

UK Focus

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What does it mean to be a Christian in our work places?

By Nicky Gumble.

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 favour when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve whole-heartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one of you for whatever good you do, whether you are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him. Ephesians 6:5-9

Billy Graham has said this, *'I believe that one of the next great moves of God is going to be through the believers in the workplace.'*

What on earth does that mean? And what is work?

'Work' in the New Testament means more than simply earning a wage. It includes school work. It includes work as a student. It includes voluntary work. It includes stay-at-home parents. It includes any kind of work.

For most people their work takes up the majority of the hours that they are awake. Yet so many view their relationships at work a bit like Tim from *The Office* in one of the more serious and poignant bits. Tim says this:

The people that you work with are the people you're just thrown together with. You don't know them and it wasn't your choice, And yet you spend more time with them than you do with your friends or family. But probably all you've got in common is the fact that you walk around on the same bit of carpet for eight hours a day.

And what Paul writes here in this passage in Ephesians can have a revolutionary impact on all our relationships at work - indeed it can transform our whole working environment.

But how can a passage which is about slaves and masters be relevant to the modern world in a democracy?

And why didn't the Apostle Paul simply say 'Look, slavery should be abolished'?

I think we need to remember that Christians at that time were a tiny persecuted minority, and they were in no position to abolish slavery.

Paul does what he can when he gets the opportunity. He writes to his friend Philemon about the runaway slave Onesimus and he says 'Look, although he's run away from you please welcome him back, but not as a slave.' In other words 'set him free'.

But as F.F Bruce points out,

To counsel the emancipation of slaves on a general scale would have been to confirm the suspicion of many people in authority that the gospel aimed at the subversion of society. It was better to state the principles of the gospel clearly, and leave them to have their own effect in due course on this iniquitous institution.

Roman slavery in the first century was not actually as iniquitous as the kind of slavery we would think of - Atlantic slavery, which ended in the nineteenth century. But as F. F Bruce again points out, 'Slavery under the best conditions is slavery nonetheless, and it could not survive where the gospel had free course.'

Slavery was universal in the ancient world. There were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire - and they were the work force.

So they were not just the domestic servants and the manual labourers. The doctors were

slaves, the teachers were slaves, the administrators were slaves.

And so, although it may not be directly applicable, the principles behind this passage still apply to us today.

And what is interesting about Paul's approach is work is not seen (as it is so often seen today) as hierarchical and functional. He sees it in relational terms.

How to relate to God at work

We know God is our number one priority. But then in Ephesians Paul goes to husbands and wives. They are our next priority.

Then there is family life (parents and children). That is our next priority. And then the next one, underneath those, but above everything else, is our work.

Sometimes in the church down the centuries there has been a kind of temptation to make a division between the sacred jobs, which are regarded highly, and the secular jobs, which have sometimes been regarded less highly.

So some would say that missionaries and church workers have the highest callings. And then you have the secular callings, with maybe a bit of a hierarchy there, with the caring professions - doctors and nurses - at the top, all the way down to the bottom -lawyers!

But as A.W. Tozer points out, *'It is not what a person does that determines whether their work is sacred or secular; it is the reason behind it'*

It is the motive behind it. It is why they do their work.

So what are the purposes? Paul gives in this passage five purposes of work.

1. Work is worship

'Serving the Lord...'. The Hebrew word for worship, 'aveda', can be translated as either 'work' or 'worship'. Perhaps the best English word to translate it would be 'serving' as in 'serving the Lord'.

So in verses five and six: 'Slaves, obey your earthly, masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ'.

In other words he says 'Do your work for the Lord'. Do your work - whether it is school work, student work, whatever you may be doing - as an act of worship. And that makes drudgery divine.

I heard about a US pastor called Howard Hendricks who was flying recently on American Airlines and he noticed that the guy sitting in front of him on the plane was an absolute pain.

He was rude, obnoxious, loud. Then he got drunk. Then he became more rude, more loud, more obnoxious.

What he noticed also was that the flight attendant that was so dignified with him, absolutely unflappable.

