

EPHESIANS 6:1-9
THANK GOD ITS MONDAY!

“Penny has worked on the buses for seven years. She’s a warm, down-to-earth sort of person. It’s not an easy job: trying to soothe stroppy, frozen-footed, frustrated passengers who have waited 45 minutes in the rain for the bus that didn’t come; trying to treaty everyone who asks for a ticket as a human being, as somebody in God’s plan; trying to go by the rules; trying to chat to her regulars, some of whom are just plain lonely and come out for a ride into town for the company. Trying and sometimes blowing it. Being herself and, as she puts it, trusting that through it all God will use her somehow. It’s tough place to work. Lots of affairs, lots of divorce, lots of gossip. ‘Pen’ as they call her, tries not to get involved. But when the chips are down its often Pen who people tell things to. After all, they can be sure she’s not going to sit in an office blabbing it to the world. Similarly, it’s often others who ask her questions about Jesus. They just come to her. She laughs with a mixture of joy and disbelief that God uses her in this way: ‘I feel unworthy of it really.’ Occasionally the mockery of Christ is sharp... she isn’t judgemental and doesn’t expect people who don’t know God to live by His rules. Sometimes it saddens her that people put her in a box: ‘We Christians are obviously a strange breed to them. And sometimes I feel like a bit of an alien.’ She pauses. ‘But that, I suppose, is what we are.’” (M Greene Thank God its Monday pp23,24)

This is just one story from a book by Mark Greene, there is a copy in the library. It is all about work and the issues that people face in the workplace today, the way in which the Bible helps us understand how to look at the way we work. It is a hard place to be a Christian at times; there are lots of issues and struggles. There are times when ‘Thank God it’s Monday’ is the very opposite of the way we think about work, and we dread going back to the shop, office, school, or wherever it is we work. But, the Bible does help us see a different attitude to work, in the same way as it does with marriage and family life. These are three areas of life where we spend most of our waking hours and in these areas, Paul challenges us to see the influence of the Spirit on our lives. He has said *“be filled...” (5:18)* and we said then that one of four ways in which the Spirit is seen in Christians’ lives is by ‘submitting’. So *“Submit to...” (5:21)* and there are three examples of relationships shaped and moulded by the Spirit in us.

Last week, we looked at marriage and we’ve already talked about children, parents, and family life this morning; now we look at the third area and that is work. There are two things to say: 1)if you’re not in paid employment any more, keep listening because this is about all kinds of relationships; are you part of a church team? Or the leader of a team? Do you volunteer somewhere? Are you in charge of volunteers? This is about all kinds of relationships as well as the work-place! 2)it’s mutual – there are two sides to this coin, as we’ve seen in other examples and this is about mutual responsibilities, whether you are at the bottom of the corporate ladder or the top! Whether you are the member of a team, or the leader of the team, there are mutual responsibilities in our relationships; whether a volunteer or the manager of volunteers, there are mutual responsibilities in these relationships. If you want to take time to think more about this and read more about it, then borrow Mark Greene’s book; there are lots of stories as well as lots of insight; it is a really easy book to read; there is a copy to borrow in the library; it is well worth it!

Slaves and masters: the nearest equivalent for us is the workplace relationship. Someone has estimated that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Slaves came in all shapes and sizes; prisoners of war were taken as slaves, people were bought and sold in the slave markets of Rome and every major city of the

Empire. They did all of the manual labour in the Empire, but were also doctors and teachers, the people trusted with bringing up children in a Roman household. But they were treated as things: "A slave is a living tool." (Aristotle) The master cared for his slaves in the same way that he thought it wise to look after his animals and his furniture. The master had the power of life and death over his slave, and he could dispose of his slaves on a whim if the fancy took him; the slave had no place at all in Roman society, other than to do his master's bidding and for some that meant severe abuse. Master, husband, father – the culture gave them absolute power over the slave, wife and children – there is a pattern here!

Paul takes this area of life and gives it a huge Christian twist. Some have questioned why Paul simply allowed slavery to continue; why did he not challenge the whole institution of slavery as degrading to human beings? But that perhaps never entered his head; that is perhaps to impose our society's views on the first century where life was very different. Perhaps Paul simply could not envisage a world without slaves because slaves made the world go around. Instead, he gave whole thing a huge Christian twist: here is the way for Christians to behave as slaves and masters; here is a way of thinking about work that is God-shaped. Perhaps you've never even considered that God is interested in your place of work and what you do when you're there; perhaps thought that God is only interested in the religious things of our life; well, here is what life is like in the work-place under the influence of the Spirit of God!

