

# Work for the Lord

"The Relationship Initiative" Series, May 9 & 10, 2026 (Mother's Day) | Ephesians 6:5-9  
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## We treat some people as disposable.

### **Sifting through a mountain of luggage in Minneapolis made me feel disposable.**

In the summer of 2024, a massive IT outage grounded many flights across the country. I was heading home after vacation with Tammi. When we got to the airport, our flight was already delayed. The problem mushroomed all day long, and we waited in one line after another until our flight was finally cancelled that evening. We were stranded. The gate agent told us to get our bags at baggage claim. I spent hours sorting through bags. Nothing. And no one could give me a clear answer. I felt like a cog in a giant machine that couldn't care less about me. Have you ever felt that way?

### **Matty Cardarople makes us laugh at characters that seem disposable.**

You probably don't recognize the name. He's a character actor who plays small parts in lots of movies and TV shows. He played a creepy guy working in a video-game arcade in a show I watched set in the 1980s. He, like other character actors, plays a type. He plays people who are not always bright and not always good. They're people most of us ignore; they're disposable. And Matty makes us see them and laugh at them and at ourselves.

### **Human trafficking is no laughing matter.**

Trafficked people are forced into labor, forced into marriages, and forced into commercial sex. Today there are nearly **50 million people** who are being held and worked against their will, and it pays big for the organized crime rings that hold them. Human trafficking generates **\$236 billion** in profit taken from the pockets of their victims by not paying them.<sup>1</sup> People who are being trafficked are disposable to their traffickers. It's slavery.

### **No one is disposable.**

People being trafficked aren't disposable. Neither is Matty Cardarople or any of the characters he plays. Neither am I, and neither are you. God created every person in His image. He made us to love, not throw away. The Bible tells us this. Then it shows us that it's true and calls us to remember the inherent value of each person. And to treat each person as someone of incredible worth. It's one of the keys to relationships that Paul gives us in Ephesians chapters 5 and 6. But to get it, we have to know something about ourselves:

### **No one is a "big deal".**

In our minds, we're all big deals. We think that we're important and that our needs and wants are urgent. So, it's tempting to look at other people as ways to get our needs and wants met. Nothing

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.occrp.org/en/news/report-over-50-million-human-trafficking-victims-forced-into-modern-slavery-worldwide>

more. But none of us is such a big deal that we can forget that all people are inherently valuable. Forgetting that destroys relationships. It causes us to treat people as disposable and fuels evils like slavery. We can do better, and the Bible shows us how.

## Slavery crumbles under the weight of the Gospel.

**This passage doesn't endorse slavery or excuse sin.**

Make no mistake. This passage is addressing masters and slaves. The ESV softens the term in **Ephesians 6:5**,

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ ...

However, the term in Greek means "slave"—someone who belongs to another person and has no ownership rights themselves. I visited a plantation in South Carolina a couple of years ago. It's located on the banks of a river near the coast. Before the Civil War, it was a rice plantation. Slaves would work in the river and in the swamps clearing land, growing rice, and harvesting it. It was tremendously profitable work, but it was also dangerous. Slaves died from diseases, snake bites, and all kinds of dangers. The mortality rate was astronomical. Meanwhile, plantation owners spent much of the year away from their plantations so that they didn't catch diseases themselves. Slavery was and is horrific. Because slavery has been a part of American history and because slavery is still practiced around the world today, it is difficult to read a passage in which the Bible seems to accept slavery. And in the past, this passage was used explicitly by people who argued that slavery was justified and even moral. But this passage doesn't justify slavery. It undermines it. Let me show you how.

### Calling someone an "earthly master" shakes their authority to the core.

The term "earthly master" translates the Greek phrase *kata sarka kurios*. The word *kurios* means "lord," so there is a question about who is lord or master. We'll pick up that question in more detail in a moment. But the words *kata sarka* already limit the master's authority. It means "according to flesh". One person may at times claim absolute authority over another person's life, but that claim is always limited. It's here and now, it's earthly, it's not heavenly, it's not eternal, and it's not true. So, the master is claiming an authority that is limited and temporary. But the question of lordship does the most damage to slavery.

### Slaves and masters both have one true Lord.

In New Testament times, the Roman Empire dominated the world. Caesar claimed to be "Lord". Only one person can truly be Lord; Caesar and Christ can't both be Lord. And the conflict is true here as well. Either the slave-owner is lord or Jesus is Lord. Moreover, when both slave owner and slave are Christians, both have the same Lord, Jesus. And if two people have the same Lord, then we are something more to each other than master and slave.

