

Christ in the Workplace – Ephesians 6:5-9

A word on slavery – Before we walk slowly through this passage, we need to pause and talk about the reality of slavery. When we hear the word “**slaves,**” most of us immediately picture the evil race-based chattel slavery of the modern Atlantic world—people treated as inheritable property with no legal rights and sold as commodities. In the Greco-Roman world, slavery was also real slavery: widespread, often dehumanizing, and deeply woven into social and economic life. It took different forms—some less harsh, some brutally cruel—but in every case it still meant one person’s life was owned and controlled by another. At the same time, slavery in Paul’s world was not identical to what we think of as chattel slavery. It was not organized primarily around skin color; many were prisoners of war or born into slave households, and some in cities could own limited property, purchase their freedom, and even become Roman citizens after manumission. That does not make first-century slavery righteous, but it does mean we must be careful not to read our own history straight back into the text. Paul is speaking into a different, but often still sinful, system, and what he says here plants seeds that undermine it from within: he addresses slaves and masters as morally responsible people under the same Lord and puts both on equal footing before Christ.

So how do we move from that world to ours without pretending they’re the same? We need to be clear: what Paul addresses here is not a simple employee–employer situation, and we dare not minimize the suffering bound up with slavery by speaking as if it were. At the same time, the Spirit gave this passage to shape how Christians live under authority and exercise authority in every age.

The underlying principles still reach us: believers doing their work under the eye of Christ, not just for human approval; those in positions of power remembering they too have a Master in heaven and will answer to him. So while our context is different, the heart issues are very similar. With that in mind, I want to spend the rest of our time drawing out how these words speak into the way we work and the way we lead in our workplaces.

Stop/Pray/Transition - Monday morning, most of us won’t be in a sanctuary; we’ll be at work in our offices, shops, school rooms, barns, homes, and job sites.

And for many of us, that’s not very exciting. Some of us have wondered: Does Jesus actually care about what happens at my job? Does my work have any spiritual or eternal meaning or value—or is it just something I must get through to get paid so that I can live and provide for my family?

As we have walked through Ephesians 5 and 6 we have seen that the spirit-filled life includes our marriages, our parenting, and in our text today, even in the relationships we have within the jobs God has given us. This passage is not mainly a call to ‘be a better employee’ or ‘be a kinder boss’. **This text is about the reality that Christ claims our workplace, and His rule reshapes both our obedience and our authority.**

Paul keeps telling the church at Ephesus that their new identity in Christ reshapes every are of life. As it relates to our identity as workers, we must recognize that what comes before our positions is the truth that we are first and foremost slaves to Jesus. You are not first an subordinate or a leader. You are first a servant of Christ. And that changes everything about we work.

1. **The Christian Under Authority (vv. 5-8) – Sincerity and Good-Will.**

A. Sincerity - Called to real obedience, not performance (v. 5-6) -

- With Fear and trembling” = Idiom – phrase that carries a figurative not literal meaning used to express deeper ideas. Paul is not saying that we should live in terror of your boss. Instead, we are to have a serious, God-aware mindset as we work under authority. We all should work knowing that Christ Himself stands over every relationship we have in the workplace, including the relationship between worker and supervisor. Paul tells us to work sincerely. Then he tells us what the opposite of sincerity looks like...
- Not with “Eye-service” = work that turns on when the boss walks in and turns off when he walks out. A Christian does not work only when under human observation. Christians know that we always work under divine observation. Eye-service reveals a worship problem.
- Not “People-pleasing” = A person who works for eye service instead of unto The Lord is one who is living for human approval. A “people pleaser.” People pleasers adjust their work, standards, and even their conscience to whatever will keep people happy.
- Christians recognize that we work first under the Lordship of Christ. We are His bondservants. (Big Daddy Weave Son – “My audience of one.”)

Applications:

- When nobody is watching, the Lord is still watching, so keep doing the right thing when no one’s around. When your supervisor is unfair: do not let a bad boss become your excuse for bad work. You work as unto the Lord.
- When you are hungry for approval: Don’t live and work for the approval of your boss, but for Christ. Because of our broken world, there will be times you cannot both honor Christ and keep everyone at work happy. When it comes to a choice, you must choose to please Christ rather than people. And be ready and willing to accept the consequences with a clear conscience before the Lord, because we must obey God, rather than man.
- When money is on the line: Don’t pad your time sheets. God knows the hours you worked and how faithful you were in those hours.
- When time is short: don’t cut corners when the client will never know. God knows.

Summary:

- The Christian should not only look obedient; we are to be obedient, from the heart, because Christ is our Master. We work unto Christ.

