



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

August 9, 2015

"We Get To Serve!" (Worthy Series) - Ephesians 6:5-9

The Rev. Tim Shaw

The word at the center of this sermon series is the Greek word, *axios*, which means "worthy". There is only one person who is truly worthy to be in God's presence and that One person is Jesus Christ. The hosts of heaven sing a song about the Risen Christ in Revelation chapter 5, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain." That's the same word, *axios*, that is in the middle of Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Christ is the only one who is worthy and Christ makes us worthy when we say "Yes" to Him—when we recognize that we can't make ourselves worthy, but Christ can gift us His worthiness when we entrust our lives to Him. In response to that gift we are called to seek to live a life worthy of what Christ has done for us.

One of the keys to life is learning how to put the full weight of our lives down on Jesus Christ so that we don't put the full weight of our lives down on some other really good things. Because when we put the full weight of our lives down on some really good things like marriage or children or work, we have the tendency to crush those things...like a particle board slipper rack!

Before we dive into the text for today I want to tell you a story that Jesus told His disciples. I think if we

understand that story, it's going to help us make sense of what the Apostle Paul teaches about the relationship between slaves and masters in Ephesians 6. And that is going to help us understand what this text has to say about our work as employees, employers and bosses.

Paul has been talking about the relationship between husbands and wives, children and their parents, and now between workers and the people they work for. This text about slaves and masters is going to help us understand the work we do, whether that work we do is for a paycheck or work we volunteer to do.

A huge crowd numbering in the thousands came to hear Jesus teach. There were so many people that some were being trampled. As Jesus got up to speak, He was immediately interrupted.

Luke 12:13 – *"Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.'"*

Jesus hasn't even started talking and some guy shouts from the crowd, "Hey Jesus, make my brother give me some of the money our father left us." It's my bet that this guy showed up to this meeting mad! He was fuming when he arrived

to hear Jesus. This guy was ticked off at his brother. Their father had died and his older brother, according to this guy, refused to share the inheritance with him. His brother is probably standing somewhere in that crowd, maybe just a few steps away.

Luke 12:14 – *"But (Jesus) said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'"*

Jesus' response in verse 14 is a challenge. It's not a defensive, exasperated reaction to the man's demand. He's trying to get this guy and the crowd to consider who it is they're listening to. He is indeed God's appointed judge and arbiter. He's not going to rule on this specific situation.

What He will do is try and get this man, the crowd, and us to consider the basic values of the Kingdom of God. He wants our lives to be shaped by those priorities and by His worldview so that we will know how to work through challenges like this when they crop up in our lives.

Luke 12:15 – *"And (Jesus) said to them (he's speaking to this man and to the entire crowd), 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'"*

Jesus tells the crowd, "Watch out! If we allow our lives to be dominated by greed, our lives will become smaller and smaller." The opposite is also true. Our lives will grow larger if generosity is at the core of who we are. Jesus knows that it is not the number of possessions we have that should define our lives. We can try to bring definition to our lives with monetary wealth and possessions but it never seems to be enough.

The first time you make \$25,000 a year you can't imagine having that much money. Then all of a sudden that's not enough, sometimes for a number of good reasons. You get married, you have children to care for. But then \$50,000 a year is suddenly not enough. People have been asked when they thought they would have enough money. If their annual salary was \$50,000 they said, \$75,000. If they made \$75,000 those people said \$125,000. And it goes on and on.

Defining our lives around our possession is never, at the end of the day, satisfying because what we make is never enough when we live as if our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions.

Jesus spends a good amount of time talking to the crowd about what really matters in life. Jesus tries to get the crowd on His agenda and that includes the man who demanded that He settle this dispute with his brother. Jesus sets before them a choice. Be rich towards God or seek first the riches of the world. That's the choice He sets before the crowd. Be rich towards God and God will take care of everything else we truly need.

It's in the context of this discussion about money that Jesus tells the story I wanted you to hear.

This story, with the surprising ending, will help us understand what the Apostle Paul has to say about slaves and masters. Here comes one of the most unexpected statements Jesus ever made. Luke chapter 12 verse 35.