### Slaves and masters both stand before our one true Lord.

Paul references this fact in **Ephesians 6:8-9**:

... knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening,

knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

In the last times, Christians will stand before Christ's judgment seat. It won't be a judgment for salvation; we are saved by faith through Christ. But it will be a reward for good done.

**2 Corinthians 5:10** describes it,

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

Slaves will stand before Jesus, and masters will stand before Jesus. Masters will not get preferential treatment in that day. Can you imagine standing before Jesus knowing that you claimed to have owned one of His precious children as your own? That powerful reminder takes the foundation out from under slavery. This passage doesn't justify slavery. It destroys it from within. Which means:

### **We are free to fight slavery in all its forms.**

Anti-human-trafficking ministries have sprung up around the world. They are fighting human trafficking, sex trafficking, and other ways we use human beings like tools. We can fight to change laws, stop perpetrators, rescue victims, and reintegrate into society those whose have suffered. When we do, we aren't fighting against the Bible; we are doing the work the Bible makes possible.

## **Work for the Lord, not for payday.**

### **The issue isn't just slavery—it's work.**

The instructions Paul gives to slaves can give powerful help to employees looking to understand what it means to work as Christians. What Paul says to masters can help employers understand how to be Christian bosses. Paul said that all Christians walk in love, filled with the Holy Spirit, back in Ephesians 5. He has already shown us what that looks like in marriages and parent-child relationships. Now he's showing us what it looks like at work.

### **Work is not just about the payday.**

Of course, "payday" is a paycheck, but it's so much more. "Payday" means all the approval, significance, and status that we get from work. It's everything we get from work to validate ourselves. Everything from the pats on the back, to the connections on LinkedIn and the number of our patents, to the title on our office door. Work isn't just about the payday. It's about something more.

### **A payday can be a prison.**

Actor Eugene Levy has a show on Apple TV called "The Reluctant Traveler". In season three, he visits Seoul, South Korea, because he's heard that it has become an exciting city, setting trends around the world in food, dress, and music. KPop is taking the world by storm. Koreans are working hard to make money. But there is a dark side to working so hard. Eugene Levy met a rising KPop boy band, NOWZ. The young men in the group work roughly 20 hours a day. When they joined the band, they learned that their managers would choose their clothes, their music, and their schedule. They belonged to their label. Success would involve a massive payday—international fame and fabulous wealth—but a payday can become a prison.

### **Work is a heart matter.**

Paul shows us how. In **Ephesians 6:5** he tells us to work,  
... with fear and trembling ...

This isn't a command to be afraid. Instead, it is a call to respect our employers, our customers, and our work. In **Ephesians 6:6** he adds,

... not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers ...

We have all known people who act one way when the boss is around and act very differently when no one's watching. Paul is calling us not to be that kind of people. We are people whose hearts are being changed by Jesus, so we behave kindly and responsibly, whether anyone is watching or not. Then in **Ephesians 6:7** he adds the key ingredient to our work; we are to do it

... as to the Lord ...

We can grow potatoes, ship them, sell them, cook them, serve them, market them, account for them, finance them, trade potato futures, and own potato companies all as ways of serving God Himself. Work almost becomes an act of worship.

### **We work for the Lord, not for the payday.**

In Genesis chapter one, God gave us a command to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and have dominion over it. From the beginning, we were tending a garden—making it work and making it better. The first man gave names to all the animals. Work is part of the human condition! As God creates, we create works of art, contracts, engines, and companies. As God tends creation, we tend the ground, nurture future generations, and keep the world running smoothly. As God relates, we bring people together in restaurants, clubs, and counseling offices. As God redeems, we share the Gospel and help broken hearts heal. As God transforms, we fix broken things and make the broken world right. Whatever you do, you can do it for the Lord.

## **Ultimately, I only have One Master.**

### **There is a right time to serve an earthly master.**

*The Devil Wears Prada* is back in the headlines since there is a sequel out now. The original movie featured Andy, an up-and-comer looking to make her way into journalism. She became an assistant to Miranda Priestly, the powerful editor of "Runway Magazine" in Manhattan. Miranda Priestly had a reputation for being brutal to assistants, and that reputation was well deserved. Working for an employer can be part of life here and now. Working for a bad employer or a cruel earthly master sometimes happens in the fallen world. As Paul puts it, we serve them respectfully, whether they are looking or not, as a way of serving God.

### **There is a right time to walk away from an earthly master.**

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andy started dressing differently. She sacrificed time with her boyfriend and undermined a colleague to get ahead. She saw herself becoming the devil she was coming to despise, so it was time to go. She quit. We are free to make the choice to become free of earthly masters, particularly bad ones. In a passage where Paul's main point is that we should be happy with the lives we have, he gives this qualifier. In **1 Corinthians 7:21** he writes to slaves,

... (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)

We have only one true Lord.