When he was rude, she was polite. When he was ,a pain, she was gracious. When he was impatient, she was patient.

She would just not let this guy get to her. He said, 'I couldn't believe how dignified she was with this obnoxious man.'

After everybody had been served their meals, he got up and walked to the back of the plane to commend the woman.

He said, 'Look I noticed how you handled that man. I was amazed how patient you were with

such a rude customer. If you'll tell me your name I would like to write American Airlines, your employer, and commend you for your service.'

She smiled at him and said, 'Thank you, sir, I don't work for American Airlines. I work for Jesus Christ.'

He said, 'After I picked myself up off the floor this flight attendant started witnessing to me - a pastor! She was telling me I matter to God and he has a plan for my life...'

2. Work is Ministry

'Serve wholeheartedly' (v.7). The very common Greek word that is used in the New Testament for 'serve' can also be translated 'minister'. And what Paul says throughout the New Testament is that work is ministry.

Those of you out in the secular world are on the front line. Those of us running 'the church' are actually just the backup. We are here to equip you for the work of ministry - for what you do in your day-to-day lives serving your boss, your teacher, your fellow employee.

Calvin said that the purpose of work is to build community, by contributing to the wellbeing of the society in which God has placed us.

It is a practical expression of our love for the people around us.

Woodrow Wilson said, 'You are not here merely to make a living, but to enrich the world'

3. Work is rewarding

'... the Lord will reward each one of you' (v.8). When we work we are imitating God and we are imitating Jesus.

Jesus said this, 'My Father is always at his work to this very day and I, too, am working' (John 5:17). Work is fulfilling.

God was at work when he created this universe. And then he created human beings and he put them in the garden to work at it. It was only as a result of the Fall that work was spoiled.

We see in Genesis 3 how the ground became cursed and it leads to painful toil: 'It will produce thorns and thistles for you... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food' (Genesis 3:17 - 19).

That means that from that moment onwards no job is 100 per cent fulfilling. There is an element of boredom, of drudgery, of tedium in every job.

But Jesus came to redeem work. And of course he himself had a secular job. Work becomes, in the words of the Roman Catholic catechism, 'A means of sanctification'.

It is one of the ways in which we grow into the likeness of Christ. It is like the sandpaper shaping us into his likeness.

And of course work is part of restoring creation to how it is intended to be. You see that with a garden - making the garden beautiful. That is an image of what all work is about.

4. Work is a means of provision

Anyone who does not provide for relatives, and especially for immediate family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever' (1 Timothy 5:8).

In other words, everybody should get a job if they can at the appropriate time in their life.

The only other verse specifically on work in Ephesians is Ephesians 4:28 where Paul says, 'Those who have been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful

with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need'.

So it is a means of provision for yourself, for your family, for the needs of others. We are in it together.

I remember so well the first Alpha Partners dinner that we had. I was very reluctant to ask anyone apart from our congregation for help with financing Alpha as it grew around the world. But it became clear that this congregation alone could not support the work.

So we had a Partners dinner to support China, India and all these other parts of the world. And at the end of the evening a man came up to me and he said, *'Thank you so much for this evening. I've been on an Alpha course, my life has been changed and I really want to be involved. But I can't because I'm a banker and I work so many hours during the week - but tonight I saw a way in which I can be involved.'*

And it struck me then that this is a gift Giving is a way that everybody can be involved in this church. The vision of this church could not happen without all of you. But we are in it together.

Woodrow Wilson said this, 'You are not here merely to make a living. You are here to enrich the world and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand'.

5. Work is Mission

A couple of hundred years ago many Christians wanted to go to the unreached people-groups of the world at that time, because they wanted to be the only Christian in China, or wherever they were going.

Now if you want to reach an un-reached people group all you have to do is get a job. The chances are you will be the only Christian in your office; the only Christian in the factory

It is an amazing opportunity. That does not mean to say that you have to be constantly banging on about your faith. That is usually counter productive.

It is primarily about the way we live our lives. It is life and not lips - living it out, earning a license to speak.

It is no good inviting people to Alpha if our work is shabby. But if we do a really good job, then people are interested in what motivates us.

