

Learning How to Walk:
Stride Right at Work
A Study of Ephesians 6:5-9

Characteristic of Completeness: Giving Away My Life

Big Idea: In the workplace, the Lord is the boss.

Related Scriptures: Colossians 3:22-24; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10;
1 Peter 2:18-21; Matthew 20:25-28; John 13:12b-17; Colossians 4:1;
Philemon 12-17; 1 Peter 5:2-4; 2 Corinthians 5:10

Introduction:

- A. (Start video collage of difficult bosses ► [here](#).¹)
- B. The experience of suffering at work under a difficult boss seems universal. Most of us have either worked *for* a difficult boss, or we have worked *as* the difficult boss. I've done both.

Before becoming a pastor, I worked in marketing research for about 15 years. As a subordinate, there were some trying times. Like when one of my bosses said I was slow and almost fired me. Like when one of my bosses tried to get me fired because I caught her cheating. Like when one of my bosses literally threw one of my proposals back at me in disgust because he didn't like it. Like when one of my bosses called me, "too principled." Like

¹ Video clips in order of appearance: Clive Donner, dir., *A Christmas Carol*, (Travenol Laboratories Limited, 1984); Paul Weitz, dir., *In Good Company*, (Universal Studios, 2004); Mike Judge, dir., *Office Space*, (Twentieth Century Fox, 1999).

when one of my bosses was said to be fitting me for concrete shoes.

And I'm afraid I've played the role of a difficult boss at times. At one time, I managed a staff of research writers. One of them, a summa cum laude Ph.D. in sociology, cried in my office, saying, "No one has picked apart my writing the way you do."

The Bible speaks with amazing relevance to such difficulties, offering wisdom for the workplace—wisdom for both subordinates and supervisors. The Scriptures give us insights into how to be a better employee and how to be a better boss. And the insights are particularly relevant for difficult working situations.

- C. Our text for study today is ► Ephesians 6:5-9. It begins with a difficult work situation. It ► says,

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 6:5** Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh . . .

The ► “bondservants” here are basically slaves in a socioeconomic context.² Because the letter to the Ephesians addresses believers in Jesus Christ, the bondservants to whom Paul speaks are the believers in the Ephesian church who happen to be slaves. The ► “masters according to the flesh” are

² W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “δοῦλος,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

the earthly masters or bosses in charge of the slaves. Now this can be a difficult working relationship, particularly if you happen to be on the slave side of things.

Slavery was common in the first-century Greco-Roman world. But Roman slavery was generally far more humane and civilized than the slavery in American history.³ In many respects, Roman slaves experienced a standard of living on a par with the common free man. A slave had many of the legal rights of a free man. The living conditions, food, and clothing provided by masters to their slaves were often as good as those of common free men. And masters often gave slaves monthly spending money such that the discretionary income of slaves was not radically different from that of the common free man.⁴

While the living conditions of slaves in the first-century were often not as bad as you might imagine, it was still slavery. There were abuses. There was a loss of freedom. It was still a challenging work situation for a slave, and slaves, after all, were on the lowest rung of the social ladder.⁵

Interestingly, the Apostle Paul does not take this opportunity to condemn slavery. He does not urge believing slaves to rise up in revolt and take their freedom. He doesn't organize a protest.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ, Preaching The Word* series, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 206.

⁴ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 5, s.v. "slavery," by A. Rupprecht, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, 1976), 459-460.

⁵ Knute Larson, "Titus," *The Holman New Testament Commentary*, Max Anders ed., Vol. 9, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 364.

Instead, he urges the Christian bondservants to be good subordinates. And later, he issues directives to Christian masters to be good bosses. The modern application for us is not to return to slavery, but to put to work some timeless principles that will help us be better subordinates and better bosses, even in difficult situations.

- D. This message comes in two parts. First, I will cover the biblical responsibilities of subordinates or employees. Second, I will cover the biblical responsibilities of bosses or supervisors.