Luke 12:35 - *"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; **36** be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. **37** Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them."*

Here is what frees us to live generous lives of service. Here is a truly remarkable portrait of the God we meet in Jesus Christ. The God of the universe is at His core—get ready for it—a servant.

I would have expected that Jesus' story would have ended in a completely different way. We live in a world where the rich and powerful expect and even demand that others serve their needs. And because that is the world we live in, we would have expected a different ending to Jesus' story.

"Be dressed for action and have your lamps burning. Be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks."

So far this sounds like good advice for everyone who wants to keep their job. Be on your toes. Don't be asleep at the wheel. Be ready to stand to your feet and serve your boss when he or she arrives.

Now get ready for something completely unexpected. What Jesus says next reveals the heart and character of God. What Jesus says next is a window into the values of the Kingdom of God. What Jesus says next stands in stark contrast to the idols of power running amok in our culture and our relationships. What Jesus says here confronts the counterfeit gods of entitlement and privilege.

Verse 37 - *"Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he (that is the master) will fasten his belt and have them (the slaves) sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them."*

That is the radical portrait of the God we meet in Jesus Christ. The Master undergoes a status reversal. He, the one with the power and authority, will serve the servants. That should take your breath away and challenge almost every assumption you and I have about power in relationships. Our God is a servant.

That is a surprising ending to this story. But that story embodies the message Jesus has been proclaiming and living since the beginning of His public ministry. Our God has come near in order to serve. And it is this commitment to use His power to empower us by serving you and me through His death on the cross—that is the most stunning ending to any story ever lived or told on the planet.

God is a servant. The cross of Christ does not make Jesus a servant. It shows the character and heart of God as it has always been. The stunning, heroic story of the life and death of Jesus Christ is this: Jesus has come to serve us.

And because He has, and because He continues to serve us to this day, we are invited out of the small kingdoms we have made for ourselves that are so often defined and diminished by the counterfeit gods of our culture. We are invited into the expansive, generous Kingdom ruled by Jesus Christ. And the values of that Kingdom are defined by the character of the One who is the King of that Kingdom. And our King is, to His core, a servant.

Just for fun, let's reverse the order of Paul's discussion of masters and slaves in Ephesians 6 and look first at what he has to say to those who have most of the power in this relationship.

Ephesians 6:9 – *“And, masters, do the same to them (we'll unpack what he's referring to in a minute). Stop threatening them (the people who work for you), for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.”*

Did you hear that? Speaking to both masters and slaves, who were probably sitting near one another in the church, Paul says, “For you know (masters) that BOTH OF YOU have the same Master in heaven, AND WITH HIM there is no partiality.” That statement stands at the heart of the Christian worldview of relationships.

Remember that you are accountable to God for everything you do and say in your relationship with every other person. If you have more power in a relationship because you are a parent or a boss, don't forget that you are accountable to God for what you do and say to your child or employee. Your child and your employee are also accountable to God but don't forget, that all of us

are accountable to the same God. There is One God, One Lord, one set of standards, one set of rules and they apply to you and to the person over whom you have some sort of relational power.

That's a very, very, very important word. If you are a follower of Christ and an employer, if you are someone's boss, don't ever forget that you also work for someone else. You, the master, the boss, the leader have a master, a boss, a leader who is very interested in how you lead other people.

Here's the danger that the Apostle Paul is seeking to address. Sometimes, people with power abuse that power. Instead of taking the power they are given and using it to empower others, they use their power to coercively control other people. Paul makes a shocking exhortation to slave owners. It was outrageous in his day. In the first century, masters coercively controlled their slaves by threatening to beat them or sexually harass them. They would threaten to sell their male slaves, which meant that these men would never again be able to see their families.

Paul wants people with authority to abandon such strategies. This does not mean that slaves could not be warned or punished if they did something wrong. But masters were not to threaten their slaves. God gave them power for a different purpose.

In the verses that precede this one, slaves have been instructed to show respect for their masters, demonstrate a sincerity of heart and goodwill. Ephesians 6:5 says, *“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness*

of heart, as you obey Christ; 6 not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. 7 Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, 8 knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.”

