
Biblical Leadership at Work

Ephesians 6:5-9

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Introduction

The Concept

When you hear the word “work”, what comes to mind? For some, the word defines life aspirations and a passion to labor in a chosen field. For others, the word is full of frustrations, disappointment, and toils. Whether we find our work to be a daily delight or daily despair, as believers, scripture calls us to a higher standard; a Biblical standard of leadership in our work. Today, these standards fly above circumstances, culture, and position to encourage and enable us to rise to a God glorifying kind of leadership.

While the Leading Man series and this message is aimed at men who aspire to Biblical leadership in their work, I also recognize that with both men and many of our women in the work force, much of what we study this morning will apply to both. This morning’s text from Ephesians, though brief, provides clear principles that shape our thinking on being leaders at work. Whether you work under the authority of another, whether you work in authority over others, or even if you do both, scripture clearly and wisely addresses both sides of workplace relationships.

Last week Russ began by reminding us that we live out of “what we believe to be true.” In the context of work, this means that as men “how we lead or are led in the workplace will be shaped by what we affirm and what we deny leadership to be.” Regardless of whether we are in authority or under authority (and it is often both), we will think, behave, and react in relationship to others based upon what we believe to be true about Biblical leadership at work.

The second part of the concept that Russ brought out is that “we live out of what we want.” This means our view of workplace leadership will be shaped by the desires in our souls and we will move toward those things at work that we have defined as true and valuable.” This has tremendous implications as we make career and job decisions, struggle with adversity, handle praise and criticism, and especially how we relate to our coworkers.

In addition, our workplace leadership is lived out of an interaction with what we believe and treasure in other areas of our lives as well. For example, we know we ought to spend more time being a spiritual leader at home, but we find it easier to focus our attention and energy in our work. Again this has important consequences in how we allocate time to work relative to other spiritual priorities in life, how we interact in our work relative to financial implications, and the intersection of work with our personal spiritual walk.

One other important point to clarify is this. Understanding leadership at work is not only for those who are in positions of authority. A Biblical view of leadership applies both to those who lead and those who are under leadership. Whether you act as a leader in your work, work under the leadership of others, or do both, you are called to live out the pattern of Biblical leadership relative to all God-appointed structures of authority. Some choose to disdain leadership principally on the grounds of experience with bad leadership. Some choose to ignore Biblical leadership because it is a path more difficult to follow. But the truths of

Biblical leadership in Scripture are clear and call us to God-glorifying relationships and responsibilities regardless of our experience or situation. So it is not a question of whether you are a leader or not, it is only a question of how well you will lead or how well you will be led.

The Purpose of Work

Having a Biblical view of leadership at work first requires a Biblical view of work. What does the Bible have to say about the purpose and nature of work? We can find out much about work by going back to the very beginning. We see in Genesis 1 that God is a worker in a unique and creative way. When His work is complete he delights in it. God's work brings praise and glory to His name. Psalms 8 declares awesome majesty of the work of His hands. Psalm 145 proclaims the splendor of God's works and that one generation shall praise them to another.

John 5:17 expresses this truth, "Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." The sense of this verse is that the Father is continuing to work at His work and that Christ also is continuing in this work. We also know that Christ came to earth to do the work of the Father. We see this in John 4:33-34, "So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." It is wonderful to know that we are uniquely the work of God in Christ and that we are not only His created beings but we are also His re-created beings through the redemptive and sanctifying work of Christ sealed through His Spirit.

Not only is God a worker, but man was created to be a worker in the image of God. Again in Genesis we see that God gives Adam the work of cultivating the ground for food and keeping the Garden. Adam is given the work of naming the animals. And even in the creating of Eve, we see that God provides to Adam a "suitable helper" to assist in his work and to provide companionship. This idea of man as a worker is carried into the New Testament. Consider Ephesians 2:10 which says. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." I love this verse because it ties together the idea that we are God's workmanship, with the idea that man was created as a worker to do those good works which He has prepared for us to do.

Let me ask an interesting question. When was work instituted, before or after the fall? The answer is "before". This is an important truth that should shape our thinking of work. Work was ordained prior to man's fall and the subsequent to the curse upon mankind. What does this mean? This means that work was not a result of the curse, but rather was a part of God's perfect creation prior to it. Now to hear some Christians talk about their work, you might think differently. But the truth is that work is a wonderful part of God's glorious creation. And it was a part of this creation upon which He placed His stamp of approval by declaring it to be "very good".

