

**Sermon File # 737**

**Scripture Text: Ephesians 6:5-9**

**Sermon Title: *Success in the Workplace***

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**Sermon preached on Sunday morning 27 June 2010**

**At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium.**

**Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.**

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## ***Success in the Workplace***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bible with me to the *Letter to the Ephesians* 6:5-9, as we continue looking at Paul's "household code" (Hoehner, *Ephesians*), wherein the apostle gives directives for successful kingdom of God relationships in marriage, the family, and for today's text, in the workplace.

In our culture today, it's a bit disturbing to read a passage wherein slavery seems to be an accepted norm. Indeed, in the Greco-Roman world of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, slavery was an established social institution, and undoubtedly there were many slaves in the Ephesian congregation and relatively few slave owners, since Christians were normally not from the elite class of society. There were some 60, 000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire, making up a third of the total population (Skevington Wood, vol. 11, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*).

Although Paul accepts slavery as a cultural fact of life, and his focus was upon the transformation of society from the inside out rather than through societal pressures, his writings were the foundation for the eventual abolition of slavery. Paul advised those who had the option of freedom to choose liberty over remaining in slavery (1 *Corinthians* 7:21), although for many

slavery was a comfortable and secure lifestyle. Many slaves chose to remain slaves for life for economic, security and even career reasons. And some slaves were teachers, professors, physicians and other professionals. Paul's little *Letter to Philemon* is a classic statement that argues against slavery as an institution and verses like *Galatians 3:28* served to lead people like William Wilberforce in the abolition of slavery as an ungodly institution (Stott, *God's New Society: Ephesians*, p. 259).

Thankfully, we no longer live in a slave society, but the principles of this passage certainly apply to the modern workplace. Some of you in fact may think of yourselves as slaves owned by your boss, your "slave driver," so this "hermeneutical gap" won't be hard to bridge. For that reason, I will read our text today, substituting the word "employee" for "slave" and "employee" for "master."

Follow as I read what Paul has to say to us about experiencing success in the workplace, from **Ephesians 6:5-9**.

Whether you feel you are a modern day slave or not, it's very possible that you're unhappy in your job. A January 5<sup>th</sup> press release this year in my home country, the USA, reported that job satisfaction is at its lowest level in two decades. Only 45% of workers of all ages are satisfied with their jobs, and only 22% expected to remain in their current job for another year. Only 20% feel passionate about their jobs, with 21% eager to change, not just their jobs but their careers ([http://www.conference-board.org/utilities/pressdetail.cfm?press\\_id=3820](http://www.conference-board.org/utilities/pressdetail.cfm?press_id=3820))

As never before, in my conversations I hear about the difficult pressures upon workers in almost every conceivable workplace. Because of the economic pressures of recent years, more and more is expected of the worker. Especially for those of you in salaried positions, you are expected to produce more and give more of your time, and often to do so with less support and fewer resources. These work pressures are often taking a toll on employees' health and family life. So, some of you really feel there is little difference between your work expectations and that of a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman slave!

I think we can also apply these verses about the workplace to that of the classroom. I'm sure there are some students here who think of themselves as slaves and victims of their demanding teachers and professors!

Our text gives us important principles and directives for job satisfaction and success. As was true for what Paul said about marriage and the family, as kingdom of God people we think of success differently from the world. And in the workplace, the disciple of Christ seeks success God's way, and not just in terms of career advancement. In fact, success God's way may be in direct conflict with personal or corporate career goals.

Yet success God's way is success that gives job satisfaction, at least the satisfaction of knowing that we are pleasing and serving God and his purposes for our lives, and thus have his blessings upon our work. Let's

remember the foundation and setting for these verses is what Paul says in 5:15-18, about being filled with the Holy Spirit, who gives us the power and wisdom to have successful relationships in marriage, the family and at home. Only by being filled with and controlled by the Holy Spirit can we experience success in the workplace, which means success, first of all...

### **For the employee:**

In the kingdom of God, success isn't dependent on our circumstances. Trusting in the sovereignty of God, we bring our lives into submission to the lordship of Christ, and realize that Jesus is Lord of every aspect of our lives, including the workplace and the classroom. Those who are in a position of being under your boss or teacher, remember that you are promised success in the kingdom of God and in the eyes of God, which depends not on your earthly authorities. But instead, your success...

#### *Depends on conduct*

Paul first says we are to "respectfully obey" (*The Message*) our employers. Taking this from slavery to today's workplace, we should think of this as the conduct of respectful compliance in doing our task and fulfilling our responsibilities. It would mean doing our job with respect for the authorities over us, recognizing that they are placed over us and we under them for our good. Respect is due our employers out of gratitude for the livelihood we can earn for ourselves and our families. We should be respectful because of the authority of our employers, even when respect may be difficult because of their character or behavior (1 *Peter* 2:13ff). And we need to remember that, unlike slaves, we have chosen our workplace, even though we may not have had a lot of options.

