

WHO'S THE BOSS?

By Jim Mersereau

Many studies have revealed that a majority of Americans don't like their jobs. One report said that at least 50%, and perhaps as many as 80%, of American adults are in the wrong job, jobs that don't match their true skills, abilities and interests and therefore jobs they don't like. One reason that is so sad is because we spend such a large part of our lives on the job. Over the span of the average life a person can expect to spend upwards of 76,900 hours at work. How's that for a depressing thought? Also, the average job in our country today only lasts 3.6 years and the average American will change jobs eight to ten times over the course of their working years.

What happens when people are so unhappy with the thing to which they devote so much of their time? For one thing they call in sick a lot, even when they really aren't. It's been estimated that absenteeism from the job costs American industry about ten billion dollars a year. And even when they are at work, those unhappy people frequently are not very productive. In the book, "The Day America Told the Truth" the authors say their research revealed that fifty percent of Americans procrastinate at work so much that it adds up to doing absolutely nothing about one full day in every five.

Think about that, one half of all American workers admit that fully 20% of their work week is spent doing absolutely nothing, or engaging in activities that have nothing to do with their job, such as socializing with co-workers or cruising the internet. Another problem the authors identified is that sixty-one percent of Americans admit to regularly lying to their bosses, so dishonesty in the workplace is also a big issue.

What can we do about the fact that so many people dislike their jobs and consequently perform poorly? First, I believe it is essential for a person to take the time to identify what it is they want to do for a living and then get the education and training so they can be employed in a profession they will enjoy. There are few things worse than having to spend forty hours of every week performing a job you hate. Conversely, there are few things more rewarding than spending that same amount of time doing something you truly love, and getting paid to do it! As a pastor there have been many times when I've been handed my paycheck and I jokingly replied, "Wow, all this fun and they pay me too?" But it's true! I love what I do and being able to make a living from it as well is just a nice bonus.

Young people especially should take the time to discover what they are truly interested in and would enjoy doing, then get the proper education and training so someone will pay them to do it. Even an older person, who finds they are unhappy with their current position for one reason or another, should begin taking steps to find a career they will enjoy. Here in the United States we have been blessed with a wide array of adult continuing education options, many of them offered at night, that provide the opportunity to get retrained for a new career.

However with all that said, whether you like your current job or not, as a Christian the Lord requires you to do it to the very best of your ability. Since you surrendered your life to Him, and since you represent Him in all areas of your life, you are to honor Him and represent Him well in the way you do your job.

In the sixth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians the Apostle Paul teaches about this. In this letter Paul provides instructions about how to live the Christian life well. In chapters five and six the underlying theme is submission. There he explains submission in the context of husbands and wives within the marriage relationship, and parents and children in the home. Now Paul applies the theme of submission to the workplace.

Workers are to submit to the boss

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.”
Ephesians 6:5-8

Paul frames this discussion in the context of masters and slaves, but only because that was the primary workplace relationship that existed in Paul’s day. Historians estimate that up to one-third of all the people in the Roman Empire may have been slaves, so it was a work relationship Paul’s early readers could easily relate too. Paul’s teaching in this passage revolves around the employer/employee relationship and Bible scholars seem unanimous that it applies equally to us today. So where you see the word “slave” in the text, you can safely insert “employee” and where you see “master” go ahead and put “employer”.

Paul was teaching that employees should obey and show respect for their employer; the employee should serve the employer as if he was serving Jesus Christ Himself. He writes in verse six that employees should work hard, but not just because the boss might be watching. Rather, because God is watching and the clear implication is that God expects us to work hard and well. It is God’s will for us to work, and to work well.

