This is the second week in our series about transforming our work perspective. Transforming our work perspective can really help us, others and the advancement of God’s work in this world. As we said last week, don’t just see work as your paid job, although it will always include that if you have one. Work refers to any effort that we put out to accomplish a goal but excludes efforts in play, rest, and leisure … Your chores are work, learning & studying at school are work, running a home is work, serving Jesus is work, if you are disabled or retired, the extra time & effort you have to do just to keep going is work. Participating in our worship service together and seeking to learn something from God right now are work.

Last week, we saw that God works – so when we work, we imitate God. Trying to always avoid work or thinking paradise would be playing games or watching movies all the time is really seeking a less human existence. We would definitely not be reflecting God, whose image we are made in. When God works, He produces something. Our effort is to be towards a goal – a good goal – and that effort alone towards completing that goal reflects the image of God we were made in. Hopefully these truths have encouraged you this week as you faced the boring areas of work, the relentlessness of chores, the frustration of work obstacles, not being appreciated for your efforts or just being tired of being tired. You and I can reflect our awesome Lord in the little, continuous and mundane tasks of life. That is special!

We also saw that there is a dignity in all legitimate work. There are no low or demeaning jobs in God’s sight. A work-free environment, where we just indulge ourselves, will lead to a less fully-human result with lots of physical, emotional & spiritual problems. We are created in God’s image & God works. Humans need to work.

Today we are going to again look at transforming our work perspective, but this time looking at the attitudes, actions, values and focus that allow us to honor God as we work. Constant complaining, not finishing a job or being sloppy in our work does not honor God even though we put forth a lot of effort. There are some important attitudes, values and focus which will turn our work efforts into God honoring actions. Most of the direct instructions in the New Testament in this area come from the instructions given to slaves. For modern Americans, it’s hard to read these sections and think about anything other than the injustice of slavery – and let’s be clear, human slavery is totally unjust! But if those work instructions applied to slaves who had no choice, they apply to us even more today. If these directions can transform the perspectives of slaves, imagine their effect in our lives when we start living them!

PROPOSITION: We can honor God in our work by the attitude, values and focus we bring to that work!

I. Different attitude

Ephesians 6:5 (5:21)
Our passage today is part of a bigger section which is introduced in Eph 5:21. READ. “Submission” in the Christian life is not a negative word, but it is something EVERY Christian is called to – from the highest to the lowest. Submission is NOT being a doormat nor is it a sign of helplessness – but it is a different attitude & action done for a much, much greater purpose – deep respect for Jesus. We want to honor Jesus in how we approach work. That will be counter-cultural.

A. Shaped by the gospel

In Eph 6:5 we start a section that deals slaves. Slaves were the ones who did most of the work in the ancient Roman empire. Ancient historians estimate that there were some 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire - that is 50% of the population. The church probably had an even higher percentage of slaves in it once it left the land of Israel. A slave’s work was considered below the dignity of Roman citizens – yet practically everything was done by slaves including much of the teaching & medical care. A slave’s life was just to do the work of their master and then when they could no longer do that, they were expendable and could be just thrown out, left to die. If your life looks gloomy at times, their situation was downright depressing and there was very little hope of any hope of change in their lifetime. It is in this context that we read Ephesians 6:5-8. READ. There is a radical change being presented here. Their work as lowly slaves can please God, be honoring to Him and worthy of reward! For that to happen, they needed to transform their attitude about work. God offers us the opportunity to do any work for our Lord Jesus Christ whether that is in school, at home, in church, at a workplace or just overcoming disabilities.

So if you want a different perspective when you are washing the floors, scrubbing pots or taking out the garbage – do these for Jesus. When we take our turn in the nursery, park in one of the away lots, greet people, or clean the church – we are to do these for Jesus. When our paid boss gives us work that is boring or burdensome, we are to do that for Jesus. When we get tired of studying, we can push ourselves to finish for Jesus. If slaves are told it’s possible to find a kind of satisfaction & meaning in their work, how much more true is that true of us today. God can literally use any of our work for His greater work.

Underlying this new motivation, attitude and values is the gospel – the good news of Jesus. Sometimes it is easy to forget how our basic belief in Jesus dying on the cross for us and rising from the dead radically impacts EVERY area of our life.

B. Our identity is in Jesus, not what we do

Let’s go back to v 5 READ. Why do we obey Christ? Because of the gospel, the good news of Jesus – because Jesus is God incarnate who has forgiven our sins, given us a new nature inside, opened heaven to us, given the Holy Spirit to us and reconciled us with the Holy God through dying on the cross for us and then raising bodily from the dead. We obey out of reverence, love, appreciation and admiration.
So our identity is in Jesus, not what we do. In Jesus’ day, the slaves did work that was considered “below” Roman citizens, so those slaves were considered lesser people. Yet as Christians, their citizenship was in heaven which was far more significant & long-lasting than any Roman citizenship. In the Middle Ages Christians wrongly came to believe that only religious work (like being a monk, nun or priest) was important. All other work was second class. One’s job again became their identity. Monks, nuns and priests were thought to have a higher standing with God. But the gospel says our standing before God is based on what Jesus did on the cross, not the work we accomplish. So our identity is in Jesus, not our work. It is only by God’s grace through faith that we are saved. Through that, God adopts us as His child. So I am not superior to you because I have a full-time “faith oriented” job and you do not. Both of our identities come from God’s love and His adopting us into His family.

