

Creekside Community Church

Identity Theft: Who Do You Think You Are? Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

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Christians at Work

I. Introduction: In the summer of 1994, I became obsessed with the game of soccer. After watching the World Cup that year I knew I wanted to play competitively. So that summer, I decided to sign up for my first soccer camp. I entered the camp with high hopes. I dreamed about bicycle kicks, and ankle-breaking jukes, and bending free kicks around walls and off posts to win games. However, my dreams of soccer greatness quickly came crashing to the ground. Believe it or not, the first thing they teach you at soccer camp is not how to do a bicycle kick. No, the very first thing my instructors did was give this stupid net. Then, they told me to put my soccer ball into this net, hold the net, and then kick the ball. And the instructors made me kick the ball about 300,000 times until I got a feel for it. At around the 15,000th kick, soccer didn't seem so exciting anymore. In fact, the whole experience was rather disappointing. Instead of winning games with face-melting free kicks, there I was, traipsing around with my ball and my stupid net. Soccer didn't seem that great.

It's funny how often your perception of something turns out to be completely wrong. Reality often provides us with rude awakenings. And this is certainly the case when it comes to work. My guess is that most people grow up under the assumption that they will one day have an exciting, challenging, and highly satisfying job. Yet, when we enter the workforce, so many of us experience jobs that are alternatively tedious, menial, stressful, and boring. We experience a tension. On the one hand, we want to have fulfilling and purposeful careers. On the other hand, we often feel frustrated and stymied by the careers we're in.

Now, given what the Bible says about work, this tension is perfectly understandable. The Bible says that work is good. When God created the first humans, he put them in a garden. And he didn't put them in a garden to lounge around, but to work. God tells Adam and Eve to cultivate the earth; to utilize the earth's resources to produce cultural products and goods. We are made in the image of God. And just as God works to bring order and life to the creation, so we – as his representatives – work to bring order and life and flourishing. Work is God's idea. And when we fast-forward to the end of the Bible, we see that humans are still working, even in the new heavens and the new earth. And the new heavens and new earth are portrayed not as a garden, but as a city. There is culture and commerce and governance. So work is God's intention for humans. However, because of human rebellion, work is toilsome. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, God cursed the ground which Adam was called to till (Genesis 3:17-19). Because we live in a fallen and broken world, work often seems frustrating and futile. We don't feel like we're making progress, and we worry that our labor accomplishes nothing. So

the tension we feel at work is a biblical tension. On the one hand, we long to participate in something of lasting value and purpose. On the other hand, we are often frustrated by the futility and monotony of our jobs. So how do we overcome this tension? Paul's words in Ephesians 6 provide us with some help.

II. Ephesians 6:5-9: Turn with me to Ephesians 6:5-9.

Over the past few months we've been making our way through the book of Ephesians. Ephesians is all about our new identity in Christ. In the first half of the book – chapters 1-3 – Paul describes all that God has done for us in Christ. In the second half of Ephesians – chapters 4-6 – Paul teaches us how to live in response to what God has done for us; how to walk in a manner consistent with our new identity. Over the past few weeks, we've been discussing the walk of wisdom. In Ephesians 5 and 6, Paul describes how our new identity as Christians should impact the ins and outs of everyday life. We've looked at time-management, community, marriage, and parenting. Today we are going to see how our new identity in Christ should transform and shape the way we work.

A. Ephesians 6:5-9: *“Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷ With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, ⁸ knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free. ⁹ And, masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.”*

B. Slavery: This passage offers a revolutionary perspective on work. But before we look at this perspective, I want to consider the obvious dilemma we face when reading a passage like this. Paul is talking about slaves and masters. As Americans, we don't come to a passage like this as detached or dispassionate observers. Slavery has shaped our national consciousness. The transatlantic slave trade was one of the most grievous injustices in recorded history. As Christians, we are grieved – and rightfully so – that professing believers acquired, abused and exploited slaves. Additionally, we take pride in Christians like William Wilberforce, who worked to abolish institutional slavery. So how do we handle a passage like this, where Paul explicitly says, “slaves, obey your masters”? Doesn't this make Paul complicit in a horrendous injustice?

