

“The Christian and Work” – Part 1

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Scriptural Foundation: 1 Peter 2:18-23, ESV

Submission to Authority

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

This past weekend Kimberly, Jackson, and I enjoyed “Parent’s Weekend” at the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs with our second son, Daniel. We watched a parade of the cadets at the Academy and we attended a Calculus III class which was invigorating! We took in a football game at the stadium, played some tennis, worshipped in the church Daniel has been attending, and we labored up a mountain pass high against the backdrop of the military base, to arrive at the top with a view of a beautiful setting sun and a golden meadow. What a great weekend for our family!

We were impressed again by the quality of the college students at the Academy. These young men and women inspire hope for our nation’s future and they particularly look impressive in their service-dress uniforms. Daniel told me all cadets have a number of restrictions placed upon them when they are in their service-dress uniform. They cannot eat, drink, and walk at the same time while in their uniform; that is forbidden. Furthermore, they cannot talk on a cell phone or text and walk while they are in uniform. If they are going to talk on the cell phone, or text, while in uniform they must stop.

This interested me so I researched other restrictions and discovered: gum chewing, skateboard riding, roller blading, and listening to a Walkman are all prohibited while a person is in service-dress uniform. Military personnel, also, must not be drunk while in uniform. Sunglasses may be worn by a cadet as long as he or she is not in formation, but those sunglasses must be conservative, no mirrored lenses and no fancy frames. And, of course, uniforms must not be worn when they have holes, tears, or missing buttons.

The list of these kinds of regulations is too long to exhaust, but we ask the question: Why did the military created such a list? What right does the Air Force have to create these “rules” of what cadets can do when in uniform? Part of the answer to these questions is: The uniform represents the whole of the United States Air Force and the conduct of the person wearing that uniform reflects not only upon the individual, but upon the entire Air Force itself. The Air Force demands soldiers and cadets in uniform conduct themselves in a manner which exalts and honors the whole. The Air Force has a right to be concerned about the honor of its own name.

One may quibble about the specifics, but the principle is sound. Peter challenges us Christians with this principle in 1 Peter 2. Peter reminds us of our change of identity when we come to Christ as Savior and Lord. He reminds us of that in Verse 9,

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

We are no longer who we used to be. We are much more than we were when we were without Christ. We are no longer our own people, but we are God’s own possession and we represent Him in this fallen world. We now wear the uniform of one who has been chosen by God, born again to a living hope, redeemed by the blood of Jesus, citizens of God’s holy nation, and members of His royal priesthood.

This change is absolutely radical and this change is much more radical than a change in a person's life when they join a branch of the military service. Peter explains our new purpose at the end of Verse 9, "...that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Our whole new purpose is to proclaim how excellent God is to a world which does not know Him and thinks Him really small, tiny, and insignificant. We no longer live on this horizontal plane alone, but we have a vertical dimension to our life which connects us with the eternal and with our very Creator Himself.

We are called to advertise the glory of this great God through the way we live, through the way we think, and through the way we talk. Notice what Peter says in Verses 11 and 12,

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

When we become "Christians", we commit ourselves to wearing God's uniform twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; we are never out of uniform. This is a garment, the righteousness of Christ which we cannot and would not take off. As we wear the uniform as one who is "in Christ", possessing His life and son's of the Living God, we represent Him to those who are not wearing the uniform. God says, "Here are the restrictions: first, abstain from the passions of the flesh. If you do not abstain from these passions the world will think less of Me." Then He says, "Keep your conduct among unbelievers honorable. If you do the world will think more of Me. You represent Me in this world," and God is deeply concerned for the honor of His own name. He urges us to live in such a way we would cause others to think more of Him, rather than less of Him.

Here is the central question we must ask ourselves: Do others have a higher view of God because of the way they see me live my life? That is the question around which everything else flows. As people redeemed by God, His reputation becomes our greatest concern. We pursue no higher joy than the joy of glorifying God.

