

AUTHORITY: GOD'S HAND THROUGH BUSINESS
Ephesians 6:5-8

"Slaves, obey your human masters with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ.
⁶ Don't work only while being watched, in order to please men, but as slaves of Christ, do God's will from your heart. ⁷ Serve with a good attitude, as to the Lord and not to men, ⁸ knowing that whatever good each one does, slave or free, he will receive this back from the Lord."

INTRODUCTION

A certain bumper sticker is often seen on the back of pickup trucks and SUVs: "The worst day fishing is better than the best day working." Do you agree? If you're not into fishing, would you like the bumper sticker to say, "The worst day golfing, at the ball park, at a NASCAR race, vacationing, sightseeing" (or your favorite leisure activity) is better than the best day working?" How many of you think everything associated with labor, with work, is a result of the "curse" God's judgment inflicted upon our world because of our rebellious sin against Him (**Genesis 3:17-19**)? Do you believe God planned for our planet to be like a never-ending amusement park known as Funland and it's only our wickedness that canceled our ticket?

Contrast such attitudes toward work with that of a man named James. As the 2nd of 11 children born to Mennonite farming parents in Ontario, Canada, James embraced the faith in Christ and work ethic of his parents. At 18, he took a job at a grocery store in Fort Erie, carefully saved his earnings, and then invested in a cheese company in Buffalo, NY. In 1903, after being sent to Chicago to look after a branch office, his unscrupulous partners dissolved their partnership to force him out of their company. At age 29, he found himself stranded in Chicago with but \$65 to his name. James invested his "fortune" in a wagon and a horse named Paddy to start peddling cheese from Chicago's warehouses to small grocery stores. He arose at the crack of dawn each day to hurry cheese to stores in the cool of the morning to reduce spoilage. His ideas were sound but few stores accepted his cheeses. His debts mounted and he faced apparent ruin. A friend in the Chicago church he attended gave him this advice: "You did not take God into your business. You have not been working with Him." James talked this over with Paddy and told him, "If God wants to run the cheese business, He can do it better than me and I'll work for Him." He promised his new Senior Partner a full 25% of his profits and carefully sought God's guidance in all business decisions. He sought to make life better for others by his service to the Lord through his work. Within six years, his business grew so large he recruited four brothers to join him. His breakthrough came by developing new pasteurization methods to reduce the vast amount of spoilage plaguing cheese sales, and by formulating "processed cheese." He thus enabled cheese products to be available year round in all climates. By 1916, some 30 varieties of his cheeses could be found in most towns across the U. S., packaged either in glass jars or aluminum foil. His business prospered into the largest cheese concern in the world and expanded into other product lines. James kept his promise to his Senior Partner, often contributing more than 25% of his profits to God's work, amounting to millions upon millions of dollars prior to his death in 1953. He often said, "The only investment I ever made which has paid consistently increasing dividends is the money I have given to the Lord." Philadelphia Cream Cheese, Miracle Whip, Parkay margarine, and Velveeta are some of his company's best known products. Do you know his name? James L. Kraft, founder of Kraft Foods.

How many of you currently hold down a job for which you receive some pay? If you're retired, are their jobs for which you volunteer? If you are a homemaker or if you are in school full-time, this is your "work." Now please answer this question carefully: For whom (or what) are you working? No matter what your "occupation" is today, if you profess to be a follower of **Jesus Christ**, you should answer this question in only one way: "For the Lord." **Colossians 3:23-24** (NCV) reminds us: "In all the work you are doing, work the best you can. Work as if you were doing it for the Lord, not for people. ²⁴ Remember that you will receive your reward from the Lord, which He promised to His people. You are serving the Lord Christ." In essence, this is the Christian work ethic. We are commanded to put forth our best efforts,

to work from our heart and soul at whatever we do. God's "curse" upon Earth, as judgment upon sin, makes it inevitable that work is often frustrating and difficult (**Genesis 3:17-19**). For example, in America today, 4'-high cubicles are often a poor substitute for an office with true privacy. In an Internet post, a woman wrote, "One day a co-worker had an exasperating phone conversation with one of her teenage sons. After hanging up, she heaved a sigh and said, 'No one ever listens to me.' Immediately, several voices from surrounding cubicles called out, 'Yes we do.'" Work may be frustrating or difficult, but work itself is not a curse but a gift from God given to us before the Fall. **Genesis 2:15** (NCV) informs us, "The LORD God put the man in the garden of Eden to care for it and work it." By our work, we discover and develop the skills God gave us to care for His world, to care for each other, and to fulfill His purposes for creating us.

Today's message, "Authority: God's Hand through Business," focuses upon Our Attitude toward Our Work and Our Attitude toward Those for Whom We work.

I. OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD OUR WORK

There are exceptions to what I'm about to say, but I'm convinced there was a time when the majority of Americans believed they were serving God by their work. Have you ever heard of "the Protestant work ethic"? Throughout the 150+ years of our Colonial Era and most of our first 200 years as an Independent nation, the vast majority of people living in this land believed they had a responsibility to make this world a better place in which to live. Their work was one of the ways they fulfilled their purpose in life. This conviction became one of the battle cries of the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church insisted this world was so corrupt and evil that the only way for a typical person to serve God was by withdrawing from this tainted world. In the decades just prior to the Reformation, 10% of the adult population of Europe had secluded themselves in a host of monasteries and nunneries, crippling the productivity of their society and their standard of living. Martin Luther (1483-1546) and other Reformers shouted "No!" across the land to such backward teaching. They proclaimed, "God is Lord of all of life, and any honest job you do can be done unto the Lord." They taught farmers, bakers, soldiers, dressmakers, and housekeepers that their jobs were as noble and honorable in God's eyes as those of any minister or priest, if they did their work well and unto the Lord. Probably 98% of the people who settled and populated the lands of the United States in our Founding Era had Protestant affiliation and embraced this work ethic.

Whether you agree with me about our nation's past, you probably agree this is *not* the attitude of a majority of Americans today. What answer would you expect if you walked up to most adults on the street and asked, "What (or who) are you working for?" They might look at you and say, "Are you crazy? I'm doing it for the money. I'm certainly not doing it for the fun of it!" Rather than viewing their work as a way to serve God and improve society, the money they get is their chief concern. Many do work they *don't* want to do to give them money for what they *do* want to do. Even as Christians, we may often have very little sense of dignity, or mission, or purpose about our work. Our chief thought is pleasure over the money we earn rather than the God we can please by our work. This reminds me of a story of two ushers in a music hall who were seen clapping and applauding louder than anyone at the end of a Beethoven concert. The concert patrons seated nearby smiled appreciatively at these common working men who seemed to have such keen appreciation of classical music. But then one of the ushers stopped applauding. The other usher immediately told him, "Keep clapping, you dope. One more encore and we're on overtime."

In Bible times, modern employer-employee relations were rare. To learn what God expects of us in our work, we must turn to the Bible's guidelines for masters and slaves. Slaves in the 1st century A. D. were not in an enviable position. For the most part, their master held power of life and death over them (would any of us be dead if any of our bosses over the years held such power over us?). Whatever the master dished out, slaves had to take. They had no legal rights. They couldn't organize into unions or go on strike. There was no one to appeal for a safer workplace or better benefits. Most importantly, they couldn't quit to seek employment elsewhere. They were stuck with their masters, regardless of their cruelty. A "slave labor"

cartoon spoofs how bleak conditions often were for slaves. A man is shown at the end of bench, where he's chained with other men to pull an oar below deck of ancient ship. Smiling as sweetly as he can at the burly taskmaster watching over him with a whip in hand, this slave asks, "We're frequent rowers. Any chance of an upgrade?" Even under severe and often cruel conditions, slaves were told to look upon their labor as a service being given not to their earthly masters but to whom? Their Heavenly Master. As **Ephesians 6:7** declares, "Serve with a good attitude, as to the Lord and not to men."

If God required such "a good attitude" of 1st-century slaves," does He expect less of workers in 21st-century America? Let's read again **Ephesians 6:7-8**, "Serve with a good attitude, as to the Lord and not to men,"⁸ knowing that whatever good each one does, slave or free, he will receive this back from the Lord." God clarifies His guidelines for work apply equally to us, whether "slave or free." If we take seriously it is the Lord Himself we are serving through our jobs, this should affect our work in three ways:

A. Mandate—We believe we have a mandate from God, His royal commission, to accomplish His purposes in placing us in this work. Earning money to support ourselves and those for whom we have some responsibility is one purpose, but we give God access through us to people we encounter in our work who may know little-to-nothing about Him or who rarely, if ever, attend a Gospel-preaching church. One man even said to me in my days as a delivery driver for a blueprint company, "It's neat that you're out here among us rather than just in your church." During my graduate school years in Philadelphia, a young man in the security company for which I worked won Employee of the Year two years in a row. The company newsletter sent a reporter to interview him, included his photograph receiving a plaque from company executives, and printed his testimony as follows: "Here's my motivation for the job. I'm doing this work unto the Lord Jesus. I can't take credit for my success."

B. More—Let's read again **Colossians 3:23-24** (NCV): "In all the work you are doing, work the best you can. Work as if you were doing it for the Lord, not for people."²⁴ Remember that you will receive your reward from the Lord, which He promised to His people. You are serving the Lord Christ." Knowing we seek to please **Jesus** by the quality of our work should motivate us to do *more* work and *better* work than many think necessary. If we do no more work than is required of us, we truly are "slaves." In my 18 years as a security guard I often did more than what my job strictly required—many of them menial, dirty tasks—to back up my Christian testimony. I could have easily avoided them, as did some coworkers, saying, "It's not my job." As comedian and social critic George Carlin (1937-2008) comments, "Most people work just hard enough not to get fired and get paid just enough money not to quit." A certain company put up this notice one day: "To all employees: Due to increased competition and a desire to stay in business, we find it necessary to institute a new policy. We are asking that somewhere between starting and quitting time, and without infringing too much on the time usually devoted to Lunch Periods, Coffee Breaks, Rest Periods, Story Telling, Ticket Selling, Vacation Planning, and the rehashing of yesterday's TV programs, each employee endeavor to find some time that can be set aside and known as the 'Work Break.'" If we are Christians and others at our work place know we are Christians, are we signing the name of the Lord Jesus to everything we do? Yes!