Well, before we rise up in protest against Paul or the Bible, we need to keep a few things in mind. First, we must exercise caution when comparing ancient slavery with the chattel slavery common in early American history. Slavery in the ancient world was widespread. Slaves made up around one-third of the Roman Empire's total population, and slavery was a complex

phenomenon. Additionally, it was dissimilar from modern day slavery in a number of ways.¹ Slaves were not distinguishable by race, gender, class, or culture. Education among slaves was often encouraged. Many slaves served in positions of considerable social influence and power. A few slaves even held authority over freeborn persons. Slaves were not always at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. Being freeborn and impoverished was generally the worst possible position to be in, and people occasionally sold themselves into slavery to receive basic sustenance. Many slaves were freed by the age of 30, and slaves often became Roman citizens once freed. Some inscriptional evidence from the first century indicates that slaves could expect to be freed after seven years of service. Slaves were allowed to accumulate money. A few slaves achieved very high social standing in the Roman Empire. The famous Roman poet Horace was a former slave, as was the Governor Felix, who is mentioned in Acts 24. Because slaves existed across a broad range of social and economic levels, we shouldn't assume that slaves possessed a "class consciousness."² As far as we can tell, there wasn't a widespread feeling of unrest within the slave population. I make these points to say this; when reading the New Testament, we need to be careful not to import all of our ideas about slavery back into the first century world. In his commentary on Ephesians, Andrew Lincoln says this;

"Modern readers [of the Bible] need to free themselves from a number of assumptions about first-century slavery, including the assumptions that there was a wide separation between the status of slave and freedperson...and that all who were enslaved were trying to free themselves from this bondage....There was a broad continuum of statuses [or social positions] between slave and free in both Roman and Greek Society."³

Now with all that being said, I do not want to give the impression that slaves in the first century had a pleasant existence. Frankly, most people living in the Roman Empire – whether slave or free – had a very unpleasant existence (at least by 21st century standards). Slaves were often treated harshly and abused, and lacked the basic legal protections enjoyed by Roman Citizens. But slavery was complex and multifaceted. And therefore we need to exercise caution before jumping to conclusions.

However, even if we concede these points, we are still left with a lingering question; why aren't the New Testament writers more explicit in condemning the evils of slavery? In response, here are two things to keep in mind.

¹ Information gathered from See S.S. Bartchy, "Slave, Slavery," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids eds. (Downers Grove,, Ill: IVP, 1997); A.A. Rupprecht, "Slave, Slavery," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid eds. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 1993); 881.

² See J.A. Harrill, "Slavery," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2000), 1126.

³ A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC: Dallas: Word, 1990); 416-17.

In the first century, Christians were a very small and marginalized sect. At this point in church history, there were only a handful of Christian communities in the entire Roman Empire. And unlike believers in early America, these Christians wielded no political power. Christians were often persecuted by local Jewish communities, and were given no legal protection from the state to practice their faith. Thus, a despised, marginalized sect fighting for its survival wasn't in the best position to overturn Roman law and emancipate one-third of the Roman population. That might explain why we don't see more explicit denunciations of slavery in the New Testament. Additionally, it would not have been kind – at least not in every instance – for Christian masters to free their slaves. Such an action could have been disastrous for slaves, since they had no economic or social safety net. So, the first thing to keep in mind is that Christians were in a unique situation. The church was fighting for its very existence.

The second thing to keep in mind is this; while the New Testament does not explicitly condemn the institution of slavery, it does provide teaching that undermines the institution. In Galatians 3:28 Paul says that, in Christ, there is neither slave nor free. God does not favor masters because they are masters, nor does he disfavor slaves because they are slaves. In God's kingdom, Paul says, slaves and masters enjoy equal status. Additionally, Paul encourages slaves to obtain their freedom. He says this explicitly in 1 Corinthians 7:21. And Paul's letter to Philemon – the entire letter – is an extended appeal by Paul to a master (named Philemon) to free his runaway slave (named Onesimus). Furthermore, Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:10 that those who forcibly enslave people – those who kidnap people and traffic them for money – will not inherit the kingdom of God. This passage reveals that God is totally opposed to the kinds of exploitative practices that characterized the slave trade of early America. So before we listen to the teaching of this text, it is crucial that we keep in mind the cultural context, as well as the direction the New Testament is pointing. While the New Testament does not call for the overthrow of institutional slavery, it offers principles and teaching that radically undermine the institution. And the people who ultimately did abolish slavery were motivated and inspired by the teaching of the New Testament.

C. The Text: Now, having considered the slavery question, what does this text have to say to us? Well, in principle, this passage is about work. Paul is speaking to those who labor, and to those who exercise authority over laborers. He's speaking to employees and employers. And that means this passage has implications for our jobs. Before we get into the particulars of the text, it's important that we see Paul's big idea. Paul is only making *one point* in this passage. And we know this because he makes it *in every single verse*. Put simply, Paul's point is this; *work for Jesus*.