Peter knows God's reputation among unbelievers hinges upon what they see in God's own people's lives, so he tells us to live so honorably the unbelieving world around us would have to acknowledge the nobility of the God whom we serve. This is the center and the very essence of Christian living.

Peter then takes this general principle and applies it to three specific areas of life. The first area we looked in a prior study: The way we respond to government, human authority and civil authority. The second is the one we will consider in this study and the next: The way we respond to our masters and our 21st Century applications to our employers. In 1 Peter 3:1-7, he will apply it to the way we respond to family members, husbands and wives. Each of these areas possess great potential for us to shine light upon God's beauty, or the potential to throw a blanket over it so the world is even more blinded to Him.

It is vital we understand God's overriding concern for how we interact with government, our employer, and our spouse does not have to do with our own personal self-satisfaction, self-fulfillment, self-advancement, and financial gain. God's overriding concern in our relationships, in these areas, is for the advancement of His name. He knows our eternal joy is tied to our pursuit of His glory. The more we hold onto that, the more joy we will discover. Our goal, in this study, is to discover together the Christian's response to the workplace which best glorifies Him.

Peter knows God's reputation among unbelievers hinges upon what they see in us as we work in the marketplace. We acknowledge we have an adversary, the Devil, who seeks to rob us of our ability to glorify God. One of Satan's chief weapons toward this end is to use the ungodly conduct of God's own people to discredit God and to discredit God's Gospel. That is his strategy and it should be a deep concern of each one of us having this enemy to ask: Is Satan being successful? Is he actually discrediting God and God's Gospel because of the way I am living my life?

Peter challenges us to find this goal of glorifying God throughout all of our life and particularly in the workplace. The way we behave in our workplace is one means by which we can unveil and promote the greatness of God. We will consider, first, God's purpose for worship in the workplace. Second, we will consider God's call to submission in the workplace. Finally, we will consider God's design for suffering in the workplace.

This is a two-part study and in this part we will consider the first point: God's purpose for worship in the workplace,

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.

Right away, in my 21st Century eyes, two words stand out to me: servants and masters. Those seem odd in my culture; they are not used today. The Greek term Peter uses for the word "servant" is less forceful than the one Paul uses when he talks about this same subject in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6, but the idea is still the same. Peter is speaking of a domestic servant who is under the ownership and authority of a master. Our main application, in this study, is to our contemporary context of the marketplace and the workplace: Our response to employers.

Thankfully, slavery does not exist legally in our country today. However, instead of passing this over I want to take a work about the Bible and slavery. The Scriptures are often attacked by unbelievers as promoting slavery, and nothing can be further from the truth. It is important to understand, in the Roman world, in New Testament times, sixty million people were slaves. In fact, in large cities a full one out of every three people would have the status of a slave. This was a part of the economy of that day and of that world.

During Peter's time many of these slaves became Christians and who then became persecuted as a result of their faith in the Lord Jesus. This is many to whom Peter is writing. The culture around these slaves was very dehumanizing toward them, first, of their slave status, and second because they were Christians.

The Roman statesman Cato¹, writes this regarding slaves in his culture, and this is their attitude, "Old slaves should be thrown on a dump and when a slave is ill do not feed him anything. It is not worth your money. Take six slaves and throw them away because they are nothing but inefficient tools." That pretty much describes the attitude of the Romans during Peter's day. This attitude is illustrated by the actions of the Roman Emperor Augustus² who crucified one of his slaves because he accidentally killed a pet quail. These were horrible times, particularly if you were a slave.

Why didn't the Bible push for the immediate overturning of the whole abhorrent system? Why does the Bible seem to accept the institution of slavery in this section, rather than to demand its overthrow? A couple of comments may be helpful. First, the Gospel brings a radical change to the identity of the person who is a slave, and ultimately it brings a death-blow to the whole institution of slavery itself.