Our conduct is to be "with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey (NLT "serve") Christ." As the Reformers Luther and Calvin emphasized, there is no separation between the sacred and the secular. Not just pastors, priests and ministers are called, but we are all called to follow Christ and we are to serve him even through our vocation, which means our calling. Jesus is Lord of all our life and he has placed us in our jobs, and all our activities and relationships in life are part of this larger calling of God. Thus we are to perform our job in the workplace or classroom as though Jesus himself were our boss, our employer (verse 7). We are to do our jobs in the awareness that he sees us and wants us to reflect and honor him in the workplace.

We reflect and honor him through working "with sincerity of heart," and not to make a superficial and misleading impression on our employer by doing a lot of busy work when he or she is looking and then loiter and waste time on our computers when her or his back is turned. As *The Message* paraphrases this, we are not to "do what (we) have to do to get by," but are to "work heartily, as Christ's servants, doing what God wants (us) to do" (verse 6). We're not to just do the minimum amount of work to pass inspection and produce only enough to keep from getting fired, but as followers of Christ we are to be the

best possible employee and make the greatest possible contribution to our company or employer's cause.

Employees should not use work time for personal pursuits, including Bible study, your quiet time of devotions, and personal evangelism. This is like "robbing Peter to pay Paul," as they say (more like "robbing Philemon to pay Paul"). Certainly you should seek to lead your colleagues to faith in Christ and minister to their spiritual needs, but this you can do during your free time, such as the lunch hour or outside the workplace and working hours. Taking time for which you're being paid to do your job, even for such good objectives as ministry and evangelism, is dishonest and negates your witness for the cause of Christ.

In the USA, organizations of Christian business people publish a directory that urges fellow Christians to patronage their businesses, appealing to some unfounded obligation to support only putatively Christian businesses. I resist this, not only because it is an isolationist mentality that precludes the opportunity for believers to contact and witness to unbelievers, but also because it often encourages hypocrisy and supports mediocrity from so-called Christian businesses. My mother-in-law fell prey to this deception when she chose to patronize a carpet cleaning company that advertised itself as a Christian business and subsequently did substandard work and charged her an unfair price. Disciples of Jesus should, for the very reasons set forth in our text, provide the best work and be the most honest and reputable business people in the community, and should not expect anyone's patronage simply because they advertise themselves as Christian.

To me, the greatest biblical example of an exemplary employee was Joseph, who was sold by his brothers into slavery and carried to Egypt, where he became Potipher's slave. Instead of being rebellious and resentful, Joseph worked so diligently that he gained the complete trust of his master. Even after he was falsely accused by Potipher's wife and thereby landed in prison, Joseph continued with his servant spirit and diligent work, gaining trust and responsibility under the prison warden (*Genesis 39*). And in God's perfect timing, Joseph was promoted to become Egypt's Prime Minister.

Joseph was committed to always doing the will of God from his heart, which Paul says is the way we are to do our work, serving wholeheartedly, giving our very best in the workplace or classroom (6f). We are to witness by our diligence and integrity. Sloppy work and laziness are detrimental to our witness for Christ. Poor grades or failure due to lack of diligence in study and work in and outside the classroom is also a negative witness for Christ.

As followers of Christ, we are under his supervision and are to do our work and live our lives with the awareness that we are serving him and he is honored when we do honorable work and dishonored when we give less than our best.

Faithful diligence in the workplace and classroom are to characterize the disciple's conduct. Such conduct...

*Depends on motivation*

We are motivated by the thought that our work is done for the honor of the Lord, as an act of service to him, to reflect his very character by our character and conduct. Whatever our circumstances, however we are treated in the workplace, we are to realize that our real “supervisor” and “inspector” is the Lord Jesus.

Obviously Joseph’s conduct was empowered by a motivation of faith that allowed him to see God’s sovereign hand upon his life, that the Lord was using him, even during his slavery and imprisonment (*Genesis 45:7f*). Diligent, honest and productive work are a testimony of our life in the kingdom of God that shines like a bright light in this world where the motto is “get all you can for yourself and give as little as possible.” This kind of quality work is made possible by the right kind of motivation. Even though we may not be appreciated in the workplace, and even though we may never get promoted, we can have the assurance that God is pleased and that he can and will honor us in his time and way. And God may be best honored by our mistreatment. When we respond in the right way, it becomes a powerful witness to the sufferings of our Lord Jesus.

This is what Peter is saying in 1 *Peter 2:18-25*.

“Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

‘He committed no sin,  
and no deceit was found in his mouth.’