B. Good will - Called to Whole-hearted service as worship (v. 6b-7) - “Doing the will of God from the heart ... rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man.”

- Will of God/Good will – employees give your best to your boss and business with their good in mind. Don’t just think about how this job benefits you, but how you are a blessing and benefit.

- Work as to The Lord - Paul is not encouraging those under authority to 'just work harder,' but to 'work as to the Lord'. Working "as to the Lord" means we work for Jesus and His glory and His pleasure first. Which means that our work can be worship if done unto Him!

C. Called to trust the one who ultimately rewards (v. 8) - "Knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is bondservant or is free."

- This is not a prosperity gospel promise - It is a promise that the Lord Himself will repay what is done in faith. Much of that repayment will not show up until the judgment seat of Christ. Christ sees and rewards.
- Christ Sees - For the person in a monotonous, unseen job who feels like nobody notices: verse 8 is for you. Christ sees what nobody celebrates.
- Christ Rewards - Jesus is the "final paymaster": Our good work may be ignored on earth, but it is not ignored by Christ.
 - When you feel unseen & unrewarded, don't let that lead you to despair and poor workmanship. Instead, remember that Jesus sees, and because He is good, He will reward you. His reward is far greater than any earthly reward you can receive.

Transition: None of us have been perfectly faithful as employees. We can bring our less than faithful work to Jesus. He is not only our Master; He is our Redeemer. He forgives compromised obedience and reforms our work by His Spirit for His glory.

Transition: Now some of you are thinking, 'I hope my employees are listening,' Paul will not let those with power sit outside this text. He brings the weight of Christ's lordship directly to them.

2. The Christian with Authority (v. 9) - Now this is where the text turns directly toward those with power.

A. Called to the same standard as those under their leadership - "Masters, do the same to them."

- Paul doesn't erase the difference between boss and worker, he requires the same Christ-centered sincerity and good will in those who lead. (Sincerity and Good Will)
 - Sincerity - A spirit-filled leader leads with an undivided heart. No hidden agenda. No double motives. A spirit-filled leader lives with sincerity as they seek the best for their employees, seeking their good—in their development, in their pay, and in how you treat them. You may not be able to pay everything you wish you could, but you are called to treat employees justly and generously as unto Christ, not merely as units of productivity
 - Good will - You relate to those under you with a willing, positive, for-their-good posture. You act toward them in a way that reflects the kindness and patience of Christ—even when leadership is costly.
 - Good will doesn't mean you never correct or make hard calls; it means your posture toward those under you is fundamentally for their good. The golden rule applies here perfectly. "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

B. Called to Christ-like leadership - "Stop your threatening"

- “Stop your Threatening”- broadly means more than just explicit threats, but includes the posture of management defined by fear, humiliation, shame, and constant pressure. You can correct, evaluate, even fire—but you may not crush, belittle, or manipulate. A fearful culture—where everyone walks on eggshells around you—is not Spirit-filled leadership. No matter how ‘successful’ it looks on paper, it does not look like Christ. Christian authority is never permitted to rule by intimidation. The Lord forbids a threatening/lording spirit. A boss, husband, father who uses public shaming, a ministry leader, husband who uses spiritual language to control, these are not just leadership flaws, they are sinful patterns that do not belong to the Christian leader.
- Lead as a servant - “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mark 10:42-45
 - It is easy to lead the way you were led—especially if you finally made it ‘to the top’ and want to enjoy the perks. But that is not the way of Christ. His kingdom is upside-down: the greatest is the servant. Christian leaders should be the greatest servants in the room. The higher you go up the authority rung, the lower you should go in service toward others.

3. The Lord Over Both – “knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with Him.”

A. We All Have The Same Master -

- Jesus is over all - The Christian leader is never the highest authority in the room. Jesus is.
- Leaders are stewards - Leaders, you are a steward, not an absolute owner. The people under you do not ultimately belong to you. They belong to Christ.
- You will answer to The Master - Which means, you will be held accountable by God for the way you lead people. If you have authority, it is because God has given it to you so that you will exercise His authority His way in the lives of others.

B. Our Master Shows No partiality -

- Same footing and status at judgement - Jesus does not grade on a curve. You and the person on the lowest rung of your company stand on the same footing before Christ. We will all be judged fully and fairly by God.
- No excuse for abuse - For those who have been mistreated, this means God does not look at your abuser and say, ‘Well, he was important.’ There is no partiality with God.

Close: Jesus is the obedient Son who always did the Father’s will from the heart. And He is the risen Lord to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given.