In Galatians 3, the Apostle Paul is explaining some of the implications of our new identity of Christ and listen to how radical this is in view of the Roman mindset regarding slavery and one-third of the population being slaves and thought of this way during the time the New Testament was written,

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In reference to God's Kingdom, this is the social order of things: There is no slave and free status. In Christ the slave possesses a whole new identity as the son of the Living God with all other sons and daughters of the Living God. The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ brings new life to a dead, sinful soul and the Gospel is God's change-agent, first and immediately to the individual. Immediately something changes for the slave, a new identity, and ultimately to the community as the Gospel influences, grows, and takes root.

The institution of slavery in the west would never have been overturned had the Gospel had not taken root in the hearts of individual citizens and of specific government leaders, such as William Wilberforce in England and John Quincy Adams in the United States. It was the Gospel, and the Gospel alone, which sowed all of the seeds for the dissolution of slavery. God, in grace, gave us His Gospel as His power, first, to transform individual lives and ultimately as the Gospel's influence grows in individuals to transform a culture. Government does not have this power for such transformation. Government must wait upon the influence of the Gospel and that is why the loss of the influence of the Gospel in a community and a nation leads to absolute disaster and death. That is why we, the church, must forever be vigilant and bold in our proclamation of the Gospel for the life of God is brought through Her and the voice of God is presented in Her. We must not back away from proclaiming the Gospel simply because many in our

¹ Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis (95 BC– 46 BC), commonly known as Cato the Younger

² Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus (63 BC-14 AD)

culture believe it rude, unseemly, arrogant, and insensitive. We must become all the bolder if we love our nation and we love our God to say, “This is what God says. It is a message of life and of hope.”

Paul will say, in Romans 1,

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The second comment I will make regarding the Bible and slavery is: The Gospel always drives toward the immediate transformation of the human heart and the immediate liberty of the individual through the work of God’s Spirit. Many, if not most, of Peter’s readers are slaves and that is why he identifies with them. He does not, as in Paul’s writings, talk to the “masters”. For Peter’s audience, most were servants. Notice what Peter writes in 1 Peter 2,

¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

In this context, the word “servant” is actually translated as “slave” (Greek: *doulos*). We have a new Master immediately. The Gospel does not wait upon governments and politicians to set slaves free. No, the Gospel frees the slave immediately from the worst kind of slavery, which is not physical/temporal slavery, but it is that eternal/spiritual slavery and it frees us from the enslavement the guilt of our sin and the condemnation which rests upon everyone who does not have a Savior. It frees us immediately from the power and control sin has over our lives and which draws us and pulls us deeper and deeper into the darkness. The Gospel frees us from the devastating dominion of Satan himself over our lives.

As Christians we can live as people who are free, for we are servant/slaves of the Living God when we find our freedom in Him and through Him.

The application of this text, for our lives, is in the modern workplace. We are not implying employers are modern-day slave owners, though for some of you that parallel may seem to be more natural. This passage teaches us God cares deeply how we respond to those in authority over us in the workplace; God cares how we work. Paul writes on this subject, in Colossians 3,

²² Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

The Apostles Paul and Peter are connecting our secular work to our sacred worship. We are not really serving our employer so much as we are serving the Lord Jesus. This emphasis upon work flows out of God’s immutable character. God is a God who, Himself, works. God delights in the work of His hand. He is a working God and work is a part of His Divine Nature.

In Genesis 2 we read,

² And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.

God is a working God! The principle we derive from this is: God purposed from the beginning of His creation we would reflect Him in His glory by engaging in meaningful work which is part of His happy plan for us. We see, in Genesis 1, as God created man,

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

God is telling us to “go to work!” God purposes from His creation meaningful work would be part of His happy plan for us. Work is a godly activity in and of itself. Work did not come into this world as a result of the “fall” and the curse of sin, but work came into this world before sin and the curse as a part of His benevolent plan for us.

True, as a result of the curse we must deal with thorns in the garden and that makes work more difficult and frustrating. Work itself is right and noble. The principle we learn is: Our work is a significant way in which we express our pleasure in God and our worship of God. We are reminded of the Fourth Commandment, which says, in Exodus 20,

⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.