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

This is a word to Christian slaves who were being mistreated. It’s unlikely that your boss will physically beat you, but he or she may well mistreat you and cause great mental and emotional suffering. Applying to employees what Peter says to slaves, we are admonished to refrain from retaliation for mistreatment, even though there may be occasions to register legitimate grievances with the HR office in your workplace, not just for your benefit, but for the protection of the rights of your fellow employees. We are not to tolerate emotional abuse or sexual harassment. From such treatment, the Lord will provide a way of escape (*1 Corinthians 10:13*), such as a formal legal complaint or resignation.

But what Peter is admonishing is the spirit and attitude of Christ, who demonstrated humility even before his enemies and entrusted himself to the sovereign care of the heavenly Father, all the way to the cross. We must be willing to take the way of self-denial and bearing our cross, living in the pattern of Jesus' life. It may be in your patience and trust in the midst of job turmoil and mistreatment that you best exhibit the spirit of Jesus and give your strongest witness to him.

Living our lives and doing our work in the pattern of the cross may mean bearing up under unfair treatment, but it could also lead to conflict in the workplace. If the boss or the company requires you to do something that is illegal, unethical or immoral, then, like the apostles, you must obey God rather than men (*Acts 5:29*). This obedience to God in disobedience to your employer could be costly for you, but you will have to trust in God's care and promised provision for his children. When you find it necessary to disobey work orders, do so in the spirit of Jesus, "with gentleness and respect" (*1 Peter 3:15*).

In this materialistic culture, we as followers of Christ are not to be motivated by greed and the love of money, which Paul says is "a root of all kinds of evil" (*1 Timothy 6:10*). "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (*1 Timothy 6:6*), and we are to keep our focus on the advancement of the kingdom and not on the accumulation of material wealth (*Matthew 6:33*). Our motivation for productive work and gainful employment is, as Paul says, that we "may have something to share with those in need" (*Ephesians 4:28*). The reason God prospers some is not that the rich get richer, but that our plenty will supply the needs of others, especially in the Body of Christ (*2 Corinthians 8:13ff*).

Our text tells us that we are to do good work, not for present rewards, but for eternal rewards. Again, as I've mentioned before, we aren't so spiritual that we're above being motivated by rewards. Those who eschew rewards, saying that we shouldn't do good and loving deeds with the thought of rewards in mind simply don't understand the nature of rewards in the kingdom. Our eternal rewards won't be bigger mansions or crowns of gold on our heads, but rather the degree of holiness and glory of character that we're seeking on earth. As CS Lewis has rightly stated, the Christian isn't motivated by temporal rewards:

"The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation." (*The Weight of Glory*)

The man who courts a girl to obtain her dowry is improperly motivated. The right motivation is to court the girl to obtain her love, which is the proper reward. Our heavenly reward will be a godly character that will honor and glorify Christ forever. One reward will be to hear the Father say, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (*Matthew 25:21*).

Whatever your level of compensation or achievements in your career, as the Lord's employee, you can entirely please him and receive his eternal commendation. And in writing about success in the workplace, Paul has a word...

### **For the employer:**

No doubt there were fewer slave owners in the Ephesian church than there were slaves. But we know, with the example of Philemon and what Paul says elsewhere, there were slave owners in the church who called to be accountable and successful in their relationships with their slaves. So, in making the application for today, let's think about employers and bosses. Their success in the workplace...

#### *Depends on attitude*

Slaveholders in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century had absolute power over their slaves, even over those who were high-ranking professionals (Hoehner, 800-804, 815), and could abuse, even murder them with impunity. Yet there were also masters who treated their slaves with dignity and respect. Slaves who were fortunate to have such masters often chose to remain in their service (*Exodus* 21:5f).

For today's employers and all in positions of authority in the workplace, attitude is critical, and Paul would call even employers and teachers to have the attitude of a servant. This means that Christians who have oversight and management of others must treat their employees with dignity and respect, whatever the level or rank of their employment. To keep them from thinking they're so "high and mighty," Paul says they must remember they are working under a much higher Boss, the Lord Jesus himself. This humble attitude should be a motivation to treat employees with fairness, kindness and respect.

Ultimate success and harmony in the workplace calls for a good relationship of mutual respect between employers and employees. John Stott points out that the basic cause of trouble in labor relations is an imbalance of workers' and employers' rights and responsibilities. "Employers and employees alike have duties –the employee to give good work and the employer to pay a just wage." There are also certain rights, of the employer to expect good work and the right of the employee to expect a fair wage. "The major problem in management-labor disputes," says Stott, "is that each side concentrates on securing its own rights, and on inducing the other side to do its duty. Paul, however, reverses the emphasis. He urges each side to concentrate on its responsibilities, not on its rights" (*Ephesians*, pages 258f).

