



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Get To Work!

WHO AM I?

Ephesians 6:5–9

Tim Badal | April 23, 2023

Turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 6. I'm so excited to open up God's Word with you, as we're in the last weeks of our study in the book of Ephesians.



Since the beginning of the year, we've been looking at this letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus. This was a group of fledgling believers who had left their lives of selfishness, sin and self-reliance, having given their lives to Jesus. They now were following their Savior and were learning that life in Christ wasn't simply a moniker or label they took upon themselves. Rather, it impacted every area of their existence. To identify themselves as being "in Christ" meant they were going to think differently. They were going to talk differently. They were going to act differently. They were going to live differently.

In chapters one through three, Paul explains what being in Christ is all about. He talks about their position, privileges and what they had available to them through this relationship with Christ. He spoke of all the gifts, goodness and grace that they and we have because we are now children of our Father in heaven. He told of all the love and mercy Christ purchased through His death, burial and resurrection.

Then in chapters four through six, Paul moves from who we are—making sure our foundation is strong and secure—to the outworking of our position in Christ. Now that I know who I am, now that I know where I find my purpose, meaning and identity in life, then I move to my calling. Now I see how I'm to live out this life in the real world, putting feet to my faith. I am to walk in light, not darkness. I am to live this faith out in all aspects of my life—sexuality, married life, life with my children, life with parents.

Now in our text this morning, we're going to find out what it means to be in Christ and answer the question, "Who am I?" regarding work. First we need to go deep into the context of this passage, looking at what was happening in the first century, then what's going on in our context. After we do this homework, we'll get to the application that will work for us in our day, things that we can take to work tomorrow.

So let's read the text. Here's what Paul says regarding our life as workers, as well as the life of the Ephesian believers:

⁵Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or is free. ⁹Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

We've already talked about married life, life in the family, with parents and kids, now we pivot to work. When you bring up the topic of work, it might be a dream picture, something you love. Some of you love to work. You love what you're doing. You love who you work for. You love who you work with. Everything about your work is just great. You get up on Monday morning excited and ready to go to work.

For others of you, work is a four-letter word. You don't like who you work for. You don't like who you work with. You don't like your job. The person you work for is really a lot of trouble for you. What you're being asked to do might feel demeaning to you. You may feel you're above it. You may feel like you're in a dead-end place. Some work brings very little satisfaction.

Let's agree on an understanding of work. It's something that's been around since before the dawn of sin. It was there in the Garden of Eden. Adam was given the command to work, to tend and oversee the garden before sin impacted the human race. And work will be with us until the end of this age. It's part of our human experience. Not only do we need to figure out how to do our work well, but as Christians, we need to answer the question "Who am I?" when it comes to our work. We need to find our identity, not in our work, but in the One for whom we work. What we'll learn in this text is that we serve Christ. So no matter what the organization chart in our workplace says, at the top of that chart, the CEO is Jesus Christ. Therefore, because my boss is Jesus, I'm going to do everything I can to serve and honor my CEO to the best of my ability. Then as I bless Him, I'm also going to bless all the middle managers and coworkers along the way. As I do this and find my identity in who I am in Christ, work is going to take a whole different place in my life.

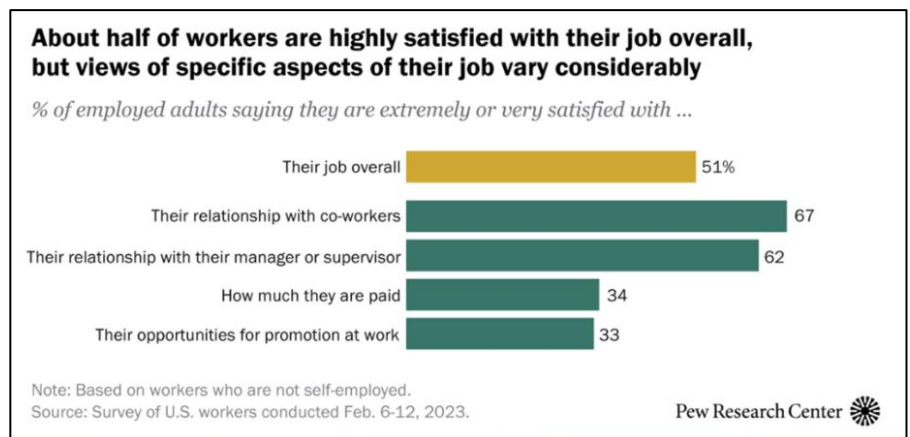
So let's talk about work for a moment. Work is a big deal our lives. For many people, work is a satisfying thing. Three-quarters of Americans find satisfaction in their jobs. That was a bit surprising to me. When they were asked what would make their situation even better, they pivoted to these things:

- Better compensation—I wasn't surprised by that.
- Better work/life balance.
- More recognition for the workers' contributions.

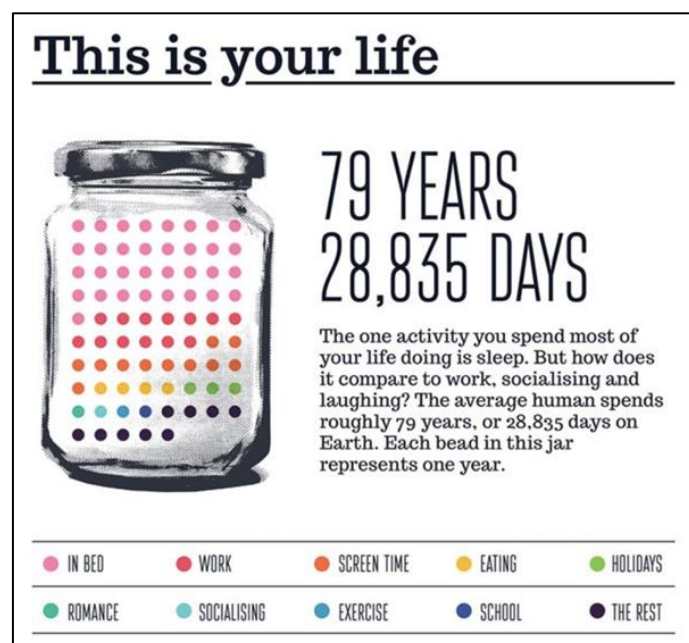
There are ways we can get more satisfaction from our job. But notice, we're extremely satisfied overall. According to this study that was done just a couple months ago, the percentage of employed adults who say they're highly satisfied with their job overall is 51%.

Regarding relationships with coworkers, 67% like working with the people around them. That's encouraging. I was blown away by this—62% are extremely satisfied with their relationship with their pastor...I mean, supervisor. That's really great. I thought it would be a much lower number than that. That's encouraging. Now, the numbers drop.

We're not extremely satisfied with how much we're paid or the opportunities for promotion.



The reason why this is so important is because we spend a lot of our lives at work. In fact, take a look at this. If you live 79 years; that's 28,835 days. That's about average these days. Each dot in the jar represents the amount of time you spend doing the



activities listed below. The top dots represent the time you spend in bed sleeping. You spend more time sleeping than any other activity.

The second set of dots represent the time you spend at work. This is where we should all groan. That's a lot of time. The second greatest use of your time, outside of sleeping, is work. Of those 79 years, over 13 years of your life will be dedicated to working. That does not including commute time.; it's you actually doing your job. Then they added one year and two months of overtime for you. So almost 14 cumulative years of your life are given to this thing called work. Hopefully you're finding some satisfaction. Hopefully you're finding some joy in it. And most importantly, as a Christ follower, hopefully you're finding a way to show those people at your workplace—your employer, fellow workers or your employees—a little bit of Jesus along the way.

This is why Paul takes time, as he works through these codes of what life as a Christian looks like, to speak to the subject of work.

As we look at this text, we need to recognize a couple things. One of the important factors in Bible interpretation is that we must always realize we're reading other people's mail. So when we pick up this letter to the Ephesians, it's not any different than if we went to their mailbox and pulled out a letter that says, "From Paul." We open the envelope and start reading. Paul opens this letter, "To the saints who are in Ephesus."