Work is so important that in Exodus 20:9 God commanded His people to work six days out of seven. He said, *“Six days you shall labor and do all your work.”* In the New Testament we are commanded to work as well. 1 Thessalonians 4:11 tells us, *“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you,”* Colossians 3:23 says, *“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,”* And in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 we read, *“For even when we were with you we gave you this rule: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”*

Over the years I have met many people who could work, and should work, but who do not work. Usually they have come to the church seeking aid of some sort. Many times they have told me that they can’t work for one reason or another, usually because of some physical ailment or disability. Granted, there are some people who really are physically unable to work, but they are rare and they are the exception. I firmly believe almost everybody can do some kind of work to help support themselves.

You are probably familiar with the story of Joni Earkenson Tada. She has spent her entire adult life as a quadriplegic, confined to a motorized wheelchair. She requires

assistance to do everything including dressing, eating, and going to the bathroom. But Joni would not allow her disability to keep her from being productive. She learned how to paint by holding a paintbrush in her teeth, and today some of her art hangs in art galleries. She is a widely published Christian author, she's a popular speaker at Christian conferences, and she even has her own radio program. She has almost no use of her body but still she has found ways to be productive.

Years ago I had a friend and co-worker in Southern California who had the same disability as Joni. He too was a quadriplegic. But like Joni he refused to allow his disability to defeat him. He put himself through college, became a licensed Marriage and Family Counselor, learned to drive a specially outfitted mini-van by using a joy stick controller on his wheel chair, and he worked forty hours a week at a counseling center helping other people put their lives back together!

Some years ago I had a member in one of my churches in California who was blind. But by means of voice activated computer software he learned how to work with computers and held a full-time job to support his family.

My own daughter has significant mental and physical handicaps but she has a job and contributes to her own expenses. In one church I was the pastor of there was an eighty-three year old woman, frail, with breathing difficulties and brittle bones but still she ran the largest Avon businesses in the Imperial Valley of California!

The point is that almost everyone can do something to help themselves. There are very few people who are completely incapable of doing any work at all. God commands that we work and the Apostle Paul tells us, very directly, that if you will not work then you shall not eat. God wants us to be productive instead of relying on others to provide for us.

Good things come to us as a result of working. Dr. Charles Stanley teaches that working is a Scriptural imperative and from it we receive at least five practical benefits:¹

1. **A paycheck.** From a purely practical standpoint we have a responsibility to pay our own bills and provide for our family. The paycheck is God's method of providing for your financial needs. Sorry, there won't be a magic money tree sprouting up in your backyard and there will be no angel disguised as the tooth-fairy leaving the rent money under your pillow. God's answer to your financial needs is, "Get a job so you will have a paycheck."

2. **Development of skills.** We all have skills and abilities that are gifts from God and He expects us to make good use of them. Having a job helps us to refine and use our skills and abilities.

3. **Development of character.** It's in the trials and challenges that come with every job that we develop and refine the character traits of patience, gentleness, faithfulness, submission to authority, etc.

4. **Development of self-worth.** When you are doing your best, and producing a good result, you feel good about yourself. Even if nobody else recognizes your accomplishments or compliments you on them, you know and God knows. If your attitude is right and you are working for the Lord at whatever you are doing, then you can have a sense of accomplishment, achievement and joy at absolutely any job. A job well-done is a good feeling and that is its own reward. You develop a sense of self-worth

because you are productive and making a contribution.

5. **Development of meaningful relationships with other people.** Your job is the greatest opportunity you have to meet and interact with lost people. As a Christian, most of the rest of your time is probably spent with your biological and church families. It is when you are at work that you have the greatest amount of contact with unsaved people and that is when God can really use you. For most of us the greatest opportunity we have to interact with lost people is when we are on the job.

Of course, we have to be careful how we do that. Our employer is paying us to do a job not to stand around preaching at people. Christians should be the best employees in the company. Our boss should get more work out of us, with better quality and a better attitude, than from any other employee. We are the ones who should always be on time and doing a good job because we realize we are really doing our work for the Lord.

