

Reverse the Curse on Work

Ephesians 6:5-9

Introduction: I hope you're doing well on this Labor Day weekend. And hopefully you are not having to labor too much. But even if you have Labor Day off, you will be back to work on Tuesday.

But let me ask you: What about work? What about your work? Where does this thing called work fit into what it means to be a follower of Jesus? For many of us, work is just something we do—we do it because we need—to pay the bills, to feed our family, to live and to hopefully save for retirement.

Studs Terkel, a famous Chicago author, interviewed hundreds of people about their jobs and recorded what they said in his 1974 book, **Working**. He wrote this in the introduction:

“This book, being about work, is...about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.

Work is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than apathy; in short, for a life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book.”

There are all kinds of jobs that people do, but I came across a job that I had never heard of before. It goes back to a time when people were awakened, not by a cell phone or even an alarm clock, but by a “knocker-upper.” Rural laborers, who used to rise with the sun and go to sleep at sunset, had relocated to manufacturing cities. They not only had to adjust to dangerous, fast-paced industrial work, but to new schedules.

There were alarm clocks at the time, but they were expensive and unreliable.

So, for many workers in early 20th century Britain, the daily alarm clock was a service worker, known as the "knocker-upper" who would pass by working-class buildings, rapping on the windows of those who needed to get up.

The job went obsolete around a hundred years after it was invented, as alarm clocks became more affordable and reliable.

Now for most of you the knocker-upper was known as mom or dad as they tried to get you out of bed for school in the morning.

Source: Josh Jones, "When the Alarm Clock Was a Person," [Flashbak.com](#) (1-12-20); Paul Middleton, "Mary Smith – The Knocker Upper," [Anomalien.com](#) (5-2-19)

An Atlantic article states, "The best-educated and highest-earning Americans, who can have whatever they want, have chosen the office for the same reason that devout Christians attend church on Sundays: It's where they feel most themselves."

But our desks were never meant to be our altars. This mismatch between expectations and reality is a recipe for severe disappointment, if not outright misery, and it might explain why rates of depression and anxiety in the US are "substantially higher."

Source: Ted Olsen, "Meet the Minnie Church," [CT magazine](#) (November, 2019), p. 43; Derek Thompson, "Workism is Making Americans Miserable," [The Atlantic](#) (February, 2019)

Most of us don't realize this, but the first picture we get of God in the bible is Him working. God is a worker. Genesis 1:1 says that God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 2:2 calls this activity "**work**":

"By the seventh day God had finished the **work** He had been doing; so, on the seventh day He rested from all his **work**." And He didn't stop working after creation.

Ps. 19:1 (NIV) "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the **work** of his hands."

But something happened to work when Adam and Eve sinned. God said to Adam, "***Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat***

of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field." (Genesis 3:17-18)

Once man sinned, God made work—even good work—hard.

The good news is that Jesus Christ subverts the curse. Have you read about how computer hackers work? They hack into somebody's computer—the person doesn't even know they're there—and a hacker uses the computer for their purposes. When Christ comes into our lives, He gives us a way to hack into the cursed work system and use it for a purpose no one around you would imagine. **Christ can make our work good again.**

Our text today tells us how this happens. Go with me to Ephesians 6: 5-9

5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6 Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. 9 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. (NIV)

The New Living Translation says, 5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear. Serve them sincerely as you would serve Christ. 6 Try to please them all the time, not just when they are watching you. As slaves of Christ, do the will of God with all your heart. 7 Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. 8 Remember that the Lord will reward each one of us for the good we do, whether we are slaves or free. 9 Masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Don't threaten them; remember, you both have the same Master in heaven, and he has no favorites. (NLT)

The Message Translation says, Servants, respectfully obey your earthly masters but always with an eye to obeying the real master, Christ. Don't just do what you have to do to get by, but work heartily, as Christ's servants doing what God wants you to do. And work with a smile on your face, always keeping in mind that no matter who happens to be giving the orders, you're really serving God. Good work will get you good pay from the Master,

regardless of whether you are slave or free. Masters, it's the same with you. No abuse, please, and no threats. You and your servants are both under the same Master in heaven. He makes no distinction between you and them.

The Title of my message today is: **Reverse the Curse on Work**

Before we get into this, let's PRAY.

Two important things to notice about these verses

1. Ephesians 6:5-9 was originally written to slaves and masters.

When you and I see the word "slave" in the Bible, we immediately think of 17th, 18th, and 19th century New World slavery: race-based, African slavery. When you do that, and you read the bible through those filters, you aren't understanding what the Bible is teaching. Slavery in the Greco Roman cultures of the New Testament is more like indentured servanthood.