I have a friend called Jonnie who, although quite young, is already a chief inspector .

He told me that when he started as a policeman he was taught something called Locard's Principle, which is used in the detection of every major crime.

The principle is this: 'Every contact leaves a trace.' When two objects come into contact with one another, an exchange takes place. When a burglar smashes a window, fibres from his jumper will be left at the scene.

Jonnie realised that this was true for his work - every contact he made with another human being left a trace.

How to relate to those you work for

There is a book out in the United States by Patricia King called Never Work for a Jerk. But the problem is often we do not have any choice.

For example slaves in the Roman Empire could not say, 'I don't like my job, I'm moving'. So what happens if your boss is David Brent? What do you do?

The context of this passage is walking in wisdom - life in the Spirit. And in this passage there is a **RECIPE**.

As part of that mnemonic...

'R' stands for 'respect' (v5). That is not servile fear or cringing servility, but deep respect.

In other words Paul says, 'Obey, unless what you are being asked to do is illegal or immoral or incompatible with the commands of God.'

Does that mean that as a Christian we have to be a doormat? No, far from it. What he says is, 'Respect with sincerity of heart' (v.5). The word for sincerity there can be translated 'frankness'.

I was fascinated to read about McKinsey's, the world's leading management consultancy. One of their values is the 'obligation to dissent'. In other words every employee of McKinsey has an obligation, however junior they are, to say what they think even if they disagree with someone who is far senior than them.

I had the amazing privilege for 19 years of having Sandy Millar as my boss. And one of the things about working for Sandy was that he made everything such fun. Noel Coward said, 'Work is much more fun than fun'. And certainly that was true working for Sandy.

And one of the things I always felt that I had an obligation to do was to tell him what I thought. That was my responsibility before God. But once I had told him what I thought it was not then my responsibility to make sure he did what I thought, because that would have been disastrous on many occasions.

It was his responsibility whether to act - and once he had decided what he was going to do, then my responsibility was to obey him and to respect what he decided to do.

'E' is for 'excellence'. That is because we are serving the Lord. We want to do our very very best just like that airline hostess. That does not mean that we do not make mistakes. But we are aiming for excellence. Why? Because the name of Jesus is at stake. And we want to be the very best in our field.

'C' is for 'conscientiousness', not only to win their favour when their eye is on you' (v.6). In other words not just eye service. We are not people pleasers. We are doing it for the Lord and it does not matter if he is the only person who sees what we do. Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher, once asked a young cleaning woman what evidence she could give of having become a Christian. She answered, 'I now sweep under the mats.'

'I' is for 'Integrity'. Paul's phrase 'Sincerity of heart' means uprightness, honesty with our time, with the telephone, with our tax, with truth.

There is an article in the Sunday Times Magazine today called 'Naughty Naughty - Drugs, infidelity, lying to the boss... Where do you stand in the modern moral maze? It's never been harder to tell right from wrong'.

The article says,

We've gradually traded in the old moral code for one which starts with the assumption that we should all do what feels best for us... The same applies to lying, which is not okay, unless you are selling a house, or applying for a job, or trying to get out of a social commitment in order to take up a better offer, in which case, anything goes... Basically we've created a whole new layer of behaviour, sandwiched between definitely right and categorically wrong, which is where most people are most happy to operate. In this fuzzy, grey hinterland you can get away with almost anything, provided either you don't get caught, or you turn it into a joke ("I nicked if from the office - it was hilarious"; "I told them I needed a CAT scan, and they fell for it!")'

But, as Sandy Millar would say, the new morality is just the old immorality dressed up. Integrity is absolutely key

'P' is for 'Passion'. In verse 6 it says, 'doing the will of God from your heart', but actually the Greek word is actually 'soul'.

In other words he says put your heart and soul into your work. That is enthusiasm.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, 'Nothing great is ever done without enthusiasm'. And enthusiasm is infectious.

You just need one enthusiastic person in an organisation and it transforms an atmosphere. Everyone likes to have enthusiastic people around them. It is a Christian duty.