Just look at how many ways Paul makes this point. In verse 5, Paul commands slaves to obey their masters *as to Christ*. In verse 6, he instructs slaves to obey *as slaves of Christ*. In verse 7, he tells slaves to render service *unto the Lord, and not to men*. In verse 8, he assures slaves that *Christ will reward them* for obedient labor. In verse 9, Paul reminds masters that

they – along with their slaves – have one impartial master, and his name is Jesus. Do you see the point? Jesus is Lord. Jesus has saved us. He has redeemed us and purchased us as his own possession. And because we are now slaves of Christ, it changes the way we work. We labor in service to our loving and gracious master. We ultimately work for Christ’s sake. And according to Paul, this truth should affect us in three ways.

1. How We Treat Our Boss: First, it should affect how we treat our bosses. Most of us are under authority in the workplace. And Paul says that our bosses are legitimate, God-ordained authorities over us. You may have a wonderful boss. You may have a boss who is downright demonic. According to this passage, it doesn’t matter. Jesus has arranged things so that you have the boss you have. That doesn’t mean your boss can force you to do unethical things. It doesn’t mean that you are prohibited from making requests or voicing concerns. After all, your ultimate allegiance is to Jesus, not your boss. However, it does mean that you must obey your boss without a questioning, begrudging attitude.

Listen to the terms Paul uses in verse 5. He commands slaves to obey their earthly masters with fear and trembling. Paul isn’t telling us to cower before our bosses. He’s telling us to show them humble respect. These two terms – “fear and trembling” – are often used in conjunction with one another. In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul says he preached the gospel to the Corinthians with fear and trembling. In Philippians 2, Paul commands the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. In each of these instances, Paul is referring to a humble awareness that God is present and at work in our lives. That’s the sense here. We should have awe and reverence and fear for Christ, and therefore humility and deference before our bosses. Obeying our bosses is a way of obeying Jesus.

Paul says employees should “obey in the sincerity of [their] heart[s].” That word, “sincerity” is elsewhere translated “simplicity.” Paul is talking about an undivided spirit. There are plenty of people who respect their bosses for the wrong reasons. If you’re only goal is to get ahead, then respecting your boss will come naturally. That’s not what Paul is talking about. He is talking about the person who can offer an honest, joyful, simple, and good-natured, “yes” to what is asked of her.

Now, if you’re an employee, you might be getting a little nervous at this point. After all, Paul is telling you to obey people who could potentially harm you. But before you accuse Paul of disempowering the working man or woman, look at verse 9. Paul says, “masters do the same things to them.” What “things” is Paul referring to? What is he commanding masters to do? I think he’s commanding them to exhibit the same attitudes and behaviors that slaves do. When Paul tells masters, “do the same things,” he is saying, “do the same things I just told the slaves to do.” Paul expects masters to serve with sincerity, he expects them to do the will of God from the heart, and as he goes on to say in verse 9, he expects masters to give up threatening. In sum, Paul expects masters to prioritize the needs of their slaves, and to show them consideration. It’s hard for us to understand how revolutionary this would have sounded. The

great Greek Philosopher Aristotle said that slaves were “human tools,” and that perspective went largely unchallenged in popular culture. But Paul says that Christian masters have an obligation to care for their slaves with gentleness and respect. And, according to Paul, why should masters do this? Because they too are under authority. Christ is the master both of bosses and employees, and thus both bosses and employees should show consideration to one another. Employees should offer sincere obedience to bosses; bosses should offer gentle consideration and help to employees. Remember the principle Paul laid out in Ephesians 5:21?

“Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.” (Ephesians 5:21).

Can you see that this passage is really just an expansion on Ephesians 5:21? Paul is applying the principle of Ephesians 5:21 to the workplace. In response to Jesus’ authority, we are to show consideration for one another. Employees obey, bosses care for and protect.

2. How We Work: When we work for Jesus, it will change the way we treat our boss. It will also change how we work. In verse 7, Paul exhorts us not to offer “eye-service.” He commands us not to be “man-pleasers.” Now, interestingly, this is the only time in all of Greek literature where this word, “eye-service” is used. Apparently, Paul invented it, and it’s a great word.