Historian Murray Harris ... wrote a book about what slavery was like in the 1st century Greco-Roman world. He says that in Greco-Roman times, **number one**, slaves were not distinguishable from anyone else by race, speech, or clothing. They looked and lived like everyone else and were never segregated from the rest of society in any way.

Number two, slaves were more educated than their owners in many cases and many times held high managerial positions.

Number three, from a financial standpoint, slaves made the same wages as free laborers and therefore were not themselves usually poor and often accrued enough personal capital to buy themselves out.

Number four, very few persons were slaves for life in the first century. Most expected to be free after about ten years or by their late thirties at the latest.

In contrast, New World slavery—17th, 18th, 19th century slavery—was race-based, and its default mode was slavery for life. Also, the African slave

trade was started and resourced through kidnapping, which the Bible unconditionally condemns in 1 Timothy 1:9-11 and Deuteronomy 24:7.

Therefore, while the early Christians, like Paul ... discouraged 1st century slavery... saying to slaves, "get free if you can," they didn't go on a campaign to end it. But 18th and 19th century Christians worked for its complete removal because it could not be aligned in any way with biblical teaching.

The point is that when you hear somebody say, "The Bible condones slavery," you need to say, "No it didn't—not the way you and I think of 'slavery.'"

Source: Timothy Keller, in the sermon *Literalism: Isn't the Bible Historically Unreliable and Regressive?*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, New York (preached 11-5-06); source: Murray Harris, *Slave of Christ* (IVP, 2001)

Nonetheless, there are some things that just don't change, and this passage speaks to that which is always true in any culture: Most people have jobs, and even the best of jobs drains us and makes demands of us and there are often difficult relationships between bosses and workers.

2. When you read Ephesians 6:5-9, you cannot help but notice how central CHRIST is in this passage.

5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey **Christ**. 6 Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of **Christ**, doing the will of **God** from your heart. 7 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the **Lord**, not people, 8 because you know that the **Lord** will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

9 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**. (NIV)

A prominent newspaper editor wrote: **"Most people don't think that work could possibly have anything to do with spirituality. They**

assume that these two worlds cannot mesh. But if we bring our souls to work then we can transform our work."

I think he's on to something. But I would say the problem with work is that we can't help but bring our souls to work. That's why it's so painful at times! Work does something to our souls. What this passage in Ephesians tells us is that we can partner with Jesus in subverting the work curse. We can bring our souls to Jesus at work, and He will transform our jobs.

Listen to verse 5: "***Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.***" The first way you Reverse the Curse on Work is to...

I. Give your boss the Jesus treatment.

Illustration: On February 7th, 2010, immediately following CBS's coverage of Super Bowl 44; where the New Orleans Saints beat the Indianapolis Colts 31 to 17, a new TV series was watched by 38.6 million viewers—the largest audience ever for a new series following the Super Bowl.

The show was called "Undercover Boss," Anybody ever watch that? In case you don't know, Undercover Boss is a reality television series franchise with a format that features senior executives working undercover in their own companies to investigate how their firms really work and to identify how they can be improved, as well as to reward hard-working employees.

The first episode featured Larry O'Donnell, then-President and Chief Operating Officer of Waste Management, Inc.

I mention this show because...**At the core of the Christian work ethic is not what we do, but WHO do we do it for.**

When we go to work each day, as a Christ-follower, who are we really working for? Our boss, or our undercover boss?

Sometimes your boss doesn't seem to know what he or she is doing. What can make it even more difficult is that sometimes you just don't want to do a

particular job that has been handed to you. But notice again what comes at the end of the verse: **"just as you would obey Christ."**

Obedying Christ is the very essence of being a disciple of Christ. Even when we don't understand why, we're committed to obeying Him, because we know Jesus loves us, and we know that He has purchased us with His blood.

- A. **First**, Verse 5 tells us to obey our earthly masters with respect and fear. That phrase—**"with respect and fear"**—is always reserved in the Bible for God. In fact, there is an exact parallel to this verse in Colossians 3:22-23, where Paul writes,

22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters... (NIV)

Paul is saying that the way we give our boss the **Jesus Treatment** is when we show respect and reverence to our boss, we are really showing respect and reverence for the Lord.

In other words, when we show genuine respect to our bosses, it is our reverence for Christ that they are seeing. Our bosses get something that they personally do not deserve. Even if they're wonderful and deserve a measure of respect, they don't deserve reverence and respect such as we would give to God. Yet that's what they see coming from us. They are shown grace by our actions.

