
Working on the Job

Illustration: World's worst jobs TV show. My working at Central Soya hanging chickens.

What can make a job difficult?

Conditions – hard, dangerous, physically demanding.

Stress – difficult, mentally taxing, high concentration over long periods of time

Co-Workers – people just being sinners in close quarters with the capacity to really make things difficult.

Bosses – people who can and often do control our lives with unreasonable demands, deadlines, and so on.

One word to all: many of you are young people who in school. While it is not a “job” per se, almost all the principles that you will hear today should guide you at school as well.

What about masters and slaves?

The texts we will go to are texts addressed to masters and slaves. The NT accommodation to slavery is surprising to many.

Why does no one in the New Testament simply tell Christian masters to free their slaves? Why give masters instructions on *how to treat their slaves*?

Why is the second most prevalent category to describe our relationship with God that of servant/slave?

The answers to these questions arise from the Biblical facts:

The Biblical Realities

God is a Master. On many occasions, God speaks of Himself as a masterⁱ. He is the master over His people who cares for them, seeks for their good and yet who has authority over them.

We are His slaves. Translators often use the word servants or bond-slaves or bond-servants. The simple fact of the matter is that the word points to someone who is owned by and responsible to another.

The Biblical Story-line

There is a Biblical story-line that uses the master-slave theme as its primary motif.

- ❖ We were created to serve, to keep the Garden and to extend it over all the earth as a means of extending God's dominion. (Genesis 1:28-31)
- ❖ We left and fled from our Master, disobeying His one prohibition. (Genesis 3)ⁱⁱ
- ❖ We were captured by the enemy, sold into sin and enslaved by birth, nature and inclination to do his will. Sin, lies, lusts, deceits and desires owned our souls and drove our sinful emotions and actions. (Ephesians 2:1-3)
- ❖ We were redeemed, purchased by Christ's death. The word "redeemed" simply means that we have now been bought by Christ through the price He paid in pouring out His life on the cross. (1 Peter 1:17-21; Hebrews 9:15)
- ❖ We are now owned by God. (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23)
- ❖ We are now glad servant/slaves who live pleasing to our master. (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 4:1; 1 Timothy 4:6; 2 Timothy 2:24; Titus 2:14)

This Biblical story-line now becomes an important part of what we believe. Without it, some of the texts speaking directly to you and your job are going to be very hard.

The Biblical Template

Understanding what the Bible is saying to the original authors, we can then make application of the text to us in our day.

Its **SITUATION** is similar – a work place, a boss, a job to do, hardness, difficulty

Its **RELATIONSHIPS** are similar – people who are over us, people who are reporting to us, people we work among

Its **RESPONSIBILITIES** are similar – assignment of tasks, expectations to meet standards, punctuality, integrity, diligence

The texts will not address a couple of issues which we may take up in another message:

Pleasing God with my peers – how to grow and change at work with people you work with...

Pleasing God in ethical challenges – how to be honest when there are opportunities, expectations and sometimes even, orders of actions of deceit, fraud, misrepresentation, theft of time and materials...

Listening to the texts - what is the Bible telling me?

Learning How We Are to Work

Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1

Ephesians 6:5–9

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.

⁹ Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Colossians 3:22–4:1

²² Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

¹ Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

From these two similar texts we learn:

To Work as the Will of God

Work is the will of God. Unless we are physically unable in God's providences, we are to provide for our families and work hard at our studies. Since it is the will of God, we are to live out our identities as Christians at work – the most important question about you at work is not “what do you do” but rather “who are you?” Our primary identity at work is as “servants” of God.

We are not our jobs. We must not get our identity or significance from our jobs. While we ought to work and provide for ourselves and our families, a job is primarily a means not an end.

To Obey those over Us

We are to obey our bosses and teachers with humility and honesty. Our poise should be to do what we are asked to do. We are to be humble, even with the right sense of fear and trembling. We are to do so with a genuine or sincere heart attitude.

We are not to disobey or disregard what we are told. We are not to be arrogant and difficult. We are to not engage our work or studies with a hidden agendas, crafty, sneaky plans, or undermining politics.

To Work as unto the Lord

We are to do our work as though God were inspecting or grading it even if men are not. We are to see ourselves as working for God, not just our bosses. In essence, we are to recognize that God has placed us in the situation of our job and is in good, sovereign and wise control of what is going on.

We are not to do the minimum that is required or slop off when it is not going to be checked or inspected. We are not to allow idolatries to drive us in our jobs where they become mistresses and adulteries or idols and substitutes for God. We must put away being mastered by the fear of man and being “suck-ups” or people-pleasers.