Jesus forgives proud bosses and resentful employees, and He changes us. He sees injustice and does not ignore it. And He teaches us to live under His lordship—even in our workplaces. (Prayer on screen)

Research

I have broken the research into 3 parts (A, B, C). Part A is the overview. Part B is a deeper dive. Part c are the sources from which I got my research.

Research Part A - Text Overview:

Exegetical Center

Ephesians 6:5–9 teaches that the lordship of Christ governs both sides of ordinary labor relationships. Paul addresses those under authority and those with authority, and he places both under the same heavenly Master. The repeated language of “as to Christ,” “as slaves of Christ,” “from the Lord,” and “your Master and theirs is in heaven” makes that the center of gravity of the paragraph.

The text does not merely command outward compliance. It presses into motive, heart, and manner. Workers are to obey with sincerity, not eye-service, not people-pleasing, but as those doing the will of God from the heart. Masters are commanded to act with the same Christ-consciousness and to abandon threatening, because God shows no partiality.

So the exegetical center is not simply “be a good employee” or “be a fair boss.” It is this: **Christ claims the workplace, and His rule reshapes both obedience and authority.**

Theological Burden

1. The gospel reaches ordinary work

This paragraph sits inside the Spirit-filled section of Ephesians that begins in 5:18 and flows through the household relationships. Paul is showing that the gospel is not confined to worship services or private devotion. Spirit-filled life shows up in marriages, parenting, and work.

2. Earthly authority is real, but never ultimate

Paul does not erase authority structures. He acknowledges them. But he limits them by locating them “according to the flesh” and under the Lordship of Christ. Calvin is especially useful here: earthly authority is real, but it does not reach the believer’s deepest identity or final allegiance.

3. The gospel dignifies the one under authority

Paul addresses slaves as moral agents who serve Christ directly. That alone is striking in the ancient world. Their work matters. Their motives matter. Their reward is not finally controlled by their earthly station, because the Lord sees and repays what is done in faithfulness.

4. The gospel humbles the one with authority

Verse 9 is a direct rebuke to pride in power. Masters are not free to rule by intimidation, contempt, or partiality. They too are under authority. God is not impressed by rank, leverage, title, or ownership.

5. Christ is both model and Savior here

Jesus is the obedient Son who did the Father's will from the heart, and He is also the Lord who now rules over every human relationship. So this passage is not bare moralism. It exposes our laziness, hypocrisy, resentment, intimidation, and people-pleasing, but it also drives us to Christ who forgives sin and reforms our work by His Spirit.

Application Buckets

1. For people under authority

- Work honestly even when unwatched. "Eye-service" is one of the clearest sins in the passage.
- Refuse the temptation to make a bad boss your excuse for bad work.
- Do not confuse Christian submission with cowardice. Lawful obedience is not servility.
- Fight people-pleasing. Your goal is not to manage impressions but to serve Christ.
- See your daily labor as morally meaningful before God, even if it is repetitive, hidden, or underappreciated.
- Remember that Christ sees what nobody in the company, shop, office, farm, or family business notices.

2. For people with authority

- Do not assume the paragraph is mainly for "workers." Paul turns and speaks directly to those with power.
- "Do the same" means bring the same sincerity, goodwill, and Christ-consciousness into leadership.
- Reject threatening, pressure tactics, contempt, shaming, and management by fear.
- Lead as someone who will answer to a higher Master.
- Treat people fairly, not selectively. God does not show partiality, so neither should you.
- Remember that Christian authority is stewardship, not ownership in the absolute sense.

3. For the whole church

- This is a lordship text before it is a labor text.
- The church must learn to connect Sunday worship with Monday work.
- A Spirit-filled Christian is not only someone who sings, prays, and gives thanks, but also someone who works and leads differently.
- The gospel creates homes and workplaces marked by honesty, fairness, repentance, and forgiveness.
- Ordinary work is one of the places where sanctification becomes visible.

Research Part B - A Deeper Dive into the Text and Context

Ephesians 6:5–9 belongs to the final major movement of the letter, where Paul turns from what God has done in Christ to how the church must now walk. Chapters 1–3 are heavily doctrinal; chapters 4–6 are the “therefore” section of gospel-shaped living. MacArthur rightly notes that this workplace paragraph sits inside that practical section flowing out of the saving realities already established in the letter.

More specifically, 6:5–9 is not an isolated ethics unit. It grows out of 5:18, “be filled with the Spirit,” and 5:21, “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Wayne Barber’s treatment on Precept Austin explicitly frames 6:5–9 as “the Spirit-filled believer in the workplace,” and MacArthur likewise treats it as “Spirit-filled labor relations.”