But in the process of being a good employee we can look for opportunities to share the love of Jesus with people. We can be nicer than anyone else; we can be more compassionate and understanding; we can go out of our way to help our co-workers. And then, when the opportunity presents itself, perhaps on a break or during lunch, we can tell them about Jesus. Our job can be a vehicle the Lord uses for us to develop truly meaningful relationships with people and to share the Good News of the Gospel with them.

So those are some reasons *why* we should work. Now let's briefly consider *how* we should work. In verse seven Paul addresses that very directly,

"Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men,"

We are to treat our work as an act of service to the Lord. Never mind if you don't like your boss, that's no excuse for slacking off or having a bad attitude. You aren't really working for him anyway. You are sweeping the floor for Jesus. You are cooking that hamburger for Jesus. You are fixing that electrical line, hammering that nail, preparing that report, teaching that class, dressing that wound, for the Lord. You do your job with enthusiasm and to the best of your ability because you are doing it for Jesus. That's *how* we are to work.

So in these four verses Paul taught employees to submit themselves to their bosses and to be exceptional employees because the boss you are really working for is Jesus. Then he moves on in his teaching and provides some instruction for employers.

Bosses are to submit to the Lord

"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 favoritism with him." Ephesians 6:9

Paul concludes his teaching about workplace relationships with a word to "masters" or "bosses". Here he tells the boss that they have a responsibility to treat the worker fairly. In verse nine he returns to the point he taught in Galatians 3:28 regarding equality in Christ:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Just as husbands and wives are equal in the eyes of God - they just have different roles to play within the structure of the marriage relationship, so too bosses and workers are equal in the eyes of God, they just have different roles to play within the structure of the workplace. Verse nine is actually a word of caution to Christian bosses that they should not allow their earthly position to go to their heads because in God's eyes the boss is no better than the worker. While the worker has a responsibility to do a good job, the boss has a responsibility to treat the worker with dignity and fairness.

That's what Paul was teaching here in Ephesians chapter six. As an employer the Christian has a responsibility to use his or her position as a means of being a blessing to the workers. If you are fortunate enough to find yourself in a supervisory role then you need to realize it is not mistake you are there, God has you there for a purpose.

Bosses, how do you treat your workers? Do you treat them like people or like machines? Are you sensitive to their needs and considerate of their feelings? How do you react when they make a mistake? Do you criticize, demean and threaten them, or do you simply correct and instruct them? Do you keep in mind that you are dealing with people whom God loves and Jesus died for?

It always amazes me to learn of a boss who mistreats his or her employees. Does that boss really think they are going to create a productive and loyal workforce like that? A Christian boss will see him or herself as a servant of the Lord and they will use their position to extend the rule of Jesus into that workplace. Bosses are to submit to the Lord. You are to be a servant of Jesus in the workplace.

Our society tends to assign value to people based upon what they do for a living and how much money they earn. The educated and wealthy are judged to be more important than the uneducated and poor. But for the Christian that kind of thinking is unacceptable. We all have a role to play and jobs to do. The positions we occupy do not make one person more valuable than another in the eyes of God. As far as the Lord is concerned, we are all equal and one day we will all stand before Him to be judged - not for the kind of career we had or for how much money we made, but for whether or not we are saved and for what we did for Him in this lifetime. In that day those are the only things that will matter.

The most important application of this text is the realization that we are all slaves of Christ. We belong to Him and we are to serve Him. All of our work is meaningful if it is done for Him. Our work is to be done with joy and enthusiasm, to the very best of our ability. The people we work with and for, and those who work for us, are to be valued by us, nurtured, and treated with dignity and respect. There are no jobs and no people whom we can treat as unimportant.

1. Stanley, Charles *The Glorious Journey*, Nashville, Thomas Nelson 1996, pp 83-92

(For an expanded teaching on this subject, refer to chapter thirteen of the book "Walking With Paul, A Journey Through The Lessons of Ephesians" by Jim Mersereau. Available at www.JimMersereauBooks.com)