To Desire Heavenly Reward

We will do our work, not just for the earthly wages or grades, but primarily for our heavenly reward. Generally, we do not own the businesses we work in, but God has promised a share in the inheritance given the Jesus which will far out-strip any earthly earnings or promotions.

We must not make the pursuit of wealth or power or position our primary aim at work. We must not make the pursuit of high grades our primary aim at school. While it may be a means to financial gain, you must weigh each promotion and pay raise in the light of the new demands and how it will affect family and ministry.

To Respond Rightly to Injustice

We who are sinned against at work must commit that injustice to Christ’s wise and sovereign judgment. He will take care of us now and will deal with the sinner in the future. God may do that through salvation, judging all that person’s sins at the cross. Or, God may do that through judgment, dealing with all that person’s sins in hell.

We will not retaliate, strike back, sabotage, undermine or seek to destroy the person, property or livelihood of those who might have sinned against us. It is my opinion that if you are aware of illegal activity at work, you should first appeal to the authorities at work and then, if nothing changes, bring in the legal authorities. But you must never do so in an attitude of retaliation or vengeance.

To Manage as God’s Will

We who are owners, bosses, managers, teachers, administrators are to do God’s will at work. Even as owners, bosses, managers, team leaders, we must live out our identity as God’s people, not gain our identity from our position in the company.

Generally, Christians who own their businesses, who are managers or who have people reporting to them must reject the world’s methods of management. The “instructions from my boss” translated into “instructions to my team” must reflect and be filtered through a Christ-like model of leading.

To Manage under God’s Management

We who have people under us are to treat them as God, our master, treats us. Even when the master had absolute control over their lives and legally could do almost anything he pleased, (the example in the text of slaves owned by their master), the master was to treat people fairly and justly. Fairly means in the same way he wants to be treated and justly means in accordance with the contract and

the law. We must reward people according to their ability and performance. You may do more as a means of grace or in mercy, but you may do no less.ⁱⁱⁱ

The higher position you hold at work, the greater responsibility to not treat people badly, to use them merely for your own gain, to treat them harshly, unfairly or unjustly. You must not break faith with them. You must not make unreasonable demands upon them. You must do all you can to be sure that your expectations are clearly understood. We must not be a party to discrimination and partiality.

These texts seriously help us to understand what pleasing God at work is like. I know that each situation may have elements that need careful attention here as well as other texts. Our situations as employees, not slaves, does mean that we are often free to change who we work for and where we live to make our living. Freedoms like this add other categories that we must bring in when we are seeking both God's will and wisdom to please Him on our jobs. Certainly, the call to obey a boss or a teacher does not mean that we can then do what is sin because they told us to. We need a good understanding of making an appeal, suffering for doing what is right and responding with an attitude of respect and submission.

These texts seriously challenge some of our attitudes at work and school. What is your attitude toward your job, the tasks that you do? What is your attitude and response to your boss, your teacher? Do you regard and respond to them with respect, humility and honesty? Do you manipulate your boss? Do you treat them as a peer? How do you respond when you are treated unjustly? What do you do when your work or school mates or your boss sins against you?

You must not merely be those who hear what God says to you, you must believe it in an obeying way – you must heed it as well. Otherwise, you are a person who looks in the mirror, sees that your shirt is buttoned wrong, your hair is all over the place and there is mayo in your beard and lettuce in your teeth and you just turn around and do nothing.

Teaching Others How to Work

1 Timothy 6:1–2

While saying much the same thing, this text to Timothy focuses on the key elements in teaching others about pleasing God at work.

¹ Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. ² Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these things.

In Response to Unbelievers

(v.1)

We must help others to be pleasing to God when their work is heavy and burdensome, when it feels like a yoke. When our bosses or teachers are hard and demanding, we must be sure to cultivate an attitude of honor and respect. This is not just faking respectful speech when we are around them but also to honor and respect them in our hearts. This is a great and difficult lesson for many men. The same men who would know what they expect and hope from their wives who are to respect and honor them, often struggle with granting that same respect to their

bosses. Yet the term here is the same – respect those you work for *particularly* when they are hard and difficult.

We are to do this so that we do not give cause or reason for the reputation of God and the teaching of the Word of God is not reviled. Our attitude towards our bosses at work will either enhance or diminish God’s reputation. It will also reflect well or badly on whether you have been Biblically taught.

This means that you must give careful attention to your own heart attitudes and your words to others. Be very careful listening to, entertaining or even worse, contributing to negative discussions about your managers and employers. Students, be very careful about participating in bad talk about teachers and administrators. Those of you who are in unions need to be very careful about this. Most modern unions survive solely on the basis of disobeying this text.