In the immediate context, Paul has already addressed wives and husbands (5:22–33), then children and fathers (6:1–4), and now slaves and masters (6:5–9). The pattern is consistent: Paul addresses the one under authority and then the one exercising authority. But in each pair, Christ is the controlling reference point. Submission is never detached from the lordship of Christ, and authority is never left unqualified or absolute.

A key structural feature of 6:5–9 is the repeated Christ-centered motivation:

“as to Christ” (v. 5),

“as slaves of Christ” (v. 6),

“doing the will of God from the heart” (v. 6),

“as to the Lord and not to men” (v. 7),

“from the Lord” (v. 8),

and then for masters, “both their Master and yours is in heaven” (v. 9). The rhetorical force is unmistakable: Paul relocates ordinary labor under the gaze and judgment of Jesus Christ.

Another structural feature is the balancing of the paragraph. Paul gives the larger section to slaves (vv. 5–8), likely because they were more vulnerable and needed moral and theological reorientation. Then in one verse he sharply constrains masters: “do the same things,” “stop threatening,” remember your Master in heaven, and remember that with Him there is no partiality. That closing line levels human status before divine judgment.

Key Greek and Phrase-Level Exegesis

1. δοῦλοι / κύριοι — “slaves / masters”

Paul is addressing a real first-century slave-master relationship, not first writing to modern employees and employers. Still, Ligonier is right to say that the broader principles do bear on modern work relationships because all of us live under some form of delegated authority, and many exercise authority over others.

2. τοῖς κυρίοις κατὰ σάρκα — “to your masters according to the flesh”

John Calvin says this softens the harshness of the relation by reminding believers that the bondage is only earthly and temporal, not ultimate or spiritual. MacArthur makes a similar point: this authority is real, but it is limited; it does not extend to the soul or to the believer’s standing in Christ.

3. ὑπακούετε — “obey”

Precept Austin notes that this is a strong word for actual obedience, not mere advice-taking. Barber stresses the straightforwardness of the term: it means responsive obedience, not constant resistance, delay, or grudging compliance.

4. μετὰ φόβου καὶ τρόμου — “with fear and trembling”

This is not cowering terror before a boss. MacArthur argues that the phrase is best tied to Christ at the end of the verse; the reverence is fundamentally Godward. Barber says the point is not panic but seriousness before the Lord.

5. ἐν ἀπλότητι τῆς καρδίας — “in sincerity / singleness of heart”

Calvin takes this as truth and sincerity of heart before God, not merely behavior that looks right outwardly. MacArthur expands it as honest, upright, undivided, conscientious loyalty. Barber highlights the lack of hidden agenda.

6. μὴ κατ’ ὀφθαλμοδουλείαν — “not by way of eye-service”

Calvin says this condemns the deceit of serving only when the master is watching. Barber’s pastoral explanation is memorable: when the boss walks in, some people get busy; when he walks out, they stop. Paul forbids that. A Christian does not work only under human observation. He works under divine observation.

7. ὡς ἀνθρωπάρεσκοι — “as men-pleasers”

The issue is not caring about people at all; it is living for their approval. Barber connects this to flattery, self-interest, and hidden agenda. Desiring God’s related work on fear of man is helpful here: the antidote to people-pleasing is not becoming hard, but living with a greater fear of God. You can be diligent and respectful without becoming a people-pleaser. The Christian worker is not controlled by the boss’s mood, but by Christ’s lordship.

8. ὡς δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ — “as slaves of Christ”

This is the heart of the passage. Ligonier says we are servants of Christ before all else. Piper’s framing captures the point well: all earthly obedience is to be obedience to Christ.

The deepest truth about a Christian at work is this: before you belong to the company, you belong to Christ.

9. ποιοῦντες τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκ ψυχῆς — “doing the will of God from the soul/heart”

This makes ordinary labor an arena of discipleship. MacArthur stresses that the obedience is heart-deep conviction, not external performance. Calvin says faithful service to a human master is, in that sense, obedience to God.

When you work faithfully in a lawful calling, you are not merely doing a job. You are doing the will of God from the heart.

10. μετ’ εὐνοίας — “with good will”

Barber treats this as honorable, peaceable, well-intentioned service; MacArthur emphasizes eagerness rather than reluctant compliance. This is not bare duty. It is willing service shaped by Christ.

