

Since I became a minister, I've struggled with the summer because the lack of activity and subsequently, the lack of work. Work's a funny word and one of the hardest things I had to do when I became a minister was to get my head around what was work and what wasn't. A great deal of what I do is enjoyable and I don't think of it as work and I know why this is. Like most people, there were times when I found my work in housing difficult and it seemed that all people did was complain, often with good reason. Some people find their work demeaning, while others find work as something that gives them dignity. But I still turned up every day and worked in a professional manner because my parents gave me a good work ethic.

Things have changed since I left school and so many young people work hard to get qualifications, and then find that the only positions open to them are low paid, menial jobs. I trained with Jim Teasdale who is the minister at Eastwood, and Jim has a degree in marketing; and this got him a job as an assistant manager in Millets at 12k a year. It's hardly surprising people have little expectations of life, it's difficult for them to see the value of hard work when the prospects are so poor. They just don't see the wisdom and satisfaction in hard work.

Scripture gives us real wisdom and it speaks directly to the issue of work. In Ephesians 6: 1 to 9, Paul dignifies work and the worker. Paul gives us a formula for how to succeed at work, and how to feel fulfilled in the workplace. He addresses the responsibilities and duties of slaves and masters. There is a direct correlation between Paul's reference to slaves and masters and the employee/employer relationships of today. But let's look at the context of Paul's time: The Roman Empire contained around 60 million slaves. Approximately 40% of people in the large cities of Ephesus and Rome were slaves. And where you have slaves you must have masters, and Paul was addressing both. Many slaves were horribly mistreated, they were considered as property and little more than a living tool.

Under Roman law a slave could be bought and sold without rights. The slaves master possessed the power of life and death over the slave. Despite the fact that many slaves were mistreated, there is evidence that by the time of the Christian era, attitudes were changing and by the 1st Century, the Romans were setting many slaves free. Some slaves, although still owned by their master could own property; including other slaves! Slaves were used in all kinds of jobs and a slave could be a teacher, doctor or administrator, they were the backbone of society. In the Hebrew society, slaves had the rights to be set free in the seventh year, and they were bond servants. In many respects, the position of a slave or bond servant can easily be compared with that of employee today. The position of master could also be compared with that of employers.

So let's start with looking at *Paul's advice to Employees: Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.* Paul's advice to employees can make hard reading, but a closer reading tells us this advice contains wisdom. It centres around a simple command, and it underscores the importance of both authority and submission in God's plan. The instruction to employees is simple: *Be obedient.* As employees, we are to *be obedient* to those who are our employers or supervisors in our world today.

But the command to *be obedient* is not issued in isolation for there are important qualifiers: It's not just that we obey, it's more important *how* we obey, for its how we obey that informs our attitude to work. We are to obey *respectfully and with fear and trembling.* I don't like the sound of that, but when we translate these words from Greek, it doesn't mean we're to be fearful but respectful to our employers. Showing respect for a person in authority is right and wise. It's right because God commands it and because it preserves order in society, and it's wise because we lose out when we do otherwise. If are disrespectful and insubordinate at work, and if we're known to be Christians, then we bring the name of Christ into reproach.

**1 Timothy 6:1** says; *All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered.* Hard as this may seem; if you want to succeed at work, respect to your boss.

***We should obey honestly and have a right conscience.*** Our obedience should be *with a sincere heart, as if we were obeying Christ.* Our work should be done with integrity whether our boss is around or not. When we skive or take it easy when our boss is away, we're stealing or cheating money from our employer, and there's nothing admirable about stealing or cheating. Paul tells us not to work honestly with integrity, then we will receive our pay with a good conscience. If you want to succeed at work then work honestly.

***We are to obey whole-heartedly.*** Our work should be done whole-heartedly because God demands it: ***Colossians 3:23, Whatever you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord rather than for men.*** Sometimes we are asked to do something we dislike and we can only do our job whole-heartedly if we view what we are doing as for God. Is it possible to cook a meal as if Jesus were going to eat it? It is possible for doctors or nurses to care for patients as if they were serving Jesus Christ? Is it possible for lawyers to help clients, or accountants to audit books, or salesmen to market products as if in every situation they were serving our Lord? If we have the right perspective on God then this is possible. We are called to be the best we can be and this should inform our attitude.

***We must also obey pleasantly. We are told that our obedience must be with good will as we render service as to the Lord, and not to men.*** A spirit of good will is important as we perform our work, avoiding cynicism or negativity. It's a fact that we feel better when we smile and life is easier when we choose to be happy, and happiness is often a choice. If we dwell on the negative, we will quickly begin to only see the negative. If we have a poor attitude and look for problems, then I guarantee we'll find them.

When we work, we need to remember that we're serving Jesus Christ, and if we do this we'll maintain the right spirit. Work will be more fulfilling regardless of the task, if we work with a positive spirit that comes from the Holy Spirit.

*Finally, we must obey trustfully. Our work must be done knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he or she will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.* A true faith trusts in the Lord to reward us. It's often the case that if we follow the Lord's advice as employees, then we will find many rewards from our employers. But we must remember that our ultimate reward comes from God. We are serving Him and He will reward us. Our hope is in Christ and our trust should be in Him. I believe that God will ensure that we are blessed in our labours here on earth. But our hope is in serving God and not in getting rewards on earth. We may not get every promotion we want or every salary increase we deserve, but we will be blessed. And if we truly trust Jesus, then we'll be able to leave whatever problems we have in His hands. If you want to be fulfilled at work, work trustfully.

*Now for Employers: 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 favouritism with him (6:9).* As any relationship whether it's between husbands and wives or parents and children, the relationship between employers and employees contains commands for both.

The command to employers concerning employees is to **do the same things to them**. Here is the Golden Rule in action. Employers are to treat their employees as they would want their employees to treat them. If employers want respect, they must show respect. If they want honesty, they must be honest. If they want integrity, they must show integrity. If they want pleasantness, they must be pleasant. There is a responsibility of employers to model the kind of behaviour they want their employees to exhibit.

Employers are further instructed to ***give up threatening***. The authority an employer has should not to be used arbitrarily. Employers should to treat their employees with consideration *knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with Him*. Employers must understand that all people are equal in the sight of God. One day both employer and employee will have to stand before God, and we will have to give an account of how we treated one another. Employers are not intrinsically better than their employees and if they've bullied and abused their employees, God will call them to account.

The Apostle Paul is making sense in a practical way. People work better and produce more in an environment of trust and security than they do in an environment of threats and hostility. Our Lord's management strategy is a very sound one, and this doesn't just apply to paid work, but the relationship between volunteers and those who assign tasks in churches. God hears how we speak to each other and sharp words or snapped commands do not engender good relationships, which is worse in a faith community such as a church. The Bible gives us some down-to-earth teaching on how to be fulfilled at work, whether paid or voluntary, and if we faithfully apply these principals to all of our interpersonal relationships, including our working relationships, then we will be fulfilled in Christ. ***Amen***

(1786 words)