- I. The ► first and largest portion of our text addresses believing subordinates. Perhaps Paul spends more time on subordinates because theirs is the more difficult challenge.
 - A. Paul's command to bondservants is to obey their masters. This fits the theme of submission to God-given authority begun back in Ephesians 5:21. Let me read the command and the expansion on it in ► Ephesians 6:5-7. Paul says,

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 6:5** Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men [emphasis mine]

The command to obey is not surprising. But the way in which subordinates are commanded to obey is rather shocking and countercultural. Paul says that a believing subordinate is to obey his boss as though the boss were the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. I know this is a little hard to swallow, but Paul says it three times for emphasis. In Verse 5, he says we are to be obedient ► “as to Christ.” In Verse 6, he says we are to be obedient ► “as bondservants of Christ.” In Verse 7, he says we are to be obedient ► “as to the Lord.”

The variations on the phrase, ► “as to the Lord” point to Jesus Christ as the ultimate boss. As subordinates, we are to look beyond our difficult earthly boss to the Lord Jesus. We are to respond to our earthly bosses the way we should respond to Jesus. In fact, the big idea of my message is ► this: In the workplace, the Lord is the boss. We are to work as though we are working for the Lord Himself. As believers, we are to respond to earthly bosses in the same way we respond to our heavenly boss.

This adds a whole new perspective to our work. It suggests that if we are called upon to dig a ditch, we obey as if the Lord Jesus Christ Himself issued the command. If, in our work, we are called upon to fill a cavity, or repair a car, or try a case, or supervise a crew, or build a house, or treat a patient, or write a report, or care for the kids, or put up a webpage, or answer phone calls, or clean the office, or pay the bills, or provide counsel, or put up with customers, or whatever the case may be, we are to do it as if Jesus is the One asking us to do it.

This can be a terribly difficult, self-sacrificial task when our earthly boss happens to be a jerk. So our ► Characteristic of Completeness for the week is Giving Away My Life. This obedient giving away often involves subordinating or surrendering my own preferences with a focus on my heavenly Boss and His priorities and purposes for my life, even as they are worked out through difficult earthly bosses.

Clearly, this obedience or submission must be qualified in some way. For example, I don't think Paul is advocating subordinates doing something immoral or illegal or unethical in obedience to their masters. Nor do I think Paul is condoning abuse. So, what exactly does Paul mean when he says we are to obey "as to the Lord?" Thankfully, Paul explains himself. He presents four ways we are to obey our bosses "as to the Lord."

1. The first aspect of our obedience is that we are to respond to our bosses ► with respect. We are to grant them honor. We are to ascribe value to their position. I get this from ► Verse 5, where Paul says we are to obey . . .

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 6:5** . . . with fear and trembling

. . .

The words "fear" and "trembling" can be a little misleading because we commonly associate them with terror and dread and apprehension. But that's not how

Paul is using them. He's merely describing the respect or reverence or honor that is to be afforded a God-given authority.⁶

Let me give you an example from another situation that makes this clear. On one occasion, the Apostle Paul had sent his ministry partner, Titus, to give guidance to the church at Corinth. The Corinthian church welcomed Titus with the respect due such a spiritual authority. Titus later reported back to Paul how good he felt about being treated so respectfully. And so Paul, in turn, commends the Corinthians for the respect they showed to Titus. In ► 2 Corinthians 7:15, Paul writes,

^{NKJ} **2 Corinthians 7:15** And his affections [the affections of Titus] are greater for you as he remembers the obedience of you all, how with fear and trembling you received him.

Paul describes the respect afforded Titus using the same words he uses in our text in Ephesians: ► “with fear and trembling.” The idea is not that they were terrorized by Titus; they were merely respectful of his authority.

Being ► respectful of those in authority is reiterated elsewhere in Scripture. For example, ► 1 Timothy 6:1 says,

⁶ BDAG, s.v. “φόβος.”

^{NKJ} **1 Timothy 6:1** Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor . . .

Our charge as subordinates is to respect our bosses, to count them worthy of honor, even if they don't deserve it, because in the workplace, the Lord is the boss. How do we do that?

One of the most common ways we can respect our boss is by refusing to say disrespectful things about him or her. Ever find yourself whining to other employees about your boss or your work? I've been there. It's so easy to get on a roll, especially if you have a difficult boss. The words you say, the tone of voice, the looks you give, the body language you present can all deliver the same negative message: "I'm oppressed. I'm the victim. My boss is an idiot. Woe is me. Let me tell you about it." It's easy to blame your boss or your work for your woes, and to look for a little sympathy from just about anyone who will listen.