11. εἰδότες ὅτι ... κομίσεται παρὰ κυρίου — “knowing that ... he will receive back from the Lord”

Verse 8 gives eschatological motivation. MacArthur calls Christ the “final paymaster.” The point is not merit theology, but the certainty that Christ sees and will not forget faithful good done in His name, regardless of earthly status. Your work may be ignored on earth, but it is not ignored in heaven. Christ sees what men overlook.

12. καὶ οἱ κύριοι τὰ αὐτὰ ποιεῖτε πρὸς αὐτούς — “and masters, do the same things to them”

This does not mean masters become slaves in the same social sense. It means they must display the same Christ-centered integrity, goodwill, and accountability before the Lord. Barber presses this strongly: employers are to have the same attitude of Christ toward those under them.

Paul does not let the one with power stand above the text. The same Christ-centered ethic now turns directly on the master.

13. ἀνιέντες τὴν ἀπειλήν — “stop threatening”

Calvin broadens “threatening” to every proud, disdainful, intimidating posture. Barber makes the same point pastorally: the text forbids management by menace. Christian authority is never permitted to rule by intimidation. The Lord forbids a threatening spirit.

14. οὐκ ἔστιν προσωποληψία παρ’ αὐτῷ — “there is no partiality with Him”

God is not impressed by rank, money, ownership, title, or leverage. Calvin highlights that masters often dare much against inferiors when they think there is no avenger; Paul reminds them there is.

The Lord of heaven does not grade on the curve of social status. Boss and worker stand on level ground before Him.

Historical and Theological Background

In the Greco-Roman world, slavery was widespread and embedded in social and economic life. Slaves served in households, agriculture, workshops, construction, administration, and many other sectors, and slavery in the Roman world took multiple forms, some less severe and some brutally harsh. Craig Keener notes that different forms of slavery existed in Paul’s day, including extremely cruel forms, while Ligonier warns readers not to confuse ancient slavery simplistically with the race-based chattel slavery of the American South.

That matters for preaching because you should not flatten the historical differences. This text is not a defense of the Atlantic slave trade. Ligonier explicitly says that God’s regulation of a practice in Scripture does not necessarily mean that practice is His design for humanity.

At the same time, Paul does not address the institution here by launching a social revolution. Instead, he addresses people already located within the system and radically reorients both parties under Christ. That is where the subversive force of the passage lies. The slave is treated as a moral agent who serves Christ; the master is reminded that he too is under authority and will answer to the same heavenly Master.

So Paul both **affirms real authority** and **radically limits and redirects it**:

authority is real, delegated, and to be respected;

authority is not ultimate, since it is only “according to the flesh” and always beneath Christ;

authority is morally accountable to God;

authority may not be used for intimidation, contempt, or partiality.

This is where the connection to the rest of Ephesians matters. Spirit-filled life does not only sing, thank, and submit in church language; it enters the household and the workplace. The gospel does not merely save private souls. It creates a new humanity whose relationships are reordered under Christ.

Explicit Source Synthesis

Precept Austin / Wayne Barber

- Barber frames 6:5–9 as the Spirit-filled believer in the workplace, which is a helpful bridge from 5:18 into Monday-through-Saturday life.
- He explains “fear and trembling” primarily in relation to Christ, not as servile fear of the boss.
- His treatment of “eye-service” is pastorally sharp: the Christian worker is not honest only when watched, because he knows he is always watched by the Lord.
- His handling of “good will” is useful for application: Spirit-filled labor is honorable, peaceable, and not driven by dissension, manipulation, or backroom grumbling.
- On verse 9, he highlights that masters must show the same Christlike posture and must abandon threatening and favoritism.

Ligonier / R.C. Sproul orbit

- Ligonier’s treatment of 6:5–8 says the fundamental tenet is that we serve earthly supervisors with an eye to the Lord; our first identity is “servants of Christ.”
- It also says these principles apply broadly because all of us live under authority and many exercise authority.
- On labor itself, Ligonier argues work is a gift from God, not merely a post-fall punishment, and therefore labor carries dignity even when it is hard.
- On 6:4, Ligonier shows the broader authority-submission pattern clearly: biblical authority is real, but it is bounded by God’s image in others and may not become tyranny. Paul’s word to fathers placed real limits on Roman paternal power. That gives a strong theological bridge into 6:5–9: God ordains authority, but He forbids abusive authority.
- Sproul’s “Living under Authority” is also useful for a larger frame: all earthly authority is delegated by God; therefore lawful obedience to authority is ultimately obedience to God, and defiance of lawful authority is defiance of God.

