

MAKING YOUR WORKPLACE A HAPPY ENVIRONMENT

Eighth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Understanding and Repairing Our Relationships* from Ephesians 5:22-25 and 6:1-9

“With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not as to men.” Ephesians 6:7

I grew up in western Pennsylvania where labor disputes were the daily fare of each morning’s newspapers and every evening’s newscasts. The year of 1969—if my memory is correct—was a particularly explosive time for the United Mine Workers. The union was riddled with corruption and a reformer named Jock Yablonski had been elected president with a mandate to clean things up. But late one night a group of union thugs slipped into Yablonski’s isolated farmhouse near Washington, PA, and murdered Yablonski, his wife, and their children while they slept in their beds. I recall railroad work stoppages that erupted when railway companies, which one by one were going bankrupt, tried to streamline operations by eliminating obsolete jobs—featherbedding, they called it—and the unions wouldn’t yield. I recall Barb’s dad coming home exhausted during the weeks when new labor contracts were being negotiated in his company, and the normally amicable relationships between labor and management grew tense and strained. Barb, when I met her, had just gone through a teachers’ strike in her school district, and it took a year for some teachers to begin talking again to those who had not supported the strike. Of course you can imagine how that benefited the children in her elementary school. And then there was a professor of mine whose sick child was being treated at Children’s Hospital in Pittsburgh, and he, in order to park his car in the hospital lot, had to run a gamut of angry, spitting hospital workers who were picketing for higher wages. You may not know first hand about organized labor disputes, but you do know how ugly your workplace can become, sometimes because just one person causes trouble, or a new boss takes over who does not know what he is doing.

We’ve been talking for several weeks about our relationships, seeking to understand them, and from a Biblical perspective, learn how to repair them. Some of the most important relationships we have occur at work. So, I’d like to consider with you today, how to make your workplace a happy environment. Turn with me to Ephesians chapters 5 and 6. Our primary passage is chapter 6, verses 5-9 and in it Paul discusses three things. **1. Conflicts that Destroy Harmony in the Workplace, 2. The Christian’s Witness in the Workplace, and, 3. The Contribution You Make Toward Improving your Work Environment.**

1. Conflicts that Destroy Harmony in the Workplace. Any of us who must work together with other people know how easily the job environment can turn ugly. There are of course many reasons why this may happen, but in Ephesus, where the Christian recipients of Paul’s letter lived, a lot of their difficulty came from labor problems. Perhaps you remember the story of Paul’s experience in Ephesus. He had lived there for about three years preaching the gospel and teaching. A remarkable awakening had swept the city. Tens of thousands of people became Christians and the change in their personal lives had upset the social order. Luke tells us in Acts 19 that it all finally came to a head. So many people had stopped worshiping at the world-renowned temple of Diana, that revenue had fallen off. The silversmiths, who were not

so much a labor union as a guild, used to make small silver replicas of the temple which they sold to the thousands of tourists who visited Ephesus each year. The economic downturn was blamed on the Christians, and in a sense this was correct. The silversmiths provoked a great riot where people chanted for two solid hours, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." People who lived on the heights heard the commotion and came tumbling down to join the protestors in the city theater. The theater could seat something like 25,000 people, and those who filled those seats demanded that the Christians be dealt with. The authorities eventually restored order, and Paul left the city soon after

The Christians of Ephesus remained however, and day by day they had to co-exist with people who despised them. Each day in the shops and in the marketplace, in the halls of city government and in the places of their employment, they rubbed shoulders with people who were antagonized. They understood how easily a good job could become almost intolerable and how simmering resentments could spontaneously combust. They worked for people who often treated them unfairly and they had a city administration that couldn't be counted on to protect their interests. If a group of people ever needed advice on how to get along in the workplace, the Ephesian Christians did. Maybe your circumstances are like that. Perhaps Paul's guidance will aid you in getting along with your co-workers as you go to work tomorrow and in the days to come. In verses 5-9 Paul enables us to discern four issues that cause conflict at work. These are Quality Control, Motivation, Compensation, and Leadership.

1. Quality Control. In verse 5 Paul says, "*Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ.*" Paul is addressing slaves. Don't think "slaves" as we think of them in our American experience. Slaves in the ancient world had a great many rights. They could get an education. They could own a business. They might even own other slaves. And they could save up money and buy out their contract and therefore their freedom. The arrangement was probably closer to American mining or mill towns of a generation or two ago, where the company owned the business, the houses, the company store and the bank. So, Paul says to these workers, you must obey your masters. Do what you are told to do. Why does he say this? Because trouble starts when people don't follow orders. The job doesn't get done, or it doesn't get done right, and management gets angry and workers get angry back.

So we have poor quality control. A woman ordered 25 invitations. Inside the box was a note. "To assure that you receive the exact amount you have purchased, your invitations and envelopes have been counted by the same machine used by the Federal government to count currency." The woman discovered she had received 26 envelopes and 27 invitations. One person's failure to do as told reflects poorly on an entire group or company and causes others to be discouraged or to feel resentment.