We're not in Ephesus, so we need to be careful to ask, "How do we apply this letter written to someone else 2,000 years ago and half a globe away? The main thing we need to do is examine the context. What was going on then and there? If we read it through the lens of our time and place, we could get into some trouble. This is one of those passages where, if we read it through a 21st century American lens, we will run into some issues.

Last week I got in trouble with my kids for using a lot of old-time movie references, so this will be my only one this week. We're going to get into a DeLorean and go back in time. Our first stop in the back-in-time trip will be a time in American history. Right away we see in verse five a word that causes every American to freak out. Oh boy, we've got a problem. It goes like this. "Slaves, obey your earthly masters."

Everyone needs to recognize the sinful reality of slavery!

We're reading this through a 21st century American lens, but we have to remember this is not an American letter or a 21st century letter with the history we have. We're reading a first-century Middle Eastern letter written to a group of Christians in a particular context. So we have to get some of our history figured out before we can come to this letter.

The words slave and master are pregnant terms for us. They send shivers down our spine. They hearken back to the deepest and darkest places of our own American history, causing us to miss the totality of what this context contains.

Was there slavery going on in Ephesus? Yes. Was their slavery the same as we saw in the days prior to the Civil War? Probably not. Let me explain. First of all, before we can get to first-century slavery, let's deal with slavery prior to the Civil War. There are four attributes of that slavery which made it totally depraved and ugly.

It was racially based.

American slavery was an unjust system that was based on skin color. One skin color was inferior to another skin color. The Bible speaks of us as being of the same race, of the same bloodline. We come from the same parents. We have different shades of the same color. Because we're made in the image and likeness of God, there's no inferiority due to the different shades of the same color. So right away we're off the reservation, if you will, regarding this idea of slavery. We're missing the point. We're missing the gospel. It was an unjust system.

It was a lifelong enslavement.

For the vast majority of slaves in America, it was a lifetime sentence. Very few slaves were freed in America. Most of them were given very minimal human rights. If anyone should have understood this, it would have been the Hebrew Christians who read this letter from Paul, because a whole book of the Bible told of the time when they were themselves enslaved before the Exodus from Egypt.

It was inherited bondage.

This lifelong bondage came about because of the third attribute of American slave history which is that it was inherited bondage. Children were born into slavery. If your parents were slaves, you were also a slave. Likewise the grandchildren and great-grandchildren also became slaves. It was a legacy of bondage.

People were seen as property.

Slaves were viewed as property that could be bequeathed or exchanged, like any other commodity. They were like livestock or even furniture.

So given these four characteristics, it's no wonder that American slavery was by far some of the most ugly, heinous and harshest forms of slavery human history has ever known. It viewed these dear people as less than human. You could do with them whatever you wanted. You could have them do anything you asked and you'd feel you had the right to treat them that way.

On top of that, the government turned a blind eye to it. In fact, the slave owners were essentially constitutionally protected against any kind of governmental recourse—until the time of the Civil War. So this is precisely why our understanding of the American slave experience is altogether depraved. Denying the God-given worth of individuals, treating them as possessions to be bought, sold and owned, is totally antithetical to the gospel, to understanding how God created us in His image and likeness, and it is contrary to everything in the Scriptures.

So when we read this through American eyes, we think, “How could Paul write this? Why wouldn’t he just tell the slaves to revolt?” We’re actually missing something here. I knew we needed to understand the distinction here, so I did some research. Most pastors will say there’s a difference between what Paul was referring to and American slaves.

Knowing that wouldn’t be enough for some of you, I did some research in the writings of people who aren’t fans of the Bible or our way of life. I wanted them to show me why they think there is a difference between first-century slavery and what we see in our country’s history. I was able to find secular historians who also confirmed the nature of slavery in the time of the Bible:

- Keith Bradley said, “Roman slavery was not based on race. Therefore, there was no stigma attached to being a former slave. Many former slaves went on to hold positions of power and influence in Roman society.”
- Mary Beard said, “While American slaves were treated as property and could be bought and sold at will, Roman slaves had more legal protection. For example, a Roman slave could bring a case against their master in court, and could even be granted their freedom as a reward for good service.”
- Kyle Harper said, “Roman slavery was not based on the concept of racial inferiority, as it was in America. Rather, it was seen as a temporary state of affairs with the potential for slaves to earn their freedom through hard work and loyalty to their masters.”
- Finally, Mary Lefkowitz, who is a history professor from Wellesley College—which isn’t known for being big fans of the Bible—writes this: “In contrast to the horrific treatment of slaves in the American South, Roman slaves were often treated with a degree of kindness and compassion. Many Roman households had close relationships between masters and slaves, and it was not uncommon for slaves to be treated as members of the family.”