John MacArthur

- MacArthur locates the passage in the practical half of Ephesians and treats it as the workplace expression of sanctification.
- He argues “fear and trembling” is aimed at Christ, not the human boss, and that the repeated Christ-language means believers are constantly “bypassing” the human authority to the Lord behind it.
- His emphasis on “sincerity of heart” and “doing the will of God from the heart” is especially useful: Christian labor must be inwardly honest, not outwardly polished only.

- His line that “there’s no such thing as a secular job” is not a formal commentary statement, but it captures his sermon’s theological thrust: every lawful calling becomes worship when offered to Christ.
- He also presses verse 8 strongly: Christ is the final rewarder, which gives dignity to unseen, underpaid, or unrecognized labor.

John Piper / Desiring God

- Piper’s title alone is a good summary of the passage: “Let All Earthly Obedience Be Obedience to Christ.” That is very close to the controlling idea of the text.
- His related question, “Can Slaves of Christ Have Another Master?” is useful for showing that every earthly authority is relativized by the absolute lordship of Jesus.
- Piper’s “Have I Sinned If I Fall Short of Excellence at Work?” gives a careful bridge to modern application: these verses are directed to slaves and masters, but Colossians 3:17 makes the principle broader—whatever we do is to be done in the Lord’s name.
- Desiring God’s related fear-of-man article is useful for the “men-pleasers” language: the answer to people-pleasing is not harshness but a deeper fear of God.

John Calvin

- Calvin says “according to the flesh” reminds believers that earthly servitude does not touch their highest freedom in Christ.
- He says “eye-service” exposes the deceit of pretending diligence only under human observation.
- He insists that God requires sincerity of heart, not merely labor that satisfies men’s eyes.
- He is particularly strong on verse 9: “threatening” includes the whole proud, disdainful posture of those who think no one can call them to account, but both master and servant stand before the same Lord.

Biblical-Theological and Christological Connections

Christ’s own teaching and example

Jesus is the true obedient Son who always did the Father’s will, not with eye-service but from the heart. His meat was to do the will of Him who sent Him, and His obedience was not performative but sincere and complete. That makes Him both the model of willing obedience and the Savior of all our compromised obedience. Matthew 28:18 also matters here: all earthly authority is now beneath the risen Christ.

Philippians 2:5–8 is especially helpful. Christ took the form of a servant and humbled Himself in obedience. So when Paul tells believers to serve “as to the Lord,” he is not calling them into something Christ Himself has never walked. He is the Lord who served.

Mark 10:42–45 also helps with verse 9. Jesus rejects worldly models of authority that “lord it over” others. That is directly relevant to “stop threatening.” Christian authority must never imitate pagan domination.

The gospel as the atmosphere of the Christian home and workplace

Ephesians 6:5–9 is law, but not bare law. It comes inside a letter soaked in union with Christ, redemption by blood, grace, reconciliation, and Spirit-empowered new life. So this passage should not be preached as: “Try

harder and be nicer at work.” It should be preached as: Christ has claimed you, filled you, reordered your identity, and now your labor and leadership belong to Him.

That means law and gospel need to stay together:

- the law exposes eye-service, people-pleasing, intimidation, favoritism, resentment, laziness, harshness, and exploitation;
- the gospel says Christ forgives those sins, frees us from false masters, and forms new patterns of labor and leadership by His Spirit.

For the Christian home, 5:22–6:9 together show that the gospel creates a whole climate: authority without tyranny, submission without servility, correction without cruelty, work without idolatry, obedience without hypocrisy, and leadership without menace.

Helpful Cross-References

Colossians 3:22–4:1

This is the closest parallel passage and helps clarify several ideas: fearing the Lord, working heartily, receiving an inheritance from the Lord, and masters giving what is just and fair because they also have a Master in heaven. It is especially useful for showing that authority is accountable and labor is eschatologically meaningful.

1 Corinthians 7:21–24

Paul neither romanticizes slavery nor makes earthly condition ultimate. If freedom is available, use it. But whether slave or free, the believer is the Lord's. This helps keep both realism and gospel relativization in place.

Philemon

Philemon shows how the gospel destabilizes domination from within. Onesimus is no longer to be regarded merely as a slave but as a beloved brother. This helps prevent a flat reading of Ephesians 6 as though Paul were indifferent to dignity.

1 Peter 2:18–25

Peter addresses unjust masters and ties suffering under authority to Christ's example. This passage is useful for handling bad bosses, but it must be used carefully and never to trap people in abusive situations.

Romans 13:1–7

Ligonier and Sproul both lean on the delegated-authority principle here. God ordains lawful human authority, which explains why Christians ordinarily obey, even when authority is imperfect.