Often, when that passage is preached, we emphasize we are called to rest on the Sabbath because often times we have difficulty setting one day a week aside just to devote to our happiness and our satisfaction in God. Take note, part of the Commandment tells us we are to “work”. That is God’s rhythm and intention for our life. For the believer, work is a sacred activity and it is done unto God. God’s purpose for our workplace is to have that place become a sphere of worship and a sphere in which we exalt Jesus through our lives. Do we really think this way about work?

Two hills we must climb in this area in order to make our work worship and redeem what God has given us are, first, work easily becomes divorced from our worship and the second, rest from work is not a legitimate pursuit of life.

Think for a moment about arriving tomorrow morning at your place of work. Some of you will begin your day by sitting behind a desk and others behind a large machine. Some of you will carry a toolbox to work and others will carry a loaded gun. Some of you will drape a stethoscope over your head and others will drape an apron. Some of you will clean dirty floors while others will clean dirty engines. Is your work, and what you are about to do, sacred or secular?

Unfortunately, many believers see what they do on Sunday morning as completely separate from what they do during the other six days. Our work seems detached from our life with God and from our worship of Him.

Perhaps some see how their work might become spiritual “if” in the course of work we may have an opportunity to share the Gospel with a co-worker, or “if” in the course of work we have an opportunity to demonstrate Christian honesty or integrity in the workplace. But, the work itself seem unspiritual and detached from worship. The New Testament challenges that notion. The Gospel of Jesus redeems the work itself for His glory. Martin Luther understood this when he wrote, “The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays, not because she might sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps, but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes but by making good shoes because God is interested in good craftsmanship.” Do you believe that?

Somewhere along the line, I believe the church has lost this emphasis of work as our worship. Whatever you do in your vocation, if it is honest and noble, it is worship to God. My personal observation is: Young Christian men committed to Christ are often missing this exalted view of work. I do not know about young Christian women as is my observation about young Christian men. I believe this absence is harming their soul, their future, and the church of Jesus. Young men sometimes see their peers consumed by the love of money and thus energized for work and career. They throw themselves fully into college preparation and a career with money as the end goal. Spiritual young men observe that taking place and say, “I do not want to have anything to do with that,” and that is right to reject the love of money as the motivation to invest our lives in work.

But, in rejecting the pursuit of money, some fail to find any other motivation in which to invest their lives in work. They hang out with each other, perhaps doing Bible study and some Christian ministry together, without any sacred vision for their life’s work. They do not throw themselves into serious preparation for life’s work with evangelical zeal. Seeing this work as secular, they exercise little godly zeal for it. My concern is, often the young men who are most zealous for God are least enthused about life, career, and work. Please note, refusing to invest one’s life in meaningful work is just as much of a soul-damaging sin as pursuing work out of a love for money.

We have a better alternative and that alternative is to work enthusiastically with the view we serve God in this world through the abilities and opportunities He gives us. How exactly is our work a part of our worship? Again, our work is worship is not just by our ethical behavior in our work and not just by sharing the Gospel with unbelievers around us. No, our work itself is God's own working in this sin-devastated world.

How so? Imagine you have a friend who is very sick and you pray for your friend for God to heal him. God could answer that prayer by reaching down from Heaven and directly healing your friend. He can do that and I believe He sometimes does that. Most often, God answers that prayer by using human instruments in the healing process. He uses people who are doing work and who are hard at work. He uses doctors and nurses and pharmacists and physical therapists and chemists and researchers. But, more than that, He uses business managers and secretaries and accountants and receptionists at hospitals so there can be hospitals which run smoothly and efficiently and effectively. He also uses janitors and laundry personnel so the sheets are clean and the floors are clean and there is not an infection which would threaten the life of your friend.

God uses Cat engineers and architects and construction managers and electricians and truck drivers and construction workers to come together to build the hospital where you friend can heal.

God uses farmers and grocers and nutritionists to nourish the ailing bodies' recovery. We could go on and on, but all these people and many more work together as part of God's own working to answer your prayer for healing for your friend.