Too many Americans have similar, false understandings of work. For them, it is only the prestigious, high paying or “cool” jobs that count. They believe if only they can get promotions quickly, be in charge of many people or be recognized in the media, then their life will be worthwhile. Christians should not get their identity from work because we already have a more significant identity as children of God.

C. Team player/respect others

READ v 5. As Christians we are all on team – Team Jesus. We call Jesus our savior and our Lord. Lord means our boss. So when these Christian slaves were asked to have a different attitude at work, they are being called to be a team player on a bigger team – Team Jesus. On a team everyone has a role that helps the bigger goal. The more one focuses on oneself, the weaker the team as a whole. There is a specialness to what Jesus is calling us to even in the most unfair, horrible or boring situations of life. We are doing this for Jesus and we are showing respect for others – not because they deserve it but because it is what Jesus has asked us to do for the team. Jesus knows what we can each do to help the great victory which He will bring over sin, death and the demonic. In a sin-filled, broken world we will always have major problems when we work – regardless if that work is paid, at school, in the home, serving Jesus or overcoming a disability. Jesus works through even these. It is not that we are better than those around us, but through the gospel we become better “us’s”. The gospel gives us a new boss, new purpose, new values and new pay so we personally can be a better “us” than if we were not Christians.

II. Different values

Work refers to any effort that we put out to accomplish a goal but it excludes play, rest, and leisure … Your chores are work, learning & studying at school are work, running a home is work, serving Jesus is work, if you are disabled or retired, the extra time & effort you have to do just to keep going is work. As we do these with a new attitude – working for Jesus – then we honor our Great God IN our work. We also honor God as we work with different values. READ v 5-6. We also honor God when we work with different values.

A. Hard work
Hard work is one of those values. We see that in this instruction in v 6 where the Christians are told to obey not just to be thought of well when someone was watching, but as willing slaves of Jesus. God can take our hard work in any area and use it for the advancement of His Kingdom even when that work has nothing to do with the church or Christian ministries. The picture of hard work here is again very counter-cultural to our old nature. If you feel your boss is unfair, your work is meaningless, or you are just tired, then our natural response is to do as little as we can get away with. When the boss is around, then we look like we are working hard. We want them to think highly of us as hard workers because that is what bosses, teams, families and any other humans appreciate.

Instead of just “looking like a hard worker” when someone important is observing, we most glorify Jesus when we actually work hard – whether someone notices or not. I can’t tell you how many small business owners in our Central Vermont area are totally frustrated with the lack of a “work ethic” in the people they employ. The employees will work when they are being watched but then slack off when the boss is not around. Or they will waste work time on their smart phone or just not show up for work. What a great time to be a witness for Jesus just by our diligence and conscientiousness in our work. God will use our witness of diligent, consistent work far more than we can imagine.

For example, Christians & churches were oppressed and persecuted in Russia and the countries around them. One of the ways the government would try to discourage people from going to church or standing up for Jesus was to make their lives at work miserable – they’d be given the worst jobs, made to work extra for no pay, be regularly put down, etc. What changed that? The hard work of Christians at their governmental jobs despite the mistreatment! Middle level governmental managers began to question why they were coming down hard on Christians when it was the Christians who came to work on time, did solid work and worked the whole day steadily. God used the hard work of the ordinary Christian to do what lawyers, outward pressure, religious leaders, rights organizations & others couldn’t do! How powerful it is when we follow Jesus’ counter-cultural ways with these different values. When we work hard for Jesus we won’t know HOW God will use that, but we can be assured He will use that – because it honors Him. Hard work means to get to work on time, work diligently & conscientiously, be dependable and give a full day’s work – it does not mean you are at burner speed all the time (which no human can do) or that you become a work-a-holic. Bible-believing Christians should be some of the hardest workers in any job.

B. Honesty and with integrity

“Honesty” and “integrity” (“sincerity of heart”) are two other key values we can bring to our work that will honor God. We see both of these reflected in v 5-6. READ. “Sincerity of heart” in v 5, being genuine and actually carrying through with our work when no one is watching in v 6 means we work honesty and with integrity. An
honest worker can be trusted whether someone is watching or not. Someone who works with integrity means they work the same whether someone is watching or not. Christians should be workers who cannot be bribed or compromised because we serve God rather than people. Christians should be workers who keep their word.

Living with honesty and integrity in a world where the corrupt seem favored and our old sinful nature wants to take shortcuts is challenging. It takes courage to maintain personal integrity in a world that devalues the truth, ignores God’s word, and promises self-fulfillment & happiness from stuff. But it honors God when we work hard with honesty and integrity – working the same whether someone is watching or not. And God can use that kind of work mightily.

III. Different focus

Work refers to any effort that we put out to accomplish a goal but it excludes play, rest, and leisure … Your chores are work, learning & studying at school are work, running a home is work, serving Jesus is work, if you are disabled or retired, the extra time & effort you have to do just to keep going is work.