James 5:1–6

This is a needed counterweight for employers and owners. God sees wage injustice, fraud, and oppressive use of power. It pairs well with “stop threatening.”

Deuteronomy 24:14–15

The Lord cares about how workers are treated. That gives you a helpful OT bridge for business owners, farmers, and employers in your congregation.

Matthew 6:1–6

Though about almsgiving and prayer, the principle is relevant: not performing before human eyes. “Eye-service” is part of a larger biblical concern with hidden hypocrisy.

Common Misapplications and Correctives

1. Treating the passage as an endorsement of race-based chattel slavery

Corrective: The text addresses a first-century institution as it existed; it does not endorse later forms of race-based, man-stealing slavery. Ligonier explicitly cautions against that confusion.

2. Flattening slave/master into employee/employer with no qualification

Corrective: There is a valid modern application, but only by analogy and principle, not by erasing the historical difference. Say that plainly.

3. Using “obey” to sanctify abuse

Corrective: Obedience is never required where authority commands sin, covers criminality, or destroys what God forbids others to destroy. Ligonier’s authority framework explicitly limits authority under God’s law and image-bearing dignity.

4. Preaching only to workers and not to bosses

Corrective: Paul turns directly to masters. The one with power is not exempt from scrutiny; in fact, verse 9 is a sharp warning.

5. Turning “work as unto the Lord” into workaholism

Corrective: Ligonier warns that work can become an idol. This text dignifies work, but it does not justify making work your god.

6. Reading “fear and trembling” as cowardice

Corrective: In the passage, this is reverent seriousness before Christ, not emotional terror before a supervisor.

7. Using “do the same things” to erase distinctions of role

Corrective: Paul does not remove all role distinction, but he does require the same Christ-centered moral posture from those with authority.

Concrete Applications

1. **For the employee under a difficult supervisor:** do not let a bad boss become your excuse for bad work. The text does not say, “Work well if the boss deserves it.” It says, “as to the Lord.”
2. **For the worker on a farm or in a shop when nobody is around:** refuse eye-service. Do the same quality of work unwatched that you would do if the owner were standing there.
3. **For retirees:** this text still speaks because the deeper issue is not wage labor only, but how you carry responsibility under the lordship of Christ. Faithful service does not end when the paycheck ends.
4. **For business owners:** “stop threatening” means you do not manage by constant pressure, humiliation, or fear. You can correct, evaluate, and even dismiss when necessary, but not with a menacing spirit.
5. **For managers:** do not show favoritism. Unequal treatment, private perks, and selective loyalty poison a workplace and deny the impartiality of God.
6. **For workers tempted to grumble with coworkers:** “with good will” means you do not build unity in front of the boss and then spread dissension behind his back.
7. **For the person in a monotonous or unseen job:** Christ sees what nobody celebrates. Verse 8 is for the worker whose faithfulness is ordinary and hidden.
8. **For Christians in skilled trades:** your craftsmanship is not secular filler between church events. Done lawfully and faithfully, it is an offering to Christ. MacArthur presses this point strongly.
9. **For the office worker tempted to flatter upward:** stop living for access, perks, and approval. “Not as men-pleasers” gets at performance driven by self-advancement.
10. **For the self-employed:** you are not free from this text because Christ is still your Master. You may not have a human boss over you, but you are not autonomous.
11. **For employers paying wages:** James 5 and Deuteronomy 24 belong near this passage. Christian authority includes fairness, honesty, and timely pay.
12. **For the believer who hates his job:** Ligonier’s line is helpful—work itself is not the curse; the curse has made work hard. That distinction can keep people from despising God’s gift because of sin’s frustration.
13. **For leaders in church or ministry who also supervise others:** verse 9 guards against importing worldly intimidation into Christian settings. A threatening culture is not a Spirit-filled culture.
14. **For workers facing moral compromise:** obey in all lawful things, but when commanded to sin, you must obey God rather than men. Ligonier makes that qualification explicit.
15. **For the congregation as a whole:** this paragraph is a Monday-morning test of whether we really believe Jesus is Lord. Singing on Sunday and cheating on Monday do not belong together.

Tensions, Hard Questions, and Nuanced Issues

Does this passage legitimize slavery?

Trusted Reformed voices generally say:

- Paul addresses slavery as a present social reality;
- he does not celebrate it as creational ideal;
- he places moral limits on it;
- he relativizes it under Christ;
- and in passages like Philemon he pushes the church toward a radically transformed view of persons.

How far can we apply it to employment?

A careful answer is:

- not directly in a one-to-one way;
- yes, by principled analogy;
- especially regarding authority, integrity, motive, service, and accountability before Christ.