What changes in the fall is not the essence of work, but the nature of man's work. It is important to understand that the effect of the fall did not remove the legitimacy of work nor did it destroy the design for work that God created. But it did fundamentally change man's work. Before the fall, work was a blessing. Now it becomes a toilsome labor. Work also becomes a source of frustration and difficulty for men. Ecclesiastes speaks to the difficulty and frustration of work and depicts it as vanity and a striving after the wind. The fall also

separated men from God. And thus it also separated the work of men from its God-glorifying purpose. Apart from worshipping and glorifying God in our work, we will reach the same conclusion as the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. That is, that under the sun, work is meaningless and has no purpose.

If this were the end of the story on work we would be without hope. But in Christ, man's relationship with God is restored and he is able to fulfill the original purpose of work which is to worship and glorify God. First, Christ puts the worker back in a right relationship with God. Our work now matters to God; it has eternal value; and it has the potential to please God. Second, Christ puts our work back in right relationship with God. No longer is our work the empty vapor described in Ecclesiastes, it is now full of spiritual significance, purpose, and satisfaction. Thirdly, Christ changes the worker. He frees men and women from sinful attitudes and ways of work, and transforms them into God-honoring workers. Christ, and only Christ, brings real hope to the worker and his work..

The Context

This morning I chose Ephesians 6:5 as probably one of the best places to see principles of Biblical leadership in the workplace. This passage closely parallels Chapter 3:18 of Paul's letter to the Colossians. There are two main parts of Ephesians. The first three chapters of Paul's letter instruct the Ephesians on sound doctrine and theology, describing the Church, our salvation, and our inheritance in Christ. At Chapter 4, Paul moves to the practical implications of grace in the lives of believers within the Church, our families, and as individuals. It is within these instructions regarding the walk of the believer that he speaks to the church as workers.

The context of these passages is one of household relationships. While the relationships of husbands, wives, and children are natural to us, the idea of slaves and servants does not fit into our modern cultural image of a household. In the Ephesian culture, household slaves, or bond servants, often worked along with their master in support of his occupation. It is important to understand in the economy of that day slavery was often a natural and necessary means of providing for oneself and one's family. To our civilized palate, it may seem cruel, but indentured servanthood actually formed a cultural safety net for those who had no means to provide for themselves.

With industrialization and the specialization of labor, the workplace has become less centered upon families and more around man made institutions. Due to many factors, men no longer must temporarily or permanently give up their freedom to receive provisions for life. Rather, modern employment has become, while far less restrictive, what is in essence contractual indentured services. In our modern way of thinking, we view work in a much more segmented and limited way. But the employee and employer agreement could also be characterized simply as a more civilized form of a master-slave arrangement.

Therefore, I believe that when Scripture refers to the master-servant or master-slave relationship, the general principles apply directly to the Christian worker. We cannot try and avoid the application of these passages on the technicality that we are not masters or servants. Whether one is under the authority of others or in authority over others in the workplace, we are called to principles of Biblical leadership that must guide and direct what we believe to be true about and desire from our work. The amazing and challenging ramification here is that Scripture uses one of the most difficult settings as the context for illustrating

our responsibilities at work. If obedience is expected in the context of masters and servants, then it should be expected even more within the less restrictive context of modern employment.

Leadership Under Authority

(v. 5-8)

With Obedience

(v. 5-6)

The first four verses of this passage speak to a view of Biblical leadership for those under the authority of others. Here we have the Biblical response to leadership at work. Keep in mind that Paul is writing to the Ephesian church in the context of walking “according to the power at work within us” seen in Chapter 3, verse 20 and “in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” of Chapter 4, verse 1. In other words, Paul exhorts the Ephesians to live with regard to those in authority over us in a manner worthy of our calling knowing that the power of Christ within us is able to help us.

The passage begins with an immediate comparison between the obedience shown to our earthly masters and Christ who is our heavenly and true master. A Biblical view of leadership at work begins with submissive obedience to those in authority over us. The clear command here is to obey our workplace authority with the same sincerity as we would Christ. The phrase “fear and trembling” here is probably not a sense of terror, but a great eagerness to do all you are asked with a desire not to disappoint. The result is that the Christian leads with a sincerity of effort that puts the interests of our employers first in our work.

Verse 6 continues building upon the principle of obedience shown to those in authority in our relationships at work. The emphasis here is on the motivation and attitude of our obedience. Paul strikes right to the selfishness of our hearts. We are not to obey only when we are being watched, that is to serve only the eyes of those in authority over us. Nor are we to serve to please men and seek their praise and adoration of our efforts. Rather, we to be Christ-pleasers. Our leadership at work is to be seen in obedience even when our earthly masters are not present, because it is based upon a deeper and stronger desire to please the one who calls us to submit.