Paul encourages us to stop our disrespectful whining, and be content and productive in the situation in which God has sovereignly placed us. This is not to say that we shouldn't ever disagree with our superiors. There are proper ways to do that. Nor is it to say that we should

never voice our opinion. There are appropriate times and places to do that. Nor am I suggesting that you should never change jobs. That can be a viable option. Just don't become disrespectful.

2. The second aspect of our obedience is that we are to respond to our bosses ► with integrity. We are to be honest and sincere. We are to have pure motives because, in the workplace, the Lord is the boss.
 - a. I get this from ► Verse 5, where Paul says that we are to obey . . .

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 6:5** . . . in sincerity of heart . . .

The Greek word ► “sincerity” describes “personal integrity in word or action.”⁷ It’s being a worker without hidden agendas, where what you see is what you get.⁸ “Sincerity ► of heart” means that there is no “outward show that conceals improper motivation.”⁹

- b. The same idea is expressed in ► Verse 6, where Paul says we are to obey . . .

⁷ BDAG, s.v. “ἀπλότης.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 6:6** not with eyeservice,
as men-pleasers . . .

The term, ► “eyeservice” describes service that is performed only to impress the boss when he or she is watching.¹⁰ ► “Men-pleasers” are those who sacrifice principles in order to schmooze the boss.¹¹

- 1) Integrity means that you work just as hard when the boss is not watching. The person who works harder only when the boss is around lacks integrity.
- 2) Integrity also wipes out all the counterfeit, disingenuous schemes to please your human boss. Like stabbing your perceived competitor in the back to make yourself look good. Like manipulatively engaging in office politics to enhance your image at the expense of your colleagues. Like brown-nosing or kissing up. Here’s a video clip of what that can look like when a new boss arrives after an acquisition.

¹⁰ BDAG, s.v. “ὄφθαλμοδοουλία.”

¹¹ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. “ἀνθρωπάρεσκος,” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

(Play ► video clip here.¹²)

3. The ► third aspect of our obedience is that we are to respond to our bosses with dedication. We are to be hard-working, conscientious, diligent, giving our best effort. I get this from ► Verse 6, where Paul says we are to obey . . .

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 6:6** . . . doing the will of God
from the heart

The phrase ► “from the heart” literally means from the soul and could be translated “wholeheartedly.”¹³ Over in ► Colossians 3:23, Paul says to bondservants . . .

^{NKJ} **Colossians 3:23** And whatever you do, do it
heartily, as to the Lord and not to men

The word ► “heartily” is a translation of the same Greek phrase translated “from the heart” back in Ephesians 6:6. Notice also the same phrase ► “as to the Lord.” We are to be dedicated because, in the workplace, the Lord is the boss. We’re working for Jesus.

And if it’s for Jesus, wouldn’t you want to do the best employee you possibly could? Wouldn’t you strive for

¹² Weitz, *In Good Company*.

¹³ Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 809.

excellence? Wouldn't you give 100%? Would a half-hearted, half-baked effort ever be acceptable? Would a punch-clock, it's-just-a-job attitude ever be okay?

And if it's all for Jesus, wouldn't you want to go the extra mile? If Jesus is really behind your boss, wouldn't you want to go beyond the minimum required and try to anticipate his or her unspoken needs? Wouldn't you assume responsibility for things that you think your boss might want you to do without ever being asked? Wouldn't you want to learn to do your job better and better?

I can almost hear the objections. "That's fine for the land of make-believe, but my boss is an idiot, and he'd take advantage of me if I were to work as hard as I can." Sounds reasonable until you consider that Paul is addressing slaves, many of whom faced working situations far worse than ours. If Paul says slaves are to be dedicated, how much more should we be dedicated?

Some may wonder, "Are you advocating becoming a workaholic, or making my job my number one priority to the exclusion of other important things like my family?" No. It's about being well-pleasing to Jesus as the boss. I challenge you as I challenge myself to examine yourself before the Lord, prayerfully asking Him one simple question: "Lord, is my effort at work well-pleasing to You?"

4. The ► fourth aspect of our obedience is that we are to respond to our bosses with a positive attitude. I get this from ► Verse 7, where Paul says we are to obey . . .