The last letter in **RECIPE** is:

'**E**' which stands for 'expectancy' C.. because you know that the Lord will reward you' (v. 8).)

In other words our duty is to do all these things and then to trust God for the outcome. Of course, there are disappointments in life. Sometimes we do not get the job we really wish we would get. Sometimes we are overlooked for promotion.

What do we do? Know that the Lord will reward you. Take a long term view 'Career' sometimes has become a dirty word in the church. It should not be.

God gave each one of you gifts and talents - and Jesus says you are to use those talents. That is all career is about. It is progressing in the work that you do, and that is a good thing.

What about ambition? Well, ambition too is a good thing. (I don't mean selfish ambition). If it is just 'I want to get rich, I want to be famous' - that is just a waste of a life.

Jim Collins, author of Good to Great, says, 'The top leaders are ambitious - not for themselves but for the company'. In other words, they look beyond themselves to the team. And as Christians we look even beyond that to Christ.

We are ambitious to see Christ's kingdom, his righteousness, come. It is great ambition to want to be the CEO of a company - so you can transform that organisation for Christ.

How to relate to those who work for you

What St Paul writes on this is revolutionary. Slaves were obviously the majority members of the congregation in Ephesus, because they are addressed first and more is addressed to them.

But the way in which masters are addressed is revolutionary because in the ancient world masters did not have responsibilities. They could do what they liked.

But Paul says, if you are a Christian and you have people working for you, you do have responsibilities. There are three 'R's':

The first is '**Respect**'. What Paul says is, '... Masters, treat your slaves in the same way' (v.9).

This is staggering because what he said to slaves is 'Treat your masters as if they were Jesus. Obey them like Christ'.

And now he says to masters: treat your slaves as if they were Jesus in the same way.

This is the amazing balance of this whole section of Ephesians. The heading of the whole passage is, 'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ' (v21). Then in marriage, how does that work out? Well, wives submit to husbands, husbands submit to wives.

Children honour your parents, parents honour your children. Those who work for people, treat them like Jesus. Those who have people working for them, treat them like Jesus.

William Shakespeare said, 'O! It is excellent to have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant.'

G. K Chesterton said this, 'There is the great person who makes everyone feel small, but the really great person is the person who makes every man feel great.'

The second 'R' is '**Responsibility**', no favouritism' (v.9). No discrimination. Treating people fairly. That is what St Paul says... there is no favouritism with God' (v.9)

Everyone in God's eyes is of infinite value whether they are slave or free, employer or employee. Everyone should be treated well.

The third 'R' is '**Release**', 'Do not threaten them...' (v9). One of the Greek words there means

'loosen'. It means 'unfasten their chains'. Release people.

One of the key responsibilities of any employer is to help people to find the right job and then release them.

All of us have different gifts, and there are some things that we are good at and there are some things that we are not good at.

We need to find the right person to do the right job. Delegate. Then let them get on with the job_

General George Patton said this, 'Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity'.

So in all this it is important to remember that ultimately our work does not define who we are. What defines who we are is our relationship to the one Lord, Jesus Christ. That is the purpose of our lives.

I remember when I started at theological college I found it really hard because I had been practising as a lawyer before (I had been a barrister) and I had been used to, among other things, writing opinions.

As a lawyer, you usually set out all the facts and then at the end you write, 'In my opinion...'. And you get paid for it. But when I got to theological college I started writing essays and I always ended them 'In my opinion...'

Not only did nobody pay me for it - but they disagreed with it. It came as a real shock to me.

And I realised how much of my self-esteem was tied up with what I did. I went to see a very wise guy, called David Hawkins and he said, '*What is important in life is to realise that ultimately it is not what you do that matters, but who you are.*'

And what matters ultimately is that we get our relationship with the Lord in heaven right. And out of that will flow everything that St Paul talks about in this passage.

Out of that we can go out into our environments and treat people like Jesus.

We can be the missionaries. We can be the ministers. And as we do that - as every contact we make leaves a trace - then we will revolutionise our relationships at work and revolutionise our workplaces.

Then, to go back to the words of Billy Graham, we will see a great move of God in the workplace.