In Response to Believers

(v.2)

We are to encourage others who have believing owners or bosses to treat them with great respect. We must not take advantage of the fact that our managers, bosses or owners are believers. There is a proper way to interact with Christian brothers and sisters at work that keeps the relationship in proper order.

The worst offense of this is when we expect that our Christian boss will be lighter on us or make fewer demands of us. Paul tells Timothy to be sure that servants of believing masters are to go above and beyond what is required. You are to seek to bring extra benefit to believing bosses. On the other hands, believing owners and managers must not use this text as a means to manipulate or leverage a Christian employee.

Submitting and Suffering at Work

1 Peter 2:18–22

First Peter is about how those who are God’s saints and servants, must submit even when it involves suffering. Listen to what Peter writes:

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

In its Difficult Responsibilities

(v.18)

All through the texts we have studied we have seen these responsibilities. We are to be subject to our bosses at work and our teachers at school. We are to treat them with respect. We have already expanded on what this means. But notice that Peter is emphatic that this is to be true even when our masters, our teachers, managers or owners are unreasonable and unjust.

The word “subject to” or “submission” is important here. Submission allows for disobedience when you are being asked or told to sin. You might have to disobey but you are willing to accept the consequences. This is a helpful insight in situa-

tions where your employer is requiring you to violate God's Word and you cannot comply.

In its God-ward Reasons (v.19-20)

Here is our God-ward focus during suffering. We keep reminding ourselves that we are living before God's face – this is “being mindful of God”. We believe and want to endure. This is what is called for – endurance. Sometimes, when the job is hard and bosses are tough, we are to carry on.

You must remember that if the hardship at work or at school is your own fault then the suffering you get as a result has no credit or praise from God. It is obvious that you just ought to bear that well. But if you do well even when it is hard, then there you will experience the grace of God that enables you to endure.

In its Christ-centered Example (v.21-22)

The call to suffering like this is rooted in Christ's own sufferings. He has set the example for us. This example is not just to suffer, but rather how to respond while suffering. We must follow in the footsteps of Christ. We must not sin in these situations. And we must be very careful to speak honestly as well.

Reflect and Respond

Now how do we weave them into a tapestry of character and conduct that is pleasing to God in the work place? Let's think together about how to be pleasing to God at work and school.

What truths about God, yourself, your situation, your responsibilities must you believe in an obeying way?

It is God's will to work in a way that pleases Him.

I am not just working for my boss, I am working for Christ.

I am not just working for earthly wages, I am working for heavenly treasure and eternal reward.

I do not own the work I do; it is God's and then my boss/owner.

I must respect even an unjust boss

I will work harder for a Christian boss/owner so as to additionally benefit his company.

As a boss, I will lead and manage as being accountable to my master in heaven.

What core desires and wants must I put off and put on, what must I value and prize and treasure?

I want to honor my boss.

I want Christ to be seen in me and my work.

I do not want to bring dishonor to Christ, His Word or His people.

I want to endure hardship, suffering and sorrows as Christ did, following in His steps.

In my emotions, I will use my responses to evaluate whether I am pleasing to the Lord.

I will serve with humble fear and respect that reverses pride, arrogance and self-promotion.

As much as I can, I will do my work with a good and glad spirit.

I will recognize anger, frustration, disappointment, discouragement as possible symptoms of unbiblical thinking and motivations at work.

In my actions, what will I intentionally choose to do as much as possible?

I will submit to my boss, doing what I am told unless I am directed to sin.

I will do my best at my work whether I or it will be evaluated or not.

I will give my full attention to my work and try to set aside distractions.

I will do all that my work requires.

I will seek to ensure that my boss' interests are served first.

When my boss is difficult or hard, how will I please God?

I will work hard to be respectful and honoring of them in my heart.

I will be willing to suffer in order to glorify God, to uphold His reputation and to do what I am taught from God's Word.

Notes

ⁱ Jeremiah 3:14; Malachi 1:6; Matthew 6:24; 10:24-25; Luke 16:1; John 13:16; 15:15-20 as examples of the analogy in use.

ⁱⁱ Note how the curse on the man is directly related to his work in which he was to serve with the result that they were cast out of the place of service. This command was renewed with Noah but had a growing "toward the New Covenant" trajectory.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is my own personal experience and observation that many Christian Institutions are committing egregious violations of these principles, particularly in their pay scales and their treatment of those who work for them. If you are in a management position in a Christian ministry, then remind those who are responsible for those decisions and admonish them.