Are you seeing that what you and I understand about American slavery is different in a way that both biblical and secular historians agree on? Now the question is, what does Paul say about slavery? It’s a pretty ugly thing. We have to imagine in the Roman empire there were some cruel slave masters and some despicable things happening to slaves. The Roman Empire did have provisions for the protection of slaves, in contrast to American slaves who had no legal recourse.

We want to study now is the Bible’s perspective on slavery. A lot of critics would say, “The Bible was okay with slavery. Jesus never addressed slavery.” But the same man who wrote Ephesians later wrote Timothy, who was the pastor at the church at Ephesus. In his letter to Timothy, Paul talks about the importance of the law. The law is designed to show us as sinners the reality of our sin. It shows us how we all miss the mark and live contrary to the ways of God. In 1 Timothy 1:8-11, Paul says this to Pastor Timothy:

⁸ Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

Paul begins by saying the law is there for all of us, then he gives specific examples of people who are “ungodly and sinners.” We see in verse ten that he specifically mentions “enslavers,” or in other translations “slave traders.” The kind of slavery the Bible directly condemns is forced slavery—against-your-will slavery—where you are viewed as property. Let’s look at some examples of what I think were “just” ways of having slaves (please give me some grace here; this is one of the things that lets us know we’re sinners in need of God’s grace),

There are other words like “indentured servitude” that we might use, but the Bible uses the word “slaves.” Essentially Paul is saying, “You can’t own people. You can’t trade people. You can’t treat people as cargo or animals.” Notice he lists this with all kinds of other things. He goes on to speak of liars, perjurers and “*whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.*”

Now, there has been a lot of debate about what to do with Christians who own slaves. Was what they did heinous? The answer is yes. On this side, where we’re living, it’s easy to look back and say, “How could you do that? That’s depravity unhinged.” But as I

read that passage in 1 Timothy, I notice that the apostle Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, lists that sin among some of the sins I myself struggle with. So when I ask, "How can someone do that?", I have to also ask, "How can I do the things I do? How can we do the things we do? Aren't these also depraved and insidious?" We ask, "How can one person own another person?" We should also ask how can a man cheat on his wife? How can children be disobedient to parents? How can a neighbor defraud his neighbor? How can we steal from our employers? We can go down the list. God says all of these things need His amazing grace. We're all stuck there. We're all canceled out because of it. We're children of wrath. But God, through His grace, is rich in mercy and has made us alive in Christ Jesus.

John Newton, when he was slave trader, saw the depravity of his sin, treating human beings like animals, buying and selling them, but he came to know the saving grace of Jesus Christ. He famously wrote, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see." If that grace can save a slave trader, it's the same grace that can save the adulterer, the liar, the thief. It's the same grace that can save every one of us today.

Please hear me. I'm not sugarcoating what has happened. What we experienced as a nation was a pox on our house. Yet what we have been told, both by biblical and secular historians, seems to be something different.

So let's get in the DeLorean again and go back to the first century in Ephesus. We read these words, "Slaves, obey your masters." If this isn't talking about what we saw in American history, what is it? There are three reasons why an individual might have been a slave in the time of the Ephesians.

A person became a slave to pay off a debt.

They voluntarily became slaves to pay off a debt. Back in the day, there weren't banks where you could go and say, "I want to buy a house. I'm getting married. We want to start a farm. We want to start a business, so we need a piece of property." They couldn't go to the First National Bank of Ephesus and get a mortgage loan. They didn't have that. What they did was go to a richer person and say, "I want to buy a piece of property from you. The way I'll pay you for it is by becoming your slave for a season." Then there would be a contract drawn up. "I'll work until this property is paid off." There would be a certain level of enslavement as a result. They were slaves with masters.