The image of obedience here is a contentment with the authority structure that God has, by His sovereign plan, placed us into. To a great extent, it comes down to our trust in God’s sovereignty over our work. Even when things are not going well, do we trust God in His plans and purposes for our lives? In 1 Peter 2:18 we are challenged to be submissive and content even when it is hard. Peter writes, “Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.” This is a theme that runs through scripture as it speaks to each sphere of leadership. Are we willing to trust God with our work even in difficulties and uncertainties?

Contentment goes against the sinful heart that is seeking to serve self rather than our employers; that pridefully believes it knows better and can do better than those in authority over us; that tends to either fear or fight back in the face of opposition. I am always amazed at how Scripture aims with perfect accuracy at the wickedness of our hearts, cutting through the excuses, rationalizations, and justifications for our disobedi-

ence and doubts. What does Biblical leadership look like at work? It is a sincere obedience to those in authority over us while looking to and trusting in God.

With Service

(v. 7)

In verse 7, Paul shifts from obedience to the service rendered our earthly masters. The principle of Biblical leadership at work here is that of serving those in authority over us as a means of serving our Lord. The emphasis here is that ultimately our service at work is rendered to the Lord. The aim of our service is to the Lord and not to man. This is freeing truth. No matter what our circumstance, job, or position, our work matters because it is offered to God, for His glory and pleasure. Your job may not be as exciting or satisfying as some; it may not be prestigious as some professions; you may not receive the financial rewards given others, but know this truth. Working for the glory of God and His pleasure is not only more deeply satisfying; its rewards will last beyond the horizon of this lifetime.

The other facet of our service Paul brings out to render it with good will. The expression here is that of the emotion or feeling of good and trust towards another. We are to serve our earthly masters in a way that makes their interests our own. Joseph in Potiphar's house is a good example of this. Genesis 39:4 says that "Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had." Joseph's service was rendered with such good will and faithfulness to the master's interest that he was given charge over all that Potiphar owned.

How would this principle be applied today? Like Joseph, how responsible are we with managing the resources of our employer. This would include not only the finances and equipment given to us to accomplish our job, but also the time we are being paid for. If the money were our own, would we spend it the same way? Do we mistreat equipment because we didn't pay for it? Do we waste time or delay getting our work done, in effect stealing our wages from our employer? Biblical leadership at work faithfully makes our master's interests our own.

In the next verse, Paul challenges the Ephesian servants to have a right focus on the rewards of their work. Their responsibilities did not end with obedience and service, even if aimed at their heavenly master. Paul moves to an underlying attitude of the reward expected for the obedience and service rendered. For slaves and servants, there was no financial remuneration for their work. Paul exhorts them to realize that whether slave or free, when they render good service to the Lord, their reward will be received back from Him. The expectation is not on the reward and praises of men, but on the joy and blessings received from glorifying and pleasing the Lord.

It is interesting how often expectations for rewards can become an issue of discontentment at work. 1 Timothy 6:6 reminds us that "godliness with contentment is great gain." Even when we are being treated unfairly, our conduct and speech must seek to glorify God and respect those in authority over us. Do we complain and grumble about our pay? Do we speak poorly of our employer to our co-workers? This not only dishonors our Lord but damages our witness for Him with others. In parallel with this verse, Paul reminds the Colossians in 3:24 that it is "from the Lord [they] will receive the inheritance as [their] reward." We must see that discontentment with our earthly masters is ultimately discontentment with our heavenly Master who has sovereignly allowed us to be

in the work situation we are. Biblical leadership at work has a right focus on spiritual rewards.

With Right Rewards

(v. 8)

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Leadership In Authority

(v.9)

With Service

We now turn to Biblical leadership for those who are in authority over others. In the final verse of this passage, Paul turns and speaks to Ephesian masters. Though this is just one verse it is packed. The very first phrase speaks of leadership in service. It turns us back to the previous four verses. Paul writes, “Masters, do the same to them.” At first glance, this seems odd. What does Paul mean? Should Masters obey their servants? The sense here is not to do the same in specifics but in the underlying principle of serving God. That is, believers who are in authority over others are to remember that they have a heavenly master whom they ultimately serve. They are to show the same attention and care to doing God’s will in their position of authority as the servant is to have in his position under authority.

The implication of this is that Biblical leadership for those in authority must demonstrate a care for the well-being, safety, and interests of those who work for them. The master should have a ministry mindset when it comes to those under their authority. Consideration for their position, interests, compensation, and working conditions are just a few examples of ways in which masters serve those under their authority. Managers who work in business find themselves in a dual role, being both in and under authority. This can be particularly difficult when the authority over them makes it difficult to truly have a ministry mindset. In these cases, I believe they must wisely submit to those in authority

over them unless what they are being told to do is scripturally unethical or immoral. Biblical leadership at work seeks to serve those who are under their authority.