### **Jesus—our only, true Lord—claims our loyalty.**

To come to Jesus is to accept many blessings. We accept forgiveness. We accept being adopted as sons and daughters of God, and being filled with the Holy Spirit. We say “yes” to new life and eternal life. It is a train of blessings unloading in front of us. At the same time, Jesus claims our loyalty. He is Lord. God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is the acknowledged ruler of our life for now and eternity. A great exchange has happened; we gained everything, but we gave up something in the process. We no longer belong to ourselves.

### **We are slaves of Christ.**

We were at one time slaves to sin. But now that Christ has bought our freedom, we are now slaves to Jesus. It’s an odd image, but it makes upside-down sense. Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 7:22**,

... he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ.

In **Romans 6:22** he adds,

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God ...

Which is why he can write boldly in **Romans 1:1** this greeting,

Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus ...

That’s not how most of our English translations read, but that is what the Greek says. We have become slaves of Jesus. We belong to Jesus. We don’t own ourselves. He does. But before you worry about that thought, recognize this:

### **Only then are we truly free.**

Paul writes in **Galatians 5:1**,

For freedom Christ has set us free ...

Jesus has set us free from slavery to sin. Praise God! Jesus sets us free from so many kinds of prisons that feel like slavery—hurts, habits, and hangups, as our Celebrate Recovery friends say. When Jesus sets us free, we are truly free. When Christ sets us free, we are free to work as an act of worship to Him. We are free to work for people with joy and without resentment—even for difficult people. We are free to see the true value in every single person. And that is how this passage says something deep about relationships.

## **People aren’t disposable.**

### **Ali was the ultimate disposable person.**

Ali spent every day online trying to trap people into scams—cryptocurrency scams and online- gaming scams. He is the kind of person you work hard to avoid. He may have scammed you and cost you not only a bunch of money but your dignity and your sense of security. You may resent people like Ali. Ali worked in a compound in Cambodia. He was lured there from his home in Pakistan with a promise of a large paycheck. He borrowed money to travel to Cambodia. When he arrived, his employer drove him to a large compound. They took his passport and phone and cut him off from the outside world. Then they put him in a large locked building on a floor with 60-80 other people who worked relentlessly in tiny cubicles. Every day, they were forced to trap people in scams. If they fell short of their target, they were fined or beaten. If they tried to contact the outside world, they were beaten or starved. Ali was a slave. Until his friend reached out to a Christian aid organization that worked with the police and

raided the building. Ali escaped. Christians gave him back his freedom, his dignity, and his life. And that is a beautiful thing because even Ali is not a disposable person.<sup>2</sup>

### **We are ALL made in the image of God and of immense value.**

Slaves, masters, scammers, aid workers, farmers, executives, maids, and politicians. When God made us, He made us all in His image. We can never give that image away; sin can distort but never destroy that image within us, and the image can never be taken away from us. That means that every person is of immense value. Even the guy who jumps in the express lane at the grocery store ahead of you with twenty items in his basket.

### **People are never disposable.**

The essence of slavery is treating people as disposable—slaves are tools we own, use, and discard when we're done. But slavery isn't the only way we treat people as if they were disposable. When we despise people because of their politics, we're treating them as disposable. When we look at someone and know in an instant that they're bad—too trashy, too straightlaced, too wealthy, too poor, too old, too young—we're treating them as disposable. When we get frustrated because other people don't do what we want them to do and think that the world would be better off without them in it, we're treating them as disposable. Treating people as disposable ruins a relationship.

### **All our relationships depend on seeing the inherent value in people.**

I can only have a thriving relationship with YOU if I see you as valuable. That's self-evident. But I can only have a thriving relationship with YOU if I see ALL of us as valuable. Inherently valuable. Otherwise, when you're not useful—or pleasant—then I might conclude that you're not valuable. That's not what people who walk in love are called to do. And it's not what people who are filled with the Holy Spirit are called to do. We're called to value each other. Inherently.

### **Let's value each other the way God values us.**

That is so much better than valuing you because of how you make me feel or what you can do for me. Valuing each other the way God values us means that I can love you as God loves you. I can love the Alis and the Andys. Even the Mirandas and Mattys. Plus the IT folks who made the computers crash in Minneapolis, as well as the IT specialist who finally got me checked into my flight three days later so I could get home. That's the only path to just relationships. And it's the right path to thriving relationships.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://ijmhc.org/en/survivor-of-cyber-slavery-i-was-sold-and-forced-to-scam-people/>