**Class 6 - Relationships in the Workplace**

Do you like your boss? How about your coworkers? The hardest thing about our jobs can be the people with whom we’re expected to work. It’s not as if those are insignificant relationships. Working with people who are uncaring, unfair, unreasonable, cutthroat, or incompetent can easily make a typical week painful and frustrating.

But let’s be honest. The difficulty we perceive with our coworkers or bosses or employees often doesn’t have as much to do with them as it does with us. We all have a tendency to think about our jobs in sinful and selfish ways—a tendency that extends not just to the tasks we perform but also to the people with whom we work.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The biblical worldview we’ve been talking about in this class challenges and confronts our sinful attitudes toward our coworkers. It teaches us to think of them not as obstacles or competitors but as *people*—people made in God’s image and loved by him. In short, it frees us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves in a place where love is often in radically short supply — the workplace. And that’ll be our topic for this morning. A few weeks ago, we talked about how we ultimately work for King Jesus in our jobs—no matter who your earthly boss is. And that his assignment to us is to work in such a way as to show off how amazing he is. In other words, to work as to be counted as faithful. With that foundation in place, last week’s class began to step through some implications of that worldview—answering the question *why* we work. This week we’ll take on another implication: how we serve the people with whom we work.

We’ll start with the basic mindset Jesus calls us to have toward our co-workers, and then we’ll step through how that works itself out in our 9 to 5 first as employees and then as bosses.

FAITH-FUELED SERVICE

Once you realize you work for Jesus and your first responsibility is to follow him, then you realize your job isn’t just about you anymore. Your job becomes an arena in which to worship and bring honor to God. And guess what? The second most important way you do that—right after loving God—is by loving other people, according to Jesus.

Let’s look again at that familiar passage in Colossians through a slightly wider lens. Paul writes these words in Colossians 3:22 – 4:1:

**22**Bondservants, 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.

**4**Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

To summarize: the way you treat other people should be colored by a vivid realization that God is watching![[2]](#footnote-2)

Now when Paul or the other New Testament writers talk about the evil institution of slavery, we acknowledge they are speaking about a system that is somewhat removed from our current employee-employer relationships in the workplace. But the principles they advocate remain important because they’re applying the truth of the gospel to the root cause — the sinful condition of our hearts.

In this passage, Paul challenges us to think about our responsibility as Christians *to serve those who are in authority over us*. If you’re an employee, one of the ways you’re called to honor Jesus is to give yourself for the good of others. Your boss is one of those others. Paul urges us to obey those who are in authority over us “in everything.” While that command certainly doesn’t include sinful things, it *does* include stupid things. Your boss may give you tasks that are asinine in your opinion, but unless what he asks you to do is sinful, you should do it. Moreover, you should do it “with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.” That’s what will honor Jesus.

Also, your obedience should really have nothing to do with whether your boss is watching you or not. Why? Because far more important than that is the fact that *God is watching you*! Always. His eyes should provide more motivation for you than a quarterly performance review ever would.

Paul brings this same principle to bear on those who are in authority over others. Just as an employee should remember that God is watching him or her, so should an employer, chapter 4 verse 1. If you treat your employees with disrespect and unkindness, you can be sure your Master in heaven sees that. If you treat them with kindness, gentleness, love, and patience, you can be sure he sees that too.

Let me sum this up into a single phrase: faith-fueled service. We are to be servants in the workplace, whether we’re bosses or employees—because ultimately we’re servants of Christ. But we are not working for rewards we can see; we are working for rewards that are unseen and eternal. So we’re working by faith. We work as servants, trusting that that posture is always right simply because Jesus says so. And he will reward us for our service.

So what does it mean to be a faith-fueled servant in the work- place? We can identify several marks of a worker whose service is defined by faith in God and the good news of the gospel.

**Mark #1: Determination Not to Complain**

It is a rare and powerful witness *not* to complain at work. Complaints tend to be the common coin of the workplace realm. So when someone comes along who doesn’t speak Complaint as their native language, the effect can be astonishing. Look at what Paul writes in Philippians 2:14 – 16:

**14**Do all things without grumbling or disputing, **15**that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, **16**holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

Look carefully where this all starts — with the exhortation to “do all things without grumbling or disputing.” Pretty unremarkable, right? But now look where it ends up. Shining “as lights in the world”! “Holding fast to the word of life.”! Those are some astonishingly grand outcomes for doing something as simple-sounding as not complaining.

None of this is to say that holding back your complaints is easy. It’s not! It’s incredibly hard. We naturally want to let others know when our own circumstances are uniquely bad and worthy of complaint. But faith-fueled service in the workplace is marked by a spirit of dogged determination *not* to grumble, not to complain.