There's a proverb that can easily be taken out of context: *"The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender"* (Proverbs 22:7). We've gone through the Dave Ramsey material and thought, "That's great. It works for me." We might see it as just a principle, but this was a real thing. To have money loaned to you, you would become a slave.

The second way this kind of slavery came about was a person was so underwater with their debts that the one to whom they owed the money would say, "You must work this off." There was no bankruptcy court; they would just be put into indentured slavery.

By the way, in our constitution, there are statements that we can't do this. We cannot put people into indentured servitude or slavery. The only thing way to put someone into slavery, according to our constitution, is prison. You break the law,; you're put into prison. That's the only slavery we can have.

A person became a slave by their choice.

They could also become a slave by their own choice, because it was a better way of life.

Think of it this way. Tim and Amanda are in Ephesus with our three boys. We're running the 5 B's Catering of Ephesus but it isn't going well. Every time we try to get it working, it isn't. People steal from us. Business is down. So we keep looking at the guy up the hill and see that he's in a different business. Maybe he's a farmer. Amanda keeps saying, "You know what, Tim? Maybe it would be easier for us if we just became part of his clan. Maybe if you were one of his workers, we could become his people."

But I would then take my little family, and I would say, "We want to become your slaves for a period of time—or maybe for a lifetime—because it's better for our protection and provision if we're with you than if we're on our own." We're not his family. We don't marry into his family. You're thinking, "Why would you do that?" As Americans, we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. We make it on our own. As Christians, this is exactly what we do. As non-Christians, working on our own, we come to the conclusion that we can't do this. But then we learn about King Jesus and say to Him, "Instead of being king of my own kingdom, it would be better to be a slave in Your Kingdom. So I humbly come and ask You if I can be a slave in Your Kingdom, because that's better than being a king in my own."

A person became a slave because they had been discarded.

The third way to become a slave is a grotesque way, through the reality that children were often discarded in the Roman empire because they weren't wanted, they had some level of handicap or frankly, just because they were girls. They were thrown out in 50 garbage dumps. It wasn't uncommon for infant children to be dumped by the wayside. Thus it was not uncommon for landlords and masters to take these children into their households, not as adopted children—which was the practice of the New Testament church—but as future slaves to work for the master. Still, they would be given provision and protection. They could marry. They could even at some point be given their freedom. It gave them a chance at life that they would not have had otherwise.

Now, as we look at these three ways slavery came about in the first century, we can see a certain justice in them. Within that system, the important thing is the relationship between the master and the slave. As we study this passage three things come to mind.

First, the person in authority and the person under authority are both vital to that relationship, and both of these people were now in the church. So notice how Paul puts both of them on the same level. First, he tells both of them that they are servants of Christ. He also tells both of them that God doesn't treat them with partiality. And third, both of them will receive rewards and both will be in heaven. So Paul has leveled the playing field for both the slave and the master.

We need to realize that whatever is happening here on earth, from a biblical standpoint we are equals. As it says in Colossians 3:11, there is no longer slave or free. Now let's move back to the 21st century to figure out what we need to do with these insights. Since we don't have slaves and masters in America, we now have to find a way to read other people's mail in a way that applies to us. The closest thing we can do is to substitute words from our context into the situations described in the Bible. We have to be careful because there are times when this can bring trouble. What we need to do is to run a test. If I put a word in the Bible that is closer to what I live with, does it make sense? So let's do that.

[Employees], obey your earthly [employers] with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is [an employee] or is [an employer]. [Employers], do the same to [your employees], and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Now the question is this: does it work to put our words in this passage? The answer is yes, it works. We changed it a little bit, but it works. So here are my two points of application.

Employees, remember to do your job with diligence.

Paul says you must remember to do your job with diligence: "Obey your earthly employer." Who are you accountable to at work? Write that person's name down. If you're a student, write down a teacher's name, because that's who you're accountable to. Then notice the verb "obey." It's the same word he used for children. As we learned last week, obey means to listen and do. We don't need to go over that again.

So how well do you listen at work? How well do you do what you're told to do at work? This is elementary. Your boss is talking to you. Are you listening? Or are you thinking, "I'm smarter than them. I'm better at my job than them. I should be in their place and not them. Yada, yada, yada..."? Are those the questions going through your head?

