.

However, there were at the same time notable exceptions to the culture. Yes, if you came to Christ as a slave, the Christian response was "serve Christ in that situation." But if we consider the rest of the verse where Paul made that application, we discover the preferred alternative, *But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity (1 Corinthians 7:21b)*.

Furthermore, in the Church, all social levels, caste systems, human divisions ceased. Whether you were a slave or a free person or a master was irrelevant. *For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ (1 Corinthians 7:22)*. That is a wonderful reminder that we are all on level ground in Christ. *Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Colossians 3:11)*.

That explains Paul's advice to Philemon regarding his slave. *For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord (Philemon 1:15-16)*.

The Church manifested the truth that everything about Christ's teaching contradicted the practice of slavery. It would be difficult to take away a person's freedom by owning that person and still practice Jesus' teaching to do unto others as you would have them to do you (Matthew 7:12). How do you offer mutual respect, mutual honor,

mutual submission in such a relationship? All of that would, at the very least, turn a master/slave relationship into an employee/employer relationship. Slavery ceases to exist in a culture that shows love and respect.

Now imagine the setting in Ephesus when this letter was read to the Church. Maybe there was a gathering of 50-100 people. It is very likely that there was a slave owner with a couple of his slaves seated beside him. What did they hear as this letter was read?

What the Text Teaches.

An obvious principle in the statement is the matter of submission to authority. That should not surprise the reader because the same principle applies to various relationships as we have already seen in the letter. It is all part of the "worthy walk" (4:1-6:24). God already taught in this letter that gifted leaders are God-ordained authorities in the church (4:11-12). Husbands are God-ordained authorities in the home (5:21-32). Parents are God-ordained authorities in the home (6:1-4). And masters are God-ordained authorities in the work circumstance (6:5-9).

But all of these relationships are governed by mutual submission. *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:15-21)*.

In that context, we learn that slaves should obey masters sincerely. *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers (v.5-6a)*. Regardless of particular circumstances, that is a very difficult requirement. Not only is obedience expected, but God requires obedience with a right attitude. That is a necessary requirement because it is possible to obey even with a rebellious heart. Children do this all the time knowing they

have no choice but to obey even though they despise their parent or teacher. Citizens living under totalitarian dictatorships do the same.

But the words *fear and trembling* sound like God requires the same response one would have to a tyrant. Actually, the idea to learn here is much like a right response to God. God is our supreme authority and so we respond to Him with supreme respect. The employer is a God-ordained authority and should be respected. This is spite of the fact that authority is often abused.

Furthermore, we learn that obedience is more likely when it is rooted in a sincere heart. It is human nature to do what is acceptable outwardly, while harboring conflicting feelings in the heart. The slave who walked worthy of his calling in Christ kept a check on his attitude.

This very difficult requirement will be easier to accomplish if the slave follows the principle of submission to Christ first. That is the same attitude that is required when slaves submit to the master. Paul wrote, *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 (vv.6b-7)*. In other words, they were to work for Christ's glory. The earthly slave who was born again was a slave to Christ first. It would be possible for such a slave to think that because his master is a Christian and he is a Christian, obedience could be slackened. No, he or she was to respond to the master just like responding to Christ.

That is the same principle we saw with the wife's submission and the children's obedience. A heart set on God's will is the only way to carry out such difficult requirements. These are present tense commands meaning that it is not an occasional requirement but a lifestyle. This is a wonderful example of how Christ's people can do the difficult things by truly finding, recognizing their identity in Christ first and alone. If we try to please peers, we will be frustrated because they are as weak and fickle spiritually, emotionally as we are.

When their work was focused on their relationship with Christ first, they would be working for eternal rewards not passing, earthly rewards. They were to work as servants of the Lord, *knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free (v.8)*. This is the Biblical law of sowing and reaping. It is typical but not always an explanation for what God does in His child's life (cf. Job). Ultimately, this speaks of heavenly,

eternal reward. A heart set on Christ and eyes set on eternity made the slave's life bearable and even joyful.

The slave's lot would be much easier when the earthly master submitted to our Heavenly Master. The instruction in verse nine addressed the need for the boss to be a righteous boss. *Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening (v.9a)*. Masters were also expected to respond to their slaves with sincere hearts. There was no room for threatening. They were to oversee and exercise God-given authority like God who gave it: *Knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him (v.9b)*.

Application of the Principle.

Underlying the whole question of how Christians are to relate in the workplace is the fact that we are where we are by God's will. Accepting the reality of God's control, our circumstances can be a difficult battle. We are people of flesh living in a world under Satan's influence. Therefore, we will naturally want what we want in our work situations. That attitude will almost certainly cause conflict.

"In our day the struggle between employers and employees has reached monumental levels. Conflicts rage constantly between workers and management, with each side accusing the other of selfishness and unreasonableness. Employees want smaller work loads, fewer hours, more vacation, and more pay and benefits. Employers want more productivity, more profits, and greater control of management policies and practices. Both sides want lower taxes for themselves while expecting greater government protection and sometimes greater subsidy." (John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, "Ephesians," Chicago: Moody Press, 1986, 321-322.)

How does the Christian work in such circumstances? We learn to be content in whatever situation we are in. Listen again to God's Word regarding our individual lot in life. *Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches (1 Corinthians 7:17)*.

Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called (1 Corinthians 7:20). So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God (1 Corinthians 7:24).

That instruction is not prohibition against increasing our ministry for Christ but tempers our temptation to break out to get the greener grass. “Christianity does not offer us escape from circumstances. It offers us conquest of circumstances.” (William Barclay)

Therefore, we need to submit to our authority at work. It is highly unlikely that you have a perfect boss, even if he or she is a Christian. But the heart that is set on serving Christ as authority first is able to arrange our personal plans, purposes, and desires under those of our boss.

The key is a heart set on Christ, remembering that we are Christ’s slaves first. When we get that relationship settled, we can begin to work for the Lord’s glory. Do not work to make a name for yourself. Obviously that bit of advice flies in the face of everything we feel and everything we hear. Rather we should come to the end of the day and ask this question: “What did I do today that called attention to Christ?”

That question will be answered best if we spend our efforts buying up opportunities in the evil day. We do best to go to work each day with the plan to: *Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil (Ephesians 5:16)*. Tomorrow when you go to work, see it as an opportunity to turn the light on Jesus. The Body of Christ, the Church, is where we should expect to find people ordering their lifestyle according to all the riches we have in Christ. Our employment relationships is one area where we should demonstrate the understanding of how much we have been blessed. It is our responsibility to make the work place a sphere where unity in Christ is encouraged.