A. Use the abilities God has given you

READ v 7-8. Clearly God wants followers of Jesus to have a different focus – “serve wholeheartedly as if you were serving the Lord, not people”. Besides the different attitude of working for the Lord rather than people and the different values of hard work with integrity and honesty, what does “serving Jesus wholeheartedly” include?

We want to use the abilities God has given us for His purposes. We all have natural gifts from birth, spiritual gifts from our rebirth (when we came to faith in Jesus) and giftedness from the situations we have gone through in life. Those who have been addicted & overcome have extra life experience gifts to help the addicted, those who have gone through cancer have extra life experience gifts to help those facing cancer. God has given gifts to us to use in all of our life, in addition to using them in the Christian ministries. That doesn’t mean others around should change so “you can use your gift” in a way that you feel most fulfilled. God’s plans with the Ephesian Christian slaves did not depend on any of the slave masters or others around them doing anything helpful. Using the abilities we have helps us not envy the giftedness others have. And seeing the abilities we don’t have helps us from thinking we are superior to others because of giftedness God has given us. Because the focus of giftedness is NOT on the gift but on the task we are seeking to honor God in, no one is “wasting” their abilities doing something important like raising their kids, caring for a disabled or aging relative or helping their spouse. As Christians we want to have a different perspective on our giftedness – we want to use, not hide, our abilities, BUT we don’t insist on having a special position or platform where our giftedness is seen. The apostle Paul was the most ‘gifted’ in understanding Jewish theology in the early church, but God gave him the responsibility to reach out to the non-Jewish people. Peter was probably the most impetuous of the disciples, but Jesus gave him the job of
being a key leader for the church. You don’t have to find a job or ministry “in your field” to honor God – but you do need to use your abilities to help the place you are now to honor Jesus. I don’t have to be a vocational pastor to use the spiritual gifts God has given me, but I do need to point people to Jesus and help them understand the great truths of Jesus where ever I am – here at the church, with the many hundreds of kids I was a counselor to, in the computer department of National Life, among the employees of grocery store I worked at and someday probably in a hospital bed or nursing home. There is NO PLACE and there are no situations where we can’t honor God by using our abilities.

B. Serve others & do good

Doing our everyday work wholeheartedly for Jesus also means we seek to do good. READ v 8. The Lord will reward Christians “for whatever good” we do – in this case the slaves obeying and carrying out what their masters ask as if they were doing it for Jesus. Doing good refers to doing good for others, for the Lord and for humans as a whole. Serving others and doing good is a part of God’s design for work and we will look at that more in a couple weeks when we dig into our human mandate given to us by God.

C. Real pay comes from God

Finally, we need to remember that when we work for God, He pays us. Don’t skip this thinking we should always serve Jesus out of the good intentions of our heart. Jesus spent a lot of time telling us about future rewards so we could continue to live counter-culturally, especially in the area of work, long after those good intentions are out. We have a new pay or new reward for our work. READ v 8. When we do our work for the glory of Jesus right where we are now as long as that work is legitimate – we will receive a rich reward in the millennium and in heaven. Remember this is addressed to slaves – who received no pay, had little to look forward to in this life and had no chance to receive any inheritance. God rewards faithful workers – not just in “full-time Christian work” but He rewards these Christian slaves simply for doing their jobs for Jesus rather than their masters! And the pay God will give us in the future, beyond this earthly life, is so great especially for those who receive little or nothing for their work now, that we will all wish we had served Jesus more in those mundane, looked-down-upon, unpaid and seemingly meaningless tasks in our lives. These blessings, these future rewards, are beyond the natural positive results God has built in as a reward for hard, diligent, God-honoring work. Jesus is going to make up for all injustice and He is going to richly reward those who worked hard, but didn’t get the money, acclaim or status others did. This new boss, new purpose, new values and new inheritance free us from letting the injustice, crushing frustrations, menialness and lack of recognition of work enslave, embitter and control us. It doesn’t matter whether anyone else notices – God does and His is the pay, the recognition and the value we want.
In South Carolina there is a Christian prison ministry called “Jump Start”. It not only works with inmates while they are in prison, but also seeks to continue that training and help them get a place to stay & a job after they get out. They have graduated 2,100 from the 40 week in-prison course in the last 10 years and only 70 have returned to prison. But as this ministry tried to get the second part going, they could find very few companies to hire “Jump Start” graduates until Chris Phillips of Sun Surveillance, also a Christian, decided to give one former inmate a try. “He literally did the work of 2 men. He was so focused and just so thankful for the opportunity.” Today most of the dozen employees of that company are ex-cons. As Steve Wyman, a former inmate and now production manager said, “God definitely has a sense of humor. Here’s this Christian company that is a security company, where the majority of employees are ex-offenders.” What broke the ice that is now helping hundreds every year get a new life? One person who worked hard which God then multiplied to do far more than we can imagine. Do not under-estimate what God can do with your hard work whether that is at a job, chores around the house, at school, during retirement or overcoming disabilities. Keep overcoming in the power of Jesus!