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 6:7** with goodwill doing service . . .

The Greek term for ► “goodwill” describes a positive attitude—a willingness or an eagerness to work.¹⁴ I think a big part of this positive attitude is a willingness to assume responsibility to get things done without being asked. Management consultant and author Bob Nelson describes what he calls ► the “Ultimate Expectation” of every employer. It is to “always do what most needs to be done without waiting to be asked.”¹⁵ This requires a positive attitude.

For some of you, the thought of showing up for work again all eager and positive may be nauseating. Some of you are thinking, “You don’t know how hard it is to grind through every day in my job. You don’t know what an idiot my boss is. You don’t know the pressures I face.” You’re right. I don’t know exactly what you’re facing.

But I’d like you to listen to the words of the late ► Victor Frankl, a Jew who spent time in German concentration

¹⁴ BDAG, s.v. “εὐνοια.”

¹⁵ Bob Nelson & Peter Economy, *Managing for Dummies*, 2d. ed., (New York: Wiley Publishing, 2003), 18.

camps, including Auschwitz, in World War II. Frankl ► writes,

The experiences of camp life show that man does have a choice of action. ► There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. ► Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, in independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical distress.

► *We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. ► They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—► to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.¹⁶*

Your boss may be pretty bad. But he or she is probably not as bad as the Nazi bosses in Auschwitz. You can choose to have a positive attitude.

¹⁶ Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, quoted by Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*, (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1998), 37-38.

B. But ► why? Why should we obey our bosses with respect and integrity and dedication and a positive attitude, even when they're jerks?

1. Paul gives us one terrific reason in ► Verse 8. He says that we are to obey . . .

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 6:8** knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether *he is* a slave or free.

The word, ► “receive” means to get paid something as recompense or reward for good work performed.¹⁷ Paul is saying that whatever good we do will be rewarded by the Lord Himself.

I am greatly encouraged by the word, ► “whatever.” Whatever good I do at work, even if it is not noticed by anyone else, even if I get no credit for it at work, even if I am not rewarded for it by my earthly boss, my heavenly boss notices and will reward me. In ► Colossians 3:23-24, Paul speaks to subordinates, saying,

^{NKJ} **Colossians 3:23** And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive

¹⁷ BDAG, s.v. “κομίζω.”

the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.

The Lord will reward us for whatever good we do on the job.

2. When and how will we be rewarded? How does this work?
 - a. Well, sometimes the Lord rewards us on earth. He can reward us with a clean conscience—being able to sleep better at night, knowing we've given our best. He can also reward us with favor in the workplace. Generally speaking, subordinates who have this rare and valued combination of respect, integrity, dedication, and a positive attitude go much farther and are treated much better in this life.
 - b. And even if our good work is not fairly rewarded in this life, in the life to come, there will be perfect fairness. All believers will one day appear before Jesus Christ for the ultimate employee performance review. It's known as the judgment seat of Christ. Paul explains it in ► 2 Corinthians 5:10, saying,

^{NKJ} **2 Corinthians 5:10** For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to

what he has done, whether good or bad.

This is not a review to determine whether or not you will go to heaven. Heaven is secure for all who rely on Christ alone for eternal life. The review will determine your reward in heaven. The rewards relate to our capacity to enjoy and to serve the Lord in the life to come.

And I take it that one of the points of evaluation in our performance review will be the extent to which we worked with respect and integrity and dedication and a positive attitude.

3. Some may think, “Well that’s not fair because it’s easier for some people to be good employees because they work in a better environment. I’m stuck in a lousy work situation. So I’m at a disadvantage.”

Not true. The Lord factors this in. In fact, the more difficult your job is, the greater your opportunity to stand out as a godly employee. The more idiotic your boss is, the greater leverage you have to be the godly employee who rises above it when no ordinary person would. The greater the drudgery, the greater the distinction for those who deal with it by being godly. In ► 1 Peter 2:18-21, it says,

^{NKJ} **1 Peter 2:18** Servants, *be* submissive to *your* masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. ►¹⁹ For this *is* commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. ►²⁰ . . . when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this *is* commendable before God. ►²¹ For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps

Today we have a big advantage over the Roman slaves of the first century. We have the freedom to quit and find another job. And that may be a perfectly reasonable and justifiable move. The difficulty of our work situation may prompt us to change jobs, but it should never prompt us to change our commitment to work with respect, integrity, dedication, and a positive attitude wherever we are. If we think we're being underpaid or overlooked, we're free to find another job, but as believers in Jesus Christ, we are not free to diminish our work effort.