With Fairness

Not only do they seek to serve those under their authority, but the quality of leadership is to be seen in its fairness. This is seen in contrast by the command to stop threatening them. Masters are not to abuse their authority and position. Paul uses a similar thought in Colossians 3 saying treat those under your authority justly and fairly. There is an interesting parallel in the husband-wife relationship. Just as the husband is to lead, and not rule by domination, the master is to have a caring kind of leadership that makes it easier for those under their authority to be submissive to.

What does this look like? Those in authority must carefully listen to and understand those under them. They cannot play favorites nor treat people harshly. They must be faithful to their words and commitments. They must be humble and treat people with kindness and respect. Even when someone under them fails, they must deal with it with a level head and helpful words. I have heard it said that a good manager takes the blame when things go wrong and gives the credit to those under their authority when things go well. I think to some degree it speaks to a selfless style of leadership that understands the nature of its responsibility and respects those under its authority. Biblical leadership at work seeks fairness and justice.

With Equality of Position

There is one more point not to miss in Paul's instructions to masters. At the end of the verse Paul writes "that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven." Masters are to lead in service to those under their authority and it is to be measured with fairness. But above this, they are to remember that they serve in equal position before the Lord. God is the Master of both master and servant. Regardless of one's position of authority here on earth, there is no partiality with God. This serves almost as a warning to masters. Deal rightly with those under your authority just as you would have God deal with you.

It may not happen in our modern culture, but for the Ephesians, slaves and masters worshipped together as a part of a single household. For a moment, imagine the Raus and Dieringers coming to church together and probably even sitting together every Sunday. Things may be different today, but we are still to consider ourselves first within the body of Christ. That is, our workplace relationships are secondary to the fact that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. No matter what the work relationship, before God we are equal. We are all sinners saved by God's grace; brothers and sisters in Christ. The power or prestige of our jobs does not matter. The amount of money we make does not matter. None of us have an inferior or superior position in Christ. Biblical leadership at work understands our equality in Christ.

Conclusion

So in review, what does Biblical leadership for those under the authority of others look like? First, it is a sincere obedience to those in authority over us while looking to and trusting in God. It recognizes that scripture calls us to a sincere spirit of submission even when we are treated unfairly. Second, it faithfully makes our master's interests our own. It is being a good steward of our time and those resources we are responsible for. We can ask ourselves, if the roles we reversed, how would I want those under me to work? Third, it has a right focus on spiritual rewards. The purpose of our work is not about how much money we make or how prestigious a job we have. It is about glorifying God and serving Him through serving others.

What does Biblical leadership in authority over others look like? First, it seeks to serve those who are under authority. It does not lord it over others nor abuse its position of authority. It is concerned with the interests of those under their authority. Second, it seeks fairness and justice. It is not harsh or unkind in dealing with others even when they are wrong. It listens to and understands the position of others. And last, it understands our equality in Christ. It knows that our position in Christ is not determined by wealth, status, success. Therefore it is a leadership with humility and selflessness that comes from knowing we are all sinners, saved by God's marvelous grace.

Perhaps the underlying question we should all be asking is "Why is Biblical leadership at work important?" From a practical perspective it promotes harmony and peace in our workplace relationships. Just as in our homes and in the Church, a Biblical understanding and practice of leadership at work defines roles and allows for productive and caring relationships. It also aims our wants and desires toward Christ. Rather than finding satisfaction in money, careers, or the accolades of men, which we should note will ultimately disappoint, we align our hearts with the God's will and His desires. And in this comes the reward of knowing that He is pleased and glorified. Lastly, it is important because it points others to Christ. It does this in one sense because this kind of courageous leadership is not found in the world and allows us to give the credit and glory to God who has transformed us to be workers in His image. It does this in another sense because it provides a godly pattern of Biblical leadership that applies to other spheres of life as well.

Let me encourage you to follow after the kind of Biblical leadership at work that we have seen in Scripture this morning. At times it may be very hard and it may require a level of trust in God that does not come easily. But it is the kind of leadership that is desperately needed and so easily forsaken. I also want to encourage you to come back this evening as we look at leadership at work from a practical perspective. We will apply Biblical principles over work in several areas including success, integrity, and our witness in the workplace for employees, those in management, and business owners. Let us go in grace this morning with a heart that desires to see God glorified as we strive to be Biblical leaders at work.