The medical field is easy, but what about other fields? Do you pray for peace in your neighborhood and for your city and for your schools? We say, "Yes, we pray for those things." Again, God can answer our prayers by directly intervening to stop criminal activity and bring evildoers to justice. But, most often God uses people in the administration of His grace. He uses police officers and lawyers and judges and clerks and teachers and security systems engineers and operators and moms and dads and grandparents and family friends and Cat engineers and architects and construction managers and electricians to build schools, to build churches, to build court houses, and to build prisons where criminals can be incarcerated.

God uses financial planners and investors so money can be invested in helping the poor and sending missionaries into difficult places where there is such spiritual darkness.

The point is this: God uses human means to answer prayers and one of the greatest of human means is work. God gives each of us a role to play in His kind administration on this world. We can go on and on with illustrations, but let me ask, do you know how your work is being used by God to bring His common grace to others and to make this a place which reflects His goodness?

Find the answer to that question and when you find the answer your life will change. When we begin to understand how our work might be used in a greater way for the glory of God that is where the fun begins.

The second hill is: Rest from work is not a legitimate pursuit of life. Wisdom prepares for a future day when we cannot earn a salary through work any longer, but retirement from work has become a goal, not out of wisdom, but out of a loss of biblical understanding regarding life.

There may be great joy in changing vocations and focus of our life's work as we mature and become less dependant upon the salary of our work, but the Bible knows nothing of a man or woman retiring from work to nothing of lasting meaning. God does not demand we never leave a specific place of employment. It is legitimate to leave one place of employment, but as we do, as Christians, we ask the question: What work does God now have for me to throw myself and to be deeply committed, so I do not retire with the attitude, "Now I can get up whenever I want to and do what ever I want throughout the day." No, we say, "Now what other work is there? When I get up I need to get up early in the morning to get to the work God has for me to accomplish."

What a tragedy, when we think about our later years and say, "It is my right to sit back and take it easy now. I have earned this." We believe real living is fishing or golfing or lounging our later years away doing little or nothing of eternal value. God says, "What a huge waste!" God intends for us to spend ourselves from beginning to end in serving Him and in advancing His name. Is God's name so exalted in our community there is nothing we can do to advance His name with the energies He has given us in our later years?

John Piper speaks to the huge tragedy of a Christian retiring from meaningful, committed labor in his book, “Don’t Waste Your Life”³, and this is so convicting. “Consider a story from the 1998 edition of *Reader’s Digest*, which tells about a couple who ‘took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30 foot trawler, play softball and collect shells.’ At first, when I read it I thought it might be a joke. As proof on the American Dream. But it wasn’t. Tragically, this was the dream: Come to the end of your life – your one and only precious, God-given life – and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collecting shells. Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment: ‘Look, Lord. See my shells.’ *That* is a tragedy. And people today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. Over against that, I put my protest: Don’t buy. Don’t waste your life.”

Paul will say, in 1 Corinthians 15,

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

What does it mean to live the final years of my life to the glory of Jesus my King? As we move closer to that final day, when we give an account of our lives to the Lord, is it not wise and prudent to be more focused upon our work rather than less? The clock is running down, and it runs so fast; you know that and I know that, and our opportunities are almost gone. Let us make the most of our little time.

Are you wearing God’s uniform? Remember 1 Peter 2:9 – “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.” Does that describe your identity and who you are? Has God caused you to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus?

Jesus has made this new identity possible and He offers it to everyone as His free gift. You can become a part of that “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation”. You can become one of God’s own possessions. If you have never trusted in Jesus Christ as your Savior, God invites you to come to Him. He is your Savior. He died upon the cross bearing your sins. Come and He will give you life.

But, if you are one who is wearing that uniform and you say, “Yes, I put that uniform on and I understand, Pastor, I never take it off. Once I have been enclosed by the righteousness of Christ that is who I am twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.” Do others around you have a higher view of God because of the way they see you live your life? If we can answer, “Yes,” to that question, we can die in peace, knowing we have fulfilled the very purpose for our existence.

³ “Don’t Waste Your Life,” John Piper, Crossway Books, 2003, p. 45-46.