I think we know exactly what kind of behavior Paul is referring to. We know what eye-service is, and we know that it is closely tied to being a man-pleaser. Let me tell you what man-pleasing eye-service is. When I was in college, I worked as a laborer for a construction company. The guy who hired me was the crew chief, and this guy was a machine. He was unbelievably industrious. He could frame a bathroom in the time it took me to load my nail gun. Now, as every construction worker knows, each construction crew has a different pace. And as the day goes on, that pace gets slower and slower and slower. And during the last hour of the day, the work slows to a crawl. People start slowly picking up, and *slowly* filling out time cards. And our crew was no exception. However, whenever Matt – our crew chief – came on the scene, people perked up and worked at break-neck speed. That’s eye-service. Eye-service is working just hard enough to impress the people you’re supposed to impress. And as every good crew chief knows, it doesn’t work. God doesn’t appreciate eye-service either.

Instead of giving eye-service, we are, as verse 6 says, to do the will of God from the heart. And what is God’s will? Paul proceeds to tell us in verse 7; he says we should render service to the Lord and not to men. In the area of work, God’s will is that we labor in service to him. And since we are working for Jesus, we should work hard. We should work to the point of exhaustion, as Paul said back in Ephesians 4:28. Paul sums all of this up nicely for us in Colossians 3:23; *“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord rather than men.”* God’s will for your life is that you labor and toil for his glory and honor. And this has two very important implications.

a. How we work is more Important than where we work. The

current job market is absolutely nuts. On the one hand, it's very difficult to get a job. On the other hand, today's college graduates are bombarded by the number of potential careers they could pursue. Additionally, parents and teachers and authority figures have instilled in us the dual belief that we are unique and special, and that we can do whatever we want to. Now, I don't have anything against that per se, but if you put all of these factors together, it can lead to a kind of paralysis. I think many twenty and thirty-somethings believe they are unique, and they believe that the world is their oyster, but they want to know what they actually should do with their lives! My favorite song of 2011 is called *Helplessness Blues*. It's by a band called Fleet Foxes. And I love it because it captures the indecisiveness and angst that so many people feel. Here's the first verse;

*I was raised up believing I was somehow unique, Like a snowflake, distinct among snowflakes,
Unique in each way you can see. But, now, after some thinking, I'd say I'd rather be,
A functioning cog in some great machinery, Serving something beyond me.
But I don't, I don't know what that will be. I'll get back to you someday soon, you will see.*⁴

People long for a job that just serves a purpose. "Tell me what to do!" That's what the song is saying. Choosing a job has become an incredibly difficult, confusing and complex matter. And I think that Christians can make this process even more complicated than it already is. Many Christians have a preoccupation with God's individual will for their lives. They want to make sure that they find the "sweet spot;" that they find their true calling. Now, I believe that God guides his people, but in the vast majority of cases, he does it through His word, through His wisdom, and His people. And when it comes to work, God's revealed will to us is not, "go find that one special job I have for you;" it's "work hard; work for Jesus, *regardless* of what you're doing."

We would do well to remember what Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformers said about calling. Luther and the Reformers sought to break down the division that existed between the professional ministers (the clergy), and the non-professionals (the laity). According to the popular mindset of Luther's day, only priests and professional church workers were called to their professions. They were called to do the Lord's work, while everyone else was supposed to support the ministry of the church. Luther totally rejected this idea. He said, in effect, "if you are working for the glory of God, you are fulfilling your calling, regardless of whether you are a banker or a monk or a priest or shoemaker." Luther wanted people to see that our primary calling is to live for the glory of God, regardless of what we're doing. But, as Kevin DeYoung says, we've turned this biblical notion of calling on its head. Instead of looking for purpose in every kind of work, we look for the one job that will fulfill our purpose in life.⁵ And when we do this, we miss the forest for the trees. I don't want to give the wrong impression. If you're passionate about your job, that's wonderful. There's nothing wrong with looking for a job that fits your passions and personality. However, let's not miss the big picture.

⁴ See <http://fleetfoxes.com/music>.

⁵ Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to God's Will* (Chicago: Mood Press, 2009); 103.

Regardless of what you're doing, it can be a calling from God. And if you are currently dissatisfied with your job, it probably has more to do with the fact that we live in a fallen world than it does that you've somehow misinterpreted God's will for your life. How we work is more important than where we work.

b. All work should be done to the glory of God, and not simply as a means to an end. I want you to imagine that we are having a conversation, and you ask, "Jeff, why are you a pastor?" Now, I want you to be honest. What would you think if I responded like this; "Why am I a pastor? Do you know what kind of tax breaks we get? And think about the job security! No one wants to fire the pastor. I'd have to screw up royally to lose this gig! Plus, I can pretty much do whatever I want. I mean, seriously, haven't you wondered what I do all week? Everyone wonders that, and nobody really knows." Now, if I said that, I hope your first thought wouldn't be, "I've missed my calling!" I hope your first thought would be, "wow, I should probably look for a new church." No one wants to be pastored by a guy who is only in it for the paycheck. The very thought is appalling.