Summary of the tensions as Reformed voices tend to hold them

- Authority is good because God delegates it.
- Authority is fallen because sinners wield it.
- Obedience is ordinarily required in lawful matters.
- Obedience is never absolute, because Christ is Lord.
- The gospel dignifies those under authority and humbles those with authority.
- The workplace is a theater of sanctification, not a neutral zone.

Possible big idea statements

1. **Because Christ is Lord over every station of life, believers must work and lead under His gaze, not for human approval.**
2. **The gospel turns ordinary labor into service to Christ and turns human authority into stewardship under Christ.**
3. **Spirit-filled Christians show the lordship of Jesus in the workplace by sincere obedience, willing service, and humble authority.**
4. **In Christ, both worker and boss stand under the same Master, so work must be honest and authority must be gentle.**

Possible sermon movements

1. **The Christian under authority** → vv. 5–8
Focus: obedience, sincerity, no eye-service, doing God’s will from the heart, reward from the Lord.
2. **The Christian with authority** → v. 9
Focus: do the same, stop threatening, shared Master, no partiality.
3. **The Lord over both** → vv. 5–9 threaded throughout
Focus: Christ as the repeated center of the whole paragraph.

Especially Important Quotes or Paraphrased Insights to Consider Using

1. **Ligonier / Tabletalk:** “The fundamental tenet Paul unfolds in Ephesians 6:5–8 is that we serve our earthly supervisors with an eye to the Lord.”
2. **Calvin, paraphrased:** “According to the flesh” reminds believers that earthly bondage is real but only temporal; their deepest freedom in Christ remains untouched.
3. **Calvin:** God requires “truth and sincerity of heart,” not merely labor that looks right to men.
4. **MacArthur:** There is “no such thing as a secular job” for the Christian; every lawful task is offered to the Lord.
5. **Precept Austin / Barber, paraphrased:** The Spirit-filled worker is not an eye-service worker; he does not work only when watched because he knows he is always watched by the Lord.
6. **Ligonier / Sproul orbit:** God delegates real authority, but delegated authority never becomes absolute authority.

7. **Piper title as summary:** “Let all earthly obedience be obedience to Christ.” That is not a quote from the verse itself, but it is an excellent paraphrase of the controlling thrust of the passage.

Research Part C – The Sources

Primary Exegetical & Pastoral Sources

Precept Austin (Wayne Barber & others)

- https://www.preceptaustin.org/ephesians_65-9
-

Ligonier Ministries / R.C. Sproul orbit

- “Serving Earthly Masters” (Tabletalk Devotional)
<https://learn.ligonier.org/devotionals/serving-earthly-masters>
 - “Living Under Authority”
<https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/living-under-authority>
 - “The Sanctity of Labor”
<https://learn.ligonier.org/devotionals/sanctity-labor>
 - “Christian Discipline and Instruction” (Ephesians 6:4 context)
<https://learn.ligonier.org/devotionals/christian-discipline-and-instruction>
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John MacArthur (Grace to You)

- “Divine Design for the Workplace” (Ephesians 6:5–9)
<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/49-38/divine-design-for-the-workplace>
 - “Spirit-Filled Labor Relations”
<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/1951/spirit-filled-labor-relations>
 - “God’s Perspective on Work”
<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/80-171/gods-perspective-on-work>
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John Piper / Desiring God

- “Let All Earthly Obedience Be Obedience to Christ”
<https://www.desiringgod.org/labs/let-all-earthly-obedience-be-obedience-to-christ>
- “Can Slaves of Christ Have Another Master?”
<https://www.desiringgod.org/labs/can-slaves-of-christ-have-another-master>
- “Have I Sinned If I Fall Short of Excellence at Work?”
<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/have-i-sinned-if-i-fall-short-of-excellence-at-work>
- “You Cannot Please God and People” (fear of man / men-pleasers theme)
<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/you-cannot-please-god-and-people>

John Calvin (Commentary on Ephesians 6:5–9)

- <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom41/calcom41.iv.vii.ii.html>

Additional Helpful Background & Commentary

Craig Keener (historical background on slavery)

- <https://craigkeener.com/slaves-and-slaveholders-ephesians-65-9/>

Parallel Passage for Study (Colossians 3:22–4:1)

- https://www.preceptaustin.org/colossians_322-41

Optional Broader Reformed Commentary (if you want to expand)

(These are not required, but helpful if you want deeper study)

- Ephesians (Baker Exegetical Commentary)
- The Letter to the Ephesians (Pillar New Testament Commentary)
- Ephesians (Reformed Expository Commentary)