4. You may be thinking, "Why would God want me to suffer on the job. Why does He commend my occupational suffering?" Suffering is not God's final goal. His ultimate objective is not for His children to suffer on the job. His ultimate objective is for His children to reflect His

character, to be a witness to His goodness wherever they are. And sometimes we reflect His character most brightly against the dark backdrop of a difficult workplace. Victor Frankl says, “What is to give light must endure burning.”¹⁸ Think about that: “What is to give light must endure burning.”

In ► Titus 2:9-10, Paul says we ought to be good subordinates because working hard and well in the midst of adversity makes God attractive to others. Paul says,

^{NLT} **Titus 2:9** Slaves must obey their masters and do their best to please them. They must not talk back¹⁰ or steal, but they must show themselves to be entirely trustworthy and good. ► Then they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive in every way.

In ► 1 Timothy 6:1, Paul says much the same thing in another way. He says,

^{NLT} **1 Timothy 6:1** Christians who are slaves should give their masters full respect so that the name of God and his teaching will not be shamed.

¹⁸ Victor Frankl, available from <http://www.jimpoz.com/quotes/speaker.php?speakerid=127>; Internet; accessed 31 December 2005.

I've heard some Christian employees say of their current employment, "It's just a job. It's just a way to put bread on the table. My real ministry is in my family and in the church."

That's half right. Family and church are important. But your job—any job—is your ministry, too. If you are a believer, your job is your ministry and Jesus is your boss. How you work in your job is a witness to the world concerning Christ.

I've heard some Christians say, "I've never really been big on evangelism. I wish I knew what to say to my colleagues at work, but I don't know that much about the Bible and I've never really been all that eloquent. So, I don't really say anything."

That's half right. Maybe you aren't saying words about Jesus. But your work as a godly employee speaks volumes every day. If I could somehow make a few sweeping changes that would have the greatest evangelistic impact on America, I would make Christians better employees. I think this is one of the greatest evangelistic opportunities lost in America. Christians ought to be the best employees on earth because we have the best Boss in heaven.

Some Christians think that being a pastor is a holy calling, but working in the meat department at Safeway is just a

job, as if God is somehow more involved in the pastorate than He is in the meat department.

That's not true. They're both jobs and they're both a holy calling—a calling from the same Boss to be the best, most godly employee you can be as a witness to the world.

Some Christians say, “I wish I could be involved in a vocation that really counts for Jesus. Working at Sonic or Subway or Honeywell or APS or Bank of America doesn't seem to count for much.”

That's not true. Every Christian employee in every job is a missionary. Godly clerks are needed just as badly as godly clergy. Your job is to shine wherever you work because, in the workplace, the Lord is the boss.

- II. Paul concludes our text in ► Verse 9 by briefly addressing those believers in the Ephesian church who happen to be masters or bosses. He says,

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 6:9** And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

- A. What are the ► “same things” bosses are to do to subordinates? Clearly, bosses are not obligated to obey their subordinates. But

bosses are to treat their subordinates with respect, with integrity, with dedication, and with a positive attitude. That's what Paul is saying. The roles of bosses and subordinates are clearly different, but in these four ways, they are to treat each other the same.

- B. This means that Christian bosses are ► to give up “threatening.” This is a call for bosses to stop abusing subordinates.

- C. Why? Because the Christian boss has ► the same Master as the Christian slave. In the workplace, the Lord is the boss of both. And “there is ► no partiality with the Lord.” That is to say the Lord will impartially judge both subordinates and bosses. He will be completely fair. Society may grant bosses greater privilege. Culture may cut bosses more slack. But Jesus won't. Jesus is unimpressed and unswayed by our status in the workplace.

Our performance reviews at the judgment seat of Christ will have the same evaluative criteria for the workplace, whether we're a CEO or a clerk. In the workplace, the Lord is the boss. And the Boss requires ► respect, ► integrity, ► dedication, and ► a positive attitude.