**Mark #2: Happy Submission to Authority**

As long as our bosses aren’t asking us to sin, we should obey those in authority over us “with sincerity of heart” (Colossians 3:22), not with a plastic smile and a heart exploding with rage.

It’s easy to submit when your boss is a paragon of kindness, respect, and goodwill. But when your boss is a flat-out jerk who is arrogant and self-absorbed, how you respond reveals your heart — whether you really are working for Jesus.

[Insert your own story here if possible.] A friend of ours once worked for a boss who was absolutely brilliant in his profession. But he was also greedy, abrasive, and verbally abusive to his employees. He screamed at his employees regularly for the smallest infractions. It would have been easy for our friend to launch a war of attrition against this guy—to bad-mouth him in front of his peers, sabotage his projects. Instead, he decided to take a different angle because of his Christian convictions. Rather than fighting back, he decided to “obey ... with sincerity of heart” (Colossians 3:22) in the recognition that it was Jesus who had deployed him to this job at this time in his life, and therefore he could “work heartily, as for the Lord and not for [a jerk]” (Colossians 3:23). He worked hard to make sure he spoke well of his boss to outsiders. He protected his boss’s reputation, and always tried to show the utmost respect to his boss. He prayed for the man to repent of his sin and to trust in Jesus for salvation.

Sadly, this story doesn’t have a nice, happy ending. The man wasn’t converted, and there was no dramatic turnaround. Our friend isn’t even sure his boss noticed his behavior. He didn’t act this way because the boss was worthy of his good service. Far from it! But Jesus the King *was* worthy—infinitely so.

If you’re struggling with a difficult situation with a boss or coworker, try this. Start praying for that person every day. Pray for their family, their relationships, their circumstances, and their challenges. Pray for their salvation. Pray, too, that you would be able to work for them (or with them), not just with resignation, but with sincerity of heart.

Faith-fueled service in the workplace means we will be marked by happy submission to authority, even when it’s not fun or fair.

**Mark #3: Unfeigned Humility**

More than a few of our problems at work stem from feeling that something we’ve been asked to do is beneath us. “I’m so much more valuable than that!” Really? What place does that kind of thinking have in a Christian’s life? After all, if we’re followers of Jesus, shouldn’t we expect that we’ll find ourselves doing a lot of things that aren’t exactly commensurate with our “status”? Isn’t that what Jesus himself did? Think about how Paul describes Jesus’ work in Philippians 2:5 – 8:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

No matter your situation, you have *never* stooped as low as Jesus stooped. The Bible teaches emphatically that followers of Jesus should be people marked by conspicuous humility. They should have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Faith-fueled service in the workplace is marked by unfeigned humility that leads us to follow in the self-emptying footsteps of our King.

**Mark #4: Godly Competitiveness**

Another perennial problem in the workplace comes from clashing ambitions. We want the same thing somebody else wants, and this forces us into cutthroat competition with our coworkers, suspicion of our employees, and even envy of our bosses. Ambition run amok.

But the gospel frees us from competing in ungodly ways with our peers. It rearranges and resets our ambitions. Instead of being driven merely to make much of ourselves, we’re driven to make much of Jesus in everything we do.

Does this mean we should never compete against others? No. Competition is not a bad thing. It’s that we shouldn’t play by the *world’s* playbook for competition — the cutthroat mentality that says the only way for you to go up is for someone else to go down. Our goal as Christians is to compete with and love our coworkers all at the same time. Win by running faster, not by tripping all your competitors. Even more, encourage them to run faster too.

Faith-fueled service means having a spirit of godly competitiveness, working hard before the Lord rather than taking others down.

**CONCLUSION: Employee**

As with so many of the things we discuss in this class, there aren’t any magic formulas for dealing with difficult bosses and coworkers. But sometimes a change of perspective can lead to a change of heart, which changes everything. If you’ve been thinking of your boss or coworkers as an obstacle to your career advancement, pray and ask God to help you see that person as someone God wants you to serve. Then go do it. Work willingly, not grudgingly. Stop complaining and rolling your eyes. Be humble. Encourage.

***Questions?***

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN BOSS?[[3]](#footnote-3)**

As Christians, we understand that the authority we hold over others is ultimately from God. And how we use it says something true or false about God’s authority. “Love your neighbor as yourself” is operative even in the boss’s chair.

Let’s think about this in terms of six principles of authority the Bible teaches us.

**Principle #1: Authority Is from God**

God created human beings and assigned them to rule over and subdue the earth. Genesis 1:28 reads, “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” Humanity’s perch at the top wasn’t a matter of raw strength or intelligence; it was a divine grant of authority. So Adam and Eve were to follow God’s direction in how they used their authority. Cultivate the garden, not destroy it. Came the animals and rule them, not cruelly dominate them.