- B. **Second**, the text also says that we bring to our obedience a **"sincerity of heart."** We obey because we want to—because we mean it. Our obedience isn't just to placate the boss or to get the paycheck. We sincerely do the job as unto the Lord. If Jesus asked you to have the report done by 5:00, would you do it? If he asked you to make those calls or clean up that mess or go to that meeting, would you do it? Yes—and willingly.

What I'm talking about isn't some mental game we play to motivate ourselves. This is reality. **Doing our jobs out of sincere obedience is a kingdom issue.**

When we serve our boss or our company, we are serving the kingdom of God. We should always be aware that Jesus is our true undercover boss observing how we do our job.

STORY: Star Wars creator George Lucas hired Harrison Ford, then a carpenter, to build a door in the casting offices. But the director wasn't just impressed by the star's woodwork skills. Despite hundreds of people competing for the role, Lucas decided Harrison was the best person for the part of Hans Solo.

Legendary producer Fred Roos said, "Harrison had done a lot of carpentry for me. He needed money, he had kids, he wasn't a big movie star yet. The day he was doing it, George happened to be there. It was serendipitous."

It was this serendipity that launched one of the greatest movie careers in history. Without it, Star Wars may not have been as big of a hit; we'd also have a different Indiana Jones.

There is no Christian angle in this story, but are we willing to work at whatever comes to hand? The Hands that flung stars into space also washed some dirty feet at a memorable meal with the disciples. Sometimes we miss opportunities for service because we are waiting for the big important roles.

Source: Debadrita Sur, "The remarkable story of how Harrison Ford landed his role in 'Star Wars'", Far Out Magazine (January, 2020); Johnell Gipson, "Star Wars': Harrison Ford Was Working as a Carpenter in Francis Ford Coppola's

Think how potent this new approach to work, this new attitude in the office, by first giving your boss the Jesus Treatment could be. Giving your boss the respect and reverence due Christ is a game-changer. For one thing, your work will always be done to the best of your ability. Secondly, your work might very well transform your boss or your company or your life. When someone is sincerely treated with deep respect, it stirs something in them.

Even the worst of bosses will be affected because a Christian attitude can be life changing. You are bringing grace to work, and grace is an amazing agent of change. This attitude that we bring as Christian workers can raise the dignity of the whole workplace. Give your boss the Jesus treatment!

II. Change your work product

Look at verses 6-8: ***“Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.”***

Do you remember the story of Rumpelstiltskin? He could miraculously spin flax into gold. He worked with something **ordinary** and produced something **extraordinary**.

That's what you can do as a Christian. It doesn't matter what your work is. The ordinary of your job, done as unto the Lord, produces something extraordinary in the people around you. (Examples)

A more literal translation of verse 6 would read: ***“not by way of eye service, nor as people pleasers.”*** In other words, don't shape your work around what makes you look good or around office politics. Let God take care of all of that. You don't have to play that game. Let God take care of the posturing and scorekeeping. **Focus instead on obeying your boss like slaves of Christ.**

STORY: Dallas Theological Seminary professor Howard Hendricks tells of a time when his flight was delayed. His fellow passengers were getting more and more irritated, and some of them began to take out their frustrations on the flight attendants. Hendricks noticed how gracious and poised one of the flight attendants was, and when they finally took off and she had a minute, he called her over and commended her.

He told her that he wanted to write a letter of commendation to the airline to tell them what a good job she had done. Her reply: ***“I don't work for the airline; I work for Jesus Christ. And this morning before I left for work, my***

husband and I prayed that I would be able to serve Christ in my job." She used her job to serve Christ.

There are three phrases in our passage that inform what being a servant of Christ involves.

- A. The first one is **"doing the will of God."** The point Paul is making is that your job, and all the tasks that go with it, are a part of the will of God for your life—the filing, the phone calls, the customer service, the repairs. These daily duties are God's will for you. This might not strike you as good news, but you must keep in mind that God is up to something in your company and the people around you don't know that. You're in there undercover. God is working through you. All these little tasks are God's will for a couple of reasons.

First, God is always at work in this world to break through the crust of sin and selfishness with His love and grace for other people. When you and I obey our bosses and do our jobs, even when it's difficult or unpleasant, that is a way for God to bring the knowledge of His love and grace into our place of work.

Second, obedience in the workplace can be used by God to shape our character into being more Christ-like.

- B. There's a second phrase in verses 6-8 that says: **"Serve wholeheartedly."** The word "wholeheartedly" comes from a Greek word that means "well-minded." The idea is to have an attitude that is born of a good heart and an active mind. You must have good intentions toward what you do. Put your mind and your heart into your tasks because whether anybody else realizes it or not, you are doing God's will.