When they tell you to do something, are you delayed in your response? Are you grumbling about it? Are you wanting to do everything else but that thing? Are you only doing it when they're watching, then not doing it when they're not watching? This is the problem. The Christian should be listening and doing. And notice, it's to be done to the best of their ability. Here's why. It's because their boss is just middle management; Who they're really working for is Christ. That's who's at the top of your organization chart.

Notice a couple other things. Your work is to be done with sincerity, that is, with integrity and wholeheartedness, without hypocrisy or ulterior motives. There's no mention of pay or benefits in this passage. You're to do this because of the role the person holds. Your work is to be done with fear and trembling, not because of the person, but because of their position.

Christian, understand this: the person you work for is there because God has put them there. The problem you have is not with your boss; the problem you have is with the sovereignty of God. God has put that person there and they are being held there by

God. Your job is not to try to evict that person; your job is to execute what that person is saying, as long as they are not asking you to do something sinful.

Also notice that your goal is to render a service (verse seven). Rendering a service is what your job is about. If someone were to ask your boss or the people you work with if you are a good employee, how would they answer? Would they say, "He's a good employee," or would they say, "You know, when they're gone, things seem to work a lot smoother"? Evaluate yourself. Ask, "Am I a good employee?" Maybe instead of reading your own press and thinking you're great, you might take the opportunity to ask your employer, "Is there anything I can do better?" Or ask your fellow employees, "Is there anything I can do to make your life easier?" Why would we do this? Because we're going to get paid more? No. Because we're going to get "Employee of the Month"? No. Because we serve Christ and because Christ is ultimately our Boss.

Kent Hughes says this: "Genesis 1 logs God's commitment to excellence when God saw all that He made and He said it was very good. Therefore Christians should always do good work. Christians ought to be the best workers wherever they are. They ought to have the best attitude, the best integrity and be the best in dependability."

You know if you're not doing this. I don't need to give you a whole list of things, right? We know what good work is. Let's do it. Let's get to work.

Employers, reflect God by leading people with a godly purpose.

Paul finishes this passage in verse nine, "*Masters, do the same to them.*" So everything I just said applies to you, employers. Then he says, "Stop threatening." It's kind of like his word to dads. You have a lot of authority, employers. You have weight you can throw around, but stop exerting it. Stop pushing people around.

Very early on in my management at the catering company, I was doing an event with a large group of people working for me. My father was observing me and noticed I did a lot of pointing, a lot of yelling and a lot of declaring, "I'm the boss." I was in my early 20s. Dad pulled me aside and said, "Hey, Tim, the event went great. But can I just give you a piece of advice?" I've never forgotten what he shared with me. He said, "Tim, I've come to realize that when people have to tell others they're the boss, that usually means they're not the boss."

So, employers, if you're constantly having to declare your position, if you have to show everybody the organization chart, if you have to point at the nameplate, you're not leading—and people are not following. If you have to dictate or threaten, if you find yourself saying, "If you don't do this, I'm going to dock this or take this away," this isn't leadership.

Paul is telling employers to be like Jesus. You're thinking, "When did Jesus run a company?" Well, here's what I know. Jesus was the Master of all masters and we never see Him dictate. Never do we see Him threaten. What we see Him do is invite. Does that mean we should never do hard things? As bosses, sometimes we may have to do hard things.

Jesus always invited people in. He cared for people. He understood the people's backstories. He tried to understand what was going on with people. It wasn't about what people did for Him; it was about the people themselves. So, employers, be careful that profits aren't what drives you; people are. Let people be most important. Let them be the program. Let your employees be more important than the bottom line. At the end of the day, without employees you would not have a bottom line.

Paul ends this passage with the statement that both the employer and the employee have a Master and His name is Jesus. So listen, friends, Jesus is our CEO. And if Jesus is our CEO, then it should be a joy to go to work. It should be a joy to be at work. It should be a joy to do work, because at the end of the day, we know our CEO knows what we're doing, knows how we're serving, knows when we're giving it our all. He says we will receive back for whatever good we've done, whether we're an employee or an employer. And friends, that should be good enough for us, amen?