The same is true for any authority God’s given you. It’s not yours by right; it is a divine grant. And God gave it to you so that you might use it for the good of those under you, not to serve yourself. That means that *how* you exercise authority communicates to the world around you what your King is like. Use it well and you’re showing your employees that authority is ultimately a good thing, that it comes from a God who himself exercises authority with perfect love and perfect justice. How you wield authority really says more about the God you serve than it does about you.

**Principle #2: Authority Should Serve and Bless Others**

The Bible repeatedly teaches that the wise exercise of authority leads to blessing for those who are under it. Joseph’s authority in Egypt enabled that nation to weather seven years of withering famine. Nehemiah used his authority among the returning exiles of Jerusalem to complete the wall that would defend them from their enemies. You may remember from last week David’s very last words in 2 Samuel 23. When he reflected back on his long and momentous life, and it came time to make his final conclusion, he spoke of the blessing of benevolent authority.

I’m guessing you’re neither the vice-regent of Pharaoh nor a king, but the principle is the same for you: authority rightly exercised leads to great blessing. When you use authority to build up and not tear down, to right wrongs and not perpetrate them, to encourage and not crush, to work for others’ good and not just for your own, the result will be light and life in your workplace. Going back to David’s words: “When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.” Is that how you’d describe your boss? Sadly, there just aren’t many like that in the world. But followers of King Jesus should be some of them.

**Principle #3: Authority Can Be Abused**

Most people think of authority as a bad and fearsome thing, a necessary evil. Sufficient evidence exists to prove that where there is authority, it will most likely be abused. That’s not how God designed authority, but it is often true of authority in a fallen world. “You know,” Jesus said, “that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them” (Matthew 20:25). Sadly, in a world of sin, that’s far too often the case.

But then look at what Jesus says right after that: “It shall not be so among you” (Matthew 20:26). We should reject the world’s sinful abuse of authority and determine to use it for good, as God intended. So keep watch over your heart. Make sure you aren’t slipping into the world’s patterns of lording it over your employees. Don’t use for evil and selfish purposes what God intended as a source of light and life for others.

**Principle #4: Authority Should Be Sacrificial**

After telling his disciples what authority is not (that is, lording it over people), he tells them in Matthew 20:26 – 28 what leadership ought to be:

But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Godly leaders serve others. They look out for them and work for their good. Service is always costly. It’ll cost you your priorities for the day at times. It’ll cost you your limited time. It might even cost you some of your organization’s short-term success. But this is what Jesus calls us to do with the authority he gives us — to give ourselves for the good of others.

**Principle #5: Godly Use of Authority Is Gospel-Motivated and Grace-Empowered**

The only way we’ll ever know how to exercise authority rightly is by taking our cues from our King. Because he humbled himself for our sake, we are freed from a conception of authority that knows only how to lord it over others. Our identity and reward are not finally tied to our job performance but are found in Christ. We are freed from an exercise of authority that knows only how to use people and drive them like pack animals toward a goal. The gospel empowers us to make much of Christ by loving, serving, and blessing others.

That doesn’t mean we decide somehow that accomplishments don’t matter. It doesn’t mean we can’t spur one another on toward team goals and even correct and reprimand employees and coworkers when they’re not doing the job. But it does mean that when we spur our employees on and even when we correct them, we do so, not with thoughts of our own glory and reputation, but with graciousness and a genuine, loving concern for their good.

**GETTING PRACTICAL: HOW CAN YOU LEAD AND MANAGE WELL?**

The most important strategy for leading well is to cultivate a heart that really desires to do so. There’s no substitute for *desire*. If you ultimately don’t care how you lead, then no set of tactics and tips can ever make you a good and godly leader. Once you’ve cultivated a genuine desire to lead in a way that reflects Jesus’ authority, it’s important to think about what that will mean tomorrow at work. What will you do differently? What will you never do again? I can’t give you all the answers to those questions. You’ll have to do a lot of that thinking on your own, bringing to bear on your own situation the principles discussed here. But perhaps I can prime the pump with a few ideas that arise out of my own attempts to use authority well.

A very easy and revolutionary idea is to pray for those who work for you. Whether they’re Christians or not, pray that they’ll find their work a joy, that it won’t be burdensome to them, and that they’ll find contentment in it. Pray also for their families and for specific things going on in their families’ lives. Pray for your interactions with them, for areas of potential conflict that might arise. Confess if you’ve spoken harshly, selfishly, or condescendingly to them and ask God to give you a heart that will respond selflessly and graciously. And pray for opportunities to share the gospel with them. Is there any better way to love your employees than by praying to the King specifically for them?