- C. The third defining phrase is found in verse 8: **"the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does."** As I've studied this passage, I'm not sure that the word "reward" is what Paul was getting at in this verse.

Here's a literal translation: ***"knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord."*** In other words, the work you do isn't so much

about reward, but compensation. Whatever good anyone does, they will receive back something similar from the Lord.

When a Christian does his or her work as the will of God, it changes from **simple work to sacred good**. Good deeds are not just feeding the poor or sharing our faith in Christ. A good deed is when you do your job no matter what it is as a service to Christ with a whole heart and good intentions.

Your company compensates you with salary and benefits. God compensates your good with His good. It calls to mind the principle: "What you sow, you will reap." To borrow from the story of Rumpelstiltskin: "You spin flax, and he'll give you gold."

I've found that God is endlessly creative with the good that he gives in repayment for the good we do for Him. It's hard to say what it will be for you. It might be a life-changing relationship. It might be great influence. It might be the trust of your boss or a raise for good work. It might be a growing reputation or surprising opportunities. One thing it will certainly mean is a more Christ-like character within you, which is a great treasure in and of itself!

Reverse the curse on work by...

1. Giving your boss the Jesus treatment!

2. Changing your work product

Finally, verse 9 tells bosses how they can reverse the curse on work: "**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.**"

III. Remembering WHO the REAL BOSS is

And how should bosses work? They must approach their relationships with their employees as their service to Christ, just as much as employees approach their relationship with their boss as a service to Christ. When Paul says bosses are to "treat their slaves in the same way," he is reiterating everything he shared in the previous verses.

Bosses do their jobs as the will of God. They must put their hearts and minds into their jobs as unto the Lord. While Christian bosses do not submit themselves to their employees' orders, they do submit themselves to their employees' good. That's what's unique about a Christian employer or boss.

Paul also adds this stern warning: **"Do not threaten them."** This doesn't mean a boss can't lay down the law, point out the consequences for poor work, or offer a bad job review. It means that Christian bosses should never lord it over their employees, using fear and intimidation to get their way. They mustn't do this **"since you know that He who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with Him."**

To those of you who are bosses, remember that your true boss—is undercover at your company, and He is watching you.

Paul says to Christian bosses that they must keep three things in mind:

- (1) Christian bosses and their Christian employees have the same master, and their master watches out for all.
- (2) The true Master is much higher on the organizational chart.
- (3) The true Master is not partial to the boss or their position. There's no favoritism with Him. He does not favor CEOs over custodians.

While God certainly honors the need for authority and leadership, a Christian boss is expected to show the same servant heart, the same willing mind, the same goodness, as the lowest Christian on the proverbial totem pole.

Take-away: What I'm saying this morning is that it isn't what we do that defines the importance of our work; but WHO do we do it for, whether we are the boss or the worker.

STORY: Emma Daniel Gray died on June 8, 2009, at the age of 95. On the office records, her title reads **"charwoman."** Your job is probably more important than that, right? Nonetheless, there was a big story about her in

the Washington Post when she died. For 24 years she was the charwoman for six different U.S. presidents. Each day she cleaned and dusted the office of the President of the United States.

We all know that work puts bread on the table it can make us feel valuable. From a Christian perspective, your work has value—not just because it contributes to your well-being—but because it contributes to somebody else. A mechanic said, "People need me more than they need a brain surgeon."

He continued, "When I put somebody's car back on the road, they're grateful; I'm happy. They need me." Work is the way we discover our major dependency on other people. We are dependent every day on the kindness of strangers to help us get through life. We're in a connected web through our work with other people.

It isn't always about the work. It's the task. It's about who you serve. We all desire to do tasks that are meaningful and fulfilling. God often grants us just that. But not always. **At the core of the Christian work ethic is not what we do, but whom we serve.** When we see our work, whatever it is, as serving the Lord and not men, our work takes on a holy dignity and an eternal significance.

When we realize that any work we do, no matter how ordinary or lowly, can be transformed from work to good, then that job is of utmost importance and will earn the compensation of our good and generous God.

What made the story of Emma Gray even more interesting to me was that she was a devout Christian. She would stand and pray over the president's chair every time she dusted it. Her dusting cloth in one hand, her other hand on the chair of the president of the United States, she would pray for blessings and wisdom and safety. That is what turned her work to good. That is what earned her God's good gifts in compensation. After she died, her pastor said that Emma "saw life through the eyes of promise." Friends, of all the places you've got to go and all the jobs you've got to do—remember that we do it all as unto the Lord. That is what makes our jobs different.