"Slaves..." (6:5) To begin with, there is nothing new there; every slave was expected to obey his/her master; he had no option; he had to obey whether he liked it or not because the punishment for a disobedient slave could be severe. But there is something completely new here, something about an attitude to work and the way in which we do that work. Obey... *"just as..." (6:5b)* Slaves are to do their work, as if doing it not for their earthly master, but as service to Jesus, as 'slaves of Christ'. So the slave is to do his work wholeheartedly, working hard even when no-one is watching him, but doing his job to the best of his ability all of the time. The Christian slave is to do his work 'as to the Lord', serving God with all his heart and as he serves God in this way, so he will serve his earthly master with a whole heart. There is a different kind of obedience here: not just for sake of it, not doing it because I have to; but serving and submitting to someone because I am serving Jesus.

The masters in the congregation would be happy to hear this; happy and hard-working, committed slaves would be good for their household or factory, would make the workplace more productive. But as we've seen before, Paul has another side to the coin: *"Masters..." (6:9)* 'Do same to them' says Paul. What does that mean? Well, means the master is to show respect to his slaves and not to bully and harass them, not to oppress them and treat them badly. Well, this is hugely different; a master who thinks about his slaves and their well-being; this is revolutionary stuff! A master who is to treat his slaves as fellow-human beings and not as goods and chattels – we don't realise at this distance just how revolutionary and counter to the culture of the first century this was, but Paul knew that everyone was equal in Christ; God looked on everyone in the same way and so people are to treat one another well. The masters had a master too; they too were servants of a Master and so were to live and work and treat slaves in way that honoured Jesus.

Tom Wright, now a theologian and writer, tells a story of working on a building site when he was a student and tells how the men would work as slowly as they could get away with and lots of 'cigarette breaks'. When the foreman appeared they would begin to work really hard, but once his back was turned they'd stop again. Then when overtime was offered, they would volunteer for three hours work, work really hard for an hour and persuade the night watchman to punch their timecards for three. There

are people who are in charge of things who know that they're in charge and want everyone else to know it too: they throw their weight around, making demands of staff that are unjust, change their minds right, left and centre, so that the staff are not sure which way to turn next and they bully and harass people so that work is a nightmare place to be.

Both of these are wrong. No matter where we are on the scale of things in the workplace, the Christian's attitude to work is to be different. There is a seven-letter word that should sum up our attitude to work, no matter what that means: "service". All of our work is service: "it is possible to cook a meal as if Jesus were going to eat it, or to spring-clean house as if Jesus were to be the honoured guest. It is possible for teachers to educate children, for doctors to treat patients and nurses to care for them, for solicitors to help clients, shop assistants to serve customers, accountants to audit books and secretaries to type letters as if in each case they were serving Jesus Christ." (John Stott) Stott goes on to suggest that same is true for factories, building sites, dustmen and every kind of workplace job. Everything we do can be done 'as to the Lord'; Billy Graham's wife had a little sign at the sink for washing dishes – "Divine services conducted here three times daily!"

Jesus told story about men working in as vineyard; they were tenant farmers, looking after the vineyard for the owner who had rented it out to them. They worked hard and produced a whole lot of fruit, but when the owner came looking for the rent, his share of the crop, they refused to give it to him. They were supposed to respect the owner, but they didn't and even when the owner sent his son to collect the rent, thinking they would respect his son, the tenants killed the son and thought they could steal the vineyard for themselves. It is a story about workers and how they got it wrong, with a wrong attitude to work. But it is also a story about serving God and how people are supposed to love God and serve God, but we get that wrong too and become self-centred and selfish and proud and arrogant and forget all about God and what God has given to us. To believe and to serve God is better way.

Treat one another well; submit to one another. Marriage, family life, work-place relationships – 'submitting' is the key. Wherever we meet people, and get along with people, 'submitting' to one another is a mark of the Spirit's influence on our life. It's mutual; we are to treat one another with respect, and be humble; we are to serve one another 'as to the Lord', because it really is Jesus that we are serving. God is interested in the way we go to work; God cares about the shape of our family life; and marriage; as people filled with the Spirit, learn to "*Submit to...*" (5:21)