It’s also helpful to schedule regular one-on-one meetings with your employees. It’s a bit like discipling them, not only (or sometimes not even at all) as Christians, but as workers and people. Here’s a practice Sebastian Traeger describes in his book, *The Gospel at Work:* he started trying to spend thirty minutes a week with each person he manages. Fifteen minutes for them to talk about anything on their minds, from work to family, and then fifteen minutes for Sebastian to talk about things on his mind — normally their work and priorities, and maybe some constructive feedback. All with the intent of building them up as workers and people. Yes, this takes time, but you’ll soon begin to see the fruit of this investment in the lives of the people you meet with.

You can develop a mentoring relationship with one or more of your employees. Far too few bosses in the world are willing to give the time and effort it takes to serve as mentors to those coming behind them. Young workers are starving for career counseling and wisdom from older, more experienced Christians who can help them see how the gospel should impact their work lives. Serving younger workers in that way doesn’t have to be a lifetime commitment. Agree to meet a few times and then make a decision about whether to continue meeting together. Mentoring someone in a deep way is a powerful opportunity, not only to train and prepare that person for greater responsibility, but also to model a culture of generosity that can eventually affect your entire organization.

CONCLUSION

I’ll admit it. Managing people has been a struggle for me over the years. I’ve sometimes seen employees merely as a means to my own ends. Needless to say, that mentality didn’t lend itself very well to displaying God’s good authority to them.

Over the years, by God’s grace, I’ve seen some slow but steady growth in this area of my life, but it’s still an area of constant struggle. What about you? Do you strive to use your authority to build others up in your workplace? Do you remind yourself every day that whatever authority you hold comes from the hand of your King? Do you therefore seek to exercise that authority as he would exercise it? Or does none of that ever really cross your mind?

Remember that even if you’re the boss, you are one who works for Jesus. Recommit yourself to exercising your God- given authority in such a way that your King will be honored and revered, even among those with whom you work.

1. If you make work an idol, you will perceive your boss as an obstacle and your coworkers as competitors. The way you perceive and treat your coworkers depends on whether they are smoothing the way toward your goal. Your boss? He has your job. Your coworker? He wants your job. And if you become idle in your job, you’ll treat your boss with contempt and your coworkers will become sounding boards

   The picture we’re drawing here is probably a little stark on both sides. Our sins don’t always make themselves quite so identifiable. However, if we’re honest with ourselves, our description here may accurately reflect the bitter fruit of any idolatry or idleness that lives in our hearts. Ungodly thoughts about work lead to ungodly thoughts about our coworkers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Because we are applying this passage, which talks about slavery, to our relationships in the workplace today, we should pause for a moment and acknowledge that it’s somewhat uncomfortable when we come to places in the New Testament that seem to take slavery as a given instead of calling for its immediate overthrow. That discomfort has led many people to point out that Roman slavery was very different from the slavery in the British Empire and the United States. There is some truth to that claim. There are important historical differences between these slaveries. Still, though, the fact remains that Roman slavery was not just a normal, everyday employer-employee relationship. It was an unjust system of forced labor, often cruel and sometimes lethal.

   We may wonder why the writers of the New Testament seem to accept the existence of slavery. We could say much about this, and many books have been written on the subject. One reason is that the aim of Jesus and the apostles was simply deeper than the reformation of a social system. They were focused on the root of the problem — the sinful state of the human heart. The fact is that the unjust system wasn’t the root of the sin of slavery, and simply changing the system wouldn’t have solved the problem in any long-term sense. The sinful human heart would just find another way to oppress others, even if the system of Roman slavery had been eliminated. So that’s what Jesus and the apostles take aim at — the human heart, whatever system it finds itself under. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The topic of leadership has attracted more attention from the world than any other subject we’ll talk about in this class. A search on Amazon for books on leadership yields 86,000 results. In all likelihood, some of those books will be genuinely good ones. God hasn’t reserved all the wise answers and helpful advice on this topic for Christians. A number of authors who write and speak about leadership are saying some genuinely good and useful things: *Be humble and charismatic. Cast vision. Inspire followers, create motivation, align goals, build teams. Persevere against daunting odds. Be morally grounded.* All of this is good advice!

   One example is Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*. The main difference he notices between a good company and a great one is the person who leads it. Leaders of great companies lead through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They have a profound commitment to seeing the company succeed, but that commitment is unrelated to their own personal legacy or burgeoning bank account. As Christians, we can both affirm and aspire to that definition of a leader. It seems like a really good one, in fact! So what is different about the picture of leadership we get from the Bible? [↑](#footnote-ref-3)