But here's the thing; according to the Bible, *all* work can be done to the glory of God. And if that is true, *no Christian* should view their job as merely a means of making money. If your attitude towards work is this utilitarian, you are essentially serving money, and not God. And if you are serving money, you are an idolater, and you will only work as hard as you have to acquire your idol. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with making money. God wants to meet our needs through jobs that create money. But God hasn't created work simply as a means of getting what we want. The thing itself is to be done to God's glory, which means the thing itself should be done with excellence. The great Christian writer Dorothy Sayers makes this point far better than I can;

*"A very able surgeon put it to me like this: 'What is happening is that nobody works for the sake of getting the thing done. The actual result of the work is a by-product; the aim of the work is to make money to do something else. Doctors practice medicine, not primarily to relieve suffering, but to make a living — the cure of the patient is something that happens on the way. Lawyers accept briefs, not because they have a passion for justice, but because the law is the profession which enables them to live. The reason why men often find themselves happy and satisfied in the army is that for the first time in their lives they find themselves doing something, not for the sake of the pay, which is miserable, but for the sake of getting the thing done.'"*⁶

If you are a Christian carpenter, God is not simply calling you to quit swearing, or to give some money to the church, or to witness to your coworkers. He is calling you to build the best houses you can possibly build. We are to reflect God's character in all of life. And God is not

⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (Manchester, 1974); 52.

only holy and morally upright, he is beautiful and excellent. This means that glorifying God at work isn't just about being honest; it's about creating things that are beautiful and excellent.

3. Why We Work: When we work for Jesus, it changes the way bosses and employees relate to one another, it changes how we work, and third, it changes *why* we work. In verse 8, Paul provides us with the ultimate motivation to work. We work for Jesus because we know that Jesus is a good master. We know that whatever good we do, we will receive it back from the Lord. As Christians, our motivation to work has nothing to do with making more money, or getting our boss's approval, or improving our job security. We work hard out of gratitude for our good God and Savior, Jesus Christ. And we seek his reward above all else. If you are discouraged with your job, if you are looking for employment and seem to be getting nowhere, then I plead with you to do what Peter says; *"gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, and fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 1:13). Jesus sees your labor. And His word says that our labor in him is *never* in vain. Nothing is wasted in God's economy. Every menial task, every mundane decision to obey, every hidden act of integrity; God sees all of them, and is faithful to reward. In Timothy 4, Paul encourages us to discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness. He goes on to say that while physical discipline is of some profit, godly discipline yields a reward not only in this age, but in the age to come. In some way which I cannot fully explain, God takes all of our efforts and enfolds them into his eternal plan in such a way that they echo throughout eternity. What better incentive could we have for working hard?

III. Gospel: Working for Jesus changes everything. However, you will never have this perspective on work until you believe the gospel. When it comes to work, there are two pitfalls to which we are susceptible. On the one hand, you can turn your job into an idol. You can make your career such a priority that it becomes *the* priority. And then, your job becomes your functional savior. And when your worth, your happiness, and your value come from your job, you are liable to sacrifice everything to your god. As a result, your relationships, your family, and your spiritual and physical health will disintegrate. You will do whatever it takes to serve your career. On the other hand, you can resent your job. You can treat your job like a necessary evil, and work just hard enough to get paid and stay employed. Only the gospel can free you from the two errors of idolatry and resentment. The gospel says that we are valuable not because of our work, but because of Christ's. We are so sinful and messed up that Jesus, God's son, had to become a human and die to save us. Jesus lived the life we should have lived but didn't. And he lived it as our representative. And Jesus died the death we all deserve to die, bearing God's just penalty on our behalf, so we don't have to bear it. And Jesus rose from the dead, defeating death, and sin and Satan and all of God's enemies. And because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can view work with a whole new set of eyes. On the one hand, we know that our worth and security don't come from a paycheck, but from Christ's work on our behalf.

We don't have to prove ourselves. On the other hand, the resurrection demonstrates that God is making all things new. He is restoring the world, and will one day create a new heavens and a new earth. And in this new world that is coming, humans will work, and create culture, and commerce, and all work will be done to the glory of God. And as the saved and redeemed people of God, we can work with such gratitude, vigor, and excellence that we give people a glimpse of the world to come. Only the gospel frees us to work with excellence.

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