Stott also reminds us that Paul is appealing to slave masters to regard their bond servants as not their property but as humans created in the image of God and even as possible brothers or sisters in Christ (p. 259). Paul made this appeal also to Philemon, to receive his runaway slave Onesimus, no

longer as his slave, but now as his brother in Christ (*Philemon* 15f). And this fellowship and unity in Christ is one of the themes of *Ephesians*, and our new life in Christ erases all distinctions of class, race and gender (also in *Galatians* 3:28).

Employers thus must relate to their employees with high regard as either true or potential brothers and sisters in Christ. Thus there's a responsibility to do nothing to harm the witness of the gospel to the unsaved or to cause a fellow believer to stumble through harsh, unfair or unethical business practices.

Again we are reminded that we cannot separate the sacred from the secular. All of life is to be lived with a kingdom of God perspective and values.

Success for employers in the eyes of the Lord...

#### *Depends on accountability*

Paul says that the same admonition to slaves goes for their masters, in terms of realizing they are under the scrutiny of the Lord and he is their Master, to whom they must give an account. As someone has said, the Lord has no "teacher's pets." All of us will give an account before the judgment seat of Christ (*2 Corinthians* 5:10; *Romans* 14:10). Employers have been entrusted with the fair treatment and wellbeing of their employees, and will have to give an account before God of their fairness. It's possible for employers to show favoritism toward some employees and to treat others unfairly. But Paul says God will use the same measure of judgment on all of us, without partiality.

I can think of many who were treated unjustly, even as servants of the Lord (missionaries and pastors). Those who destroyed their ministries will have to give an accounting to the Lord. And those of us in ministry leadership, who treated ministry colleagues unfairly, will have to give an account before the Lord. Again, we will all have to give an account before the judgment seat of Christ regarding how we treated one another in the workplace. If we think we have been treated unjustly, we don't need to seek revenge or even harbor bitter thoughts and feelings. We can simply trust the Lord to do what is right. He can vindicate and exonerate us or he can delay his judgment until the final Day.

Again, I remind us of that wonderful spirit and insight of Joseph, who had no desire to avenge himself upon his brothers. He could see God's greater purpose at work in his life, which transformed bad circumstances into redemptive ones (*Genesis* 50:20). No one was treated more unjustly than Joseph, or had greater reason for anger, resentment and bitterness. Yet Joseph was able to entrust himself to God and his sovereign purposes being fulfilled, even through danger, difficulty and disappointment. He was denied his rights, but his focus was upon his responsibilities. And because he was faithful with little responsibilities, he was given much greater opportunity (*Matthew* 25:21).



## **Conclusion:**

Whatever your workplace or classroom situation, you can be successful in the eyes of God. Success depends on a Spirit-filled life of wisdom and integrity. By the Spirit, you can express a life of love for others and commitment to responsibility and to your best work. By the power of the Spirit and in the spirit of prayer you can give your best work and also live an exemplary life before your colleagues. You will also have those opportunities to share Christ in your free time.

If you apply yourself to your work or studies in the power of the Spirit, you won't be devastated by an unfair review from your boss or an unjust grade from your teacher/professor. You can trust that your real supervisor is the Lord Jesus, and he's the one who gives the final evaluation to work done from the heart and for his glory.

Some of you may think your job is an intolerable situation. It may be one of those environments where it is impossible for you to act ethically and morally. If that's the case, you must obey God rather than man (*Acts 5:29*), and then trust that the Lord will provide and guide you to another place of employment.

Some of you are seeking employment and there may be others who are looking for qualified employees. Now is the time to commit yourself to being the kind of employee, employer, boss, student or teacher who will honor Christ and serve him in the workplace and the classroom. These are important arenas for obedient discipleship and venues for demonstrating the character of Christ Jesus.

When we work and study for Jesus, we can be assured of his success but also of true job satisfaction. We can be satisfied knowing that God is sovereign and in charge of our lives, and he will make our jobs a part of the bigger picture of our vocation, our calling to live for Christ and to follow Jesus as his disciples. Those hours you sit at the desk or work at the bench or on the assembly line, when you thought you were just earning a living or making a grade, you can trust that God was at work in you and through you. That's because you were working for Jesus and with Jesus. That's success God's way.

## **Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. Why do you think Paul didn't directly attack the institution of slavery in the Roman Empire?
2. Reviewing what Paul says in 5:15-18, what is the basis for right relationships in the work place?

3. What do you think are some of the primary reasons for lack of job satisfaction?
4. When do you think there might be legitimate reasons for filing complaints about your job conditions and when should you simply accept the conditions in a spirit of submission?
5. According to Paul, what is to be the Christian's motivation for work?
6. What is the Christian employer's responsibility for his or her employees?
7. What conditions, behavior or expectations of employees might be detrimental to an employer's witness for Christ?
8. Ask God to show you how he wants you to change your attitude and conduct in the workplace or classroom.

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