In the 1800's, church-going slave owners in the American South used Ephesians 6:5 to argue that they were justified in owning other human beings and keeping them as slaves. That proof-texting strategy failed to take into account the context of Ephesians 6; it failed to take into account the liberating arc of the gospel that is about setting captives free and it was a complete lack of understanding of who our God is.

In fact, it was these verses and the story of Onesimus in the Apostle Paul's letter to his slave owning friend Philemon, and it was the conviction that in Jesus Christ there is neither slave nor free, that ultimately inspired people like William Wilberforce in England to lead a campaign against slavery. That led to the liberation of millions of people. Those passages of scripture are what continue to inspire Christians around the world today who are seeking to liberate 22 million people who are in indentured servitude or have been trafficked. What we see here in these five verses is the beginning of a revolution in the dynamics of power in the workplace.

Here's another liberating benefit to putting Christ at the center of our work. With Jesus Christ at the center of our work, our work is put in a proper perspective.

Christ at the center of our work life challenges those of us who have the tendency to work too much. For some of us work is all-consuming. It defines who we are. It has become the ultimate source of our security. But our work can't bear the full weight of our lives.

When he was the coach of the Dallas Cowboys, Jimmy Johnson was a perfect example of this type of person. In an interview, he said that winning the Super Bowl was the primary goal in life. When he was pursuing that goal as the coach of the Cowboys, he said he sometimes slept in the office so he could devote more time to his work. That's unbalanced.

That's one end of the spectrum. At the other end of the spectrum are those who see work only as a means to an end. To these folks work is a necessary evil which has to be endured, it's almost a sentence that needs to be served until they can get to what they really want to do with their lives.

They approach their jobs with the attitude of "I'll do as little as possible to get by, but I'm outta here as soon as five o'clock rolls around." Often these folks did not begin their careers with such an attitude but because they have been treated unfairly or have experienced disappointment in their careers they have developed this type of attitude toward work. Sadly, often a bitterness can develop which can permeate all of their life.

So, there are the two extremes. Most of us are probably somewhere along the spectrum and maybe have experienced both extremes in our lives. But the thing both extremes have in common is they are not healthy and they make us less human.

Having Jesus at the center of our work life, doing our work for Christ as an employee or and employer, protects us from the extremes which can accompany work. Jesus gives us a balanced and healthy view of work. Our work is important and valuable but not the ultimate good in our lives. Christ gives meaning to work, but yet keeps it in its proper perspective.

Okay, let's translate this passage to the situation most of us are in. Hopefully, none of you own slaves. But some of you are employers and others are employees. Paul instructs Christian employees that they are to give their service to their employer as if they were serving Jesus Christ. And employers, who are Christians, are reminded that they, too, are servants, indeed fellow servants of the same Lord, as their employees. Bosses will one day have to give an account of how they treated those who were under their authority.

And this Lord to whom the boss and her employees are accountable shows no partiality. He does not favor employers over employees or employees over bosses. Ultimately, Christian employees and employers stand on the same level. Both are to be motivated and are to direct their service to the One who has served them and will hold them accountable for what they have done in response to His service to them on the cross.

What Paul is ultimately trying to get us to see is that because of what Christ has done for us and is doing for us we GET to live a life of service, wherever God calls us, in whatever position we are in.

At the core of who our God is, is a servant. And because Christ is being formed in us, we are

becoming more and more like Him. We are being formed into people who serve and find our joy in a life of service. We are given power in relationships in order to empower others and lift them up so that they might become all that God wants them to be.

Following Christ is not about HAVING to serve others. It's not about HAVING to give generously. Following Christ is about GETTING to serve. It's about GETTING to give generously. GETTING to serve is radically different from HAVING to serve. Whether at work or as a volunteer, we get to offer our work, our service to Christ. We get to serve the One who has so completely served us.

When we begin to understand that Christ has made us worthy to be in a relationship with God; when we begin to understand that Christ has served us and is serving us by gifting us with His worthiness—our response will be a response of gratitude. Just like Jesus Christ, I GET to live a life of service. That is a life of freedom.

+ + + + + + + +

Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by emailing: fpchkoolau@gmail.com