C. Money—If money is not the chief end for which we work but the means to the end of serving our Lord through our labor, our jobs, our lives, and our success prosper far more than if money is for all intents and purposes our "god." Recall the example of James L. Kraft after God became his "Senior Partner."

II. OUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS THOSE FOR WHOM WE WORK

Knowing that "You are serving the Lord Christ" by your labor should affect your attitude toward your work. Should it also affect your attitude toward those for whom you work? Look again at **vs. 5**: "Slaves, obey your human masters with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ." Is God reminding us to be fearful of our bosses or superiors because of what they can do to us, including firing us and costing us our income? No. The Greek word for "fear" means in this context, "respectful dread of displeasing or failing a superior, including God." The Greek word for "trembling" refers to the "anxiety of one who distrusts his ability to meet all requirements of a task or position." Thus, what God is telling us in

vs. 5 is to have the same fear of displeasing, falling short of expectations, and not performing up to our true capabilities in our service to our company and our bosses that we have towards God. Why? Because God accepts such service to our company and respect for our bosses as if we were doing this to please Him!

Does this apply only if our bosses are as "pure, . . . peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without favoritism and hypocrisy" as God is (**James 3:17**)? If our boss acts like a jerk, do we owe him/her nothing more than what's absolutely necessary to keep our job? Not according to **I Peter 2:18-19** (NLT). The Apostle Peter, keenly aware of conditions for slaves in his time, comments, "You who are slaves must submit to your masters with all respect. Do what they tell you—not only if they are kind and reasonable, but even if they are cruel. ¹⁹ For God is pleased when, conscious of His will, you patiently endure unjust treatment." Whether we are thrilled with this idea or not, God sometimes gives us opportunity to work for a harsh or unfair boss because this gives **Jesus** a chance to show off to the lost world how different His followers can act than non-Christians. Nearly anyone can be a good worker under prime working conditions, can't they? But the Lord **Jesus** can give us the grace we need to maintain the quality of our work "with a good attitude ["good will desiring to better others"], as to the Lord and not to men," even in poor conditions. **Jesus** can enable us to treat superiors with the dedication and respect God deserves, even when our bosses don't, "in the sincerity of our heart," which means, "free of pretence and hypocrisy." We won't two-facedly speak illy or disrespectfully of them behind their backs. "As slaves of Christ," we will continue to seek to "do God's will from our heart" in our jobs, putting the character of our Savior on display to the lost world, even under harsh working conditions.

CONCLUSION

Years ago, a boy found himself working for his Dad from a very early age. When he wasn't in school, that's where you'd find him; learning a trade while putting in long hours with his Dad. As a teenager, he would often be tempted to do fast, sloppy work so he could rush off to go fishing by himself or to hang out with his friends. As he grew older, he learned by experience what it was like for five people to come to him in the same day, each expecting him to drop everything else to help them with their emergency. He had to deal with people who unreasonably expected him to do a job for them in one day that normally took three days, all because they needed it done yesterday! And he knew what it was like to spend long hours and put in extra care in doing a really fine job on something, yet be told his work was unsatisfactory by the type of people who can find fault with nearly anything. Then, after his Dad died, because he was the eldest son, he was primarily responsible to see that his Mom and six brothers and sisters were taken care of and provided for. So, when business fell off and sales were low, he was tempted to worry how ends could be met and enough food could be put on their table.

Do you have any idea of whom I'm speaking? **Jesus**. I thought it would be good for us to remember that long before He began His ministry as the Son of God and our Savior, **Jesus** knew what it was like to work hard for a living. He learned the importance not only of doing a job, but of doing it well, up to the standards of His earthly father and to please His Heavenly Father. **Jesus** can sympathize with many of the pressures and problems we face as we seek to be God's person in our own work situations. As you carry out your duties in the business world, in your homes, your church, at school, or in your community, can others see **Jesus** in you by Your Attitude toward Your Work and Your Attitude toward Those for Whom You Work? **Ephesians 6:5-8**: "[O]bey your human masters with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ. ⁶ Don't work only while being watched, in order to please men, but as slaves of Christ, do God's will from your heart. ⁷ Serve with a good attitude, as to the Lord and not to men. **Colossians 3:23-24** (NCV): "In all the work you are doing, work the best you can. Work as if you were doing it for the Lord, not for people. ²⁴ Remember that you will receive your reward from the Lord, which He promised to His people. You are serving the Lord Christ."