2. Motivation. Paul says in verse 6, Do your work "*not by way of eyeservice, as men pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.*" Paul is talking about workers who only do their job well when the boss comes around. After my freshman year in college I got a job in a factory. I had been taught to work hard at

whatever task I was given to do, and I saw no reason to change just because I was working in a factory. After a few days, one of the older, permanent workers pulled me aside. “Slow down,” he warned. “You’re making the rest of us look bad.”

3. Compensation. This is the big one. In verses 7-8 Paul says, “*With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.*” No one ever thinks he is paid more than he ought to be. Just the opposite. Everyone feels he is being under paid. The one who grumbles that he is being cheated each pay period, or who gets even with his stingy employer by petty thefts or by hardly working instead of working hard, can create an atmosphere of bitterness that infects everyone else. I like the story of the pastor who complained about his low salary. A fellow pastor was impressed by how his friend got by on so little. “Yes,” said the impoverished servant of God, “If I didn’t fast two days a week, I’d starve to death!” Contrast that with the pastor of a mega church with a vast TV audience. He allegedly takes up two offerings each Sunday: One for the work of the church and one for him. It’s the same attitude in either case,.

4. Leadership. Paul addresses management in verse 9. “*Masters,...give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with him.*” Poor leadership frustrates people who work for them. You may feel like Corporal Peter Matthews who on D-Day had just been assigned to the British 10th Commandos. He hadn’t trained with them. The commandos found themselves pinned down outside a village by machinegun fire. Captain Robinson summoned Matthews forward and said, “I want you to go down toward the village and find out where the fire is coming from.” Matthews assumed this was a reconnaissance maneuver. “How many men should I take?” he asked. “I want you to go by yourself,” the captain said. “OK,” said Matthews. I’ll sweep along toward the left. Watch for me to come out on the right.” “You don’t understand,” said the captain. “I want you to stand up and walk straight down the road toward the village.” Then Matthews got it. The captain didn’t want to risk any of his own men. He wanted Matthews to draw fire so the rest of the troop could see where it was coming from. It was a suicide assignment. Matthews wondered how he could possibly survive. Then he remembered a scene in the movie *Gunga Din* where the British are hopelessly surrounded by Thuggees. Cary Grant stands up just before Indians close in and calmly says, “You’re all under arrest.” Matthews stood up and began walking down the road, shouting at the top of his voice, “Everybody surrender! You’re completely surrounded. Throw down your weapons and come out with your hands up!” The Germans didn’t do that, but they didn’t shoot either, so shocked were they by this lunatic. Finally a German rifleman stood up to shoot. Matthews dropped to the ground, and the 10th Commandos, with bayonets fixed, charged past him. Did you ever feel like your job is going to kill you, or your boss has singled you out for the worst job because you’re not one of his favorite people? Poor leadership creates great problems at work.

B. The Christian’s Witness in the Workplace. Paul was writing to the Christians in Ephesus who had to work in difficult circumstances, for people who in many cases resented them. And he’s saying, in effect, God has called you to bear witness

to Christ each day on the job. In many ways this is the same challenge we have. How do you conduct yourself as a Christian employee or a Christian employer or manager? A lot of Christians try to do that by displaying some overt symbol that announces that they are a Christian. For example, they may place their Bible prominently on their desk. Or they tack up a favorite Bible verse, so that their co-workers will get the gospel each time they come near. Or sometimes they bore the ears off their fellow workers by talking about Christ. In other words, you're a Christian because you've taped it across your forehead or printed it on your shirt. But this is not how Paul says we are to do it.

Instead, Paul says, we are to create a counter-culture. Unlike those who fight, rebel, complain, or divide, Christians should be known for just the opposite. Look at the context of our passage. In Ephesians 5:21 Paul says Christians are to "*be subject.*" This is how we are to conduct our marriages. In verse 22 Paul tells wives to "*be subject to your own husbands.*" In verse 25 he tells husbands, "*Love your wives.*" Same thing. In the family he tells children in chapter 6, verse 1, "*Obey your parents.*" And so he says in the workplace in verse 5, "*Slaves, be obedient to...your masters.*" We are to be people, in other words, who honor the structures God has set in place. We're to make things work, not tear them apart.

Speaking of the order that God has established, we are to realize that we are part of the over-riding kingdom of Christ. In chapter 5, verse 21 he says, "*Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.*" That is, in all we do we are to honor Christ. In verse 22 when he tells wives to be subject to their husbands, they are to do that as if they were serving the Lord. In verse 25 husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. In chapter 6, verse 1, children are to obey their parents "*in the Lord.*" In verse 4, fathers are to instruct their children in the way the Lord says to do. In verse 5 slaves are to obey their masters as they would Christ. In verse 9 masters are to remember that Christ is their Master. In other words, they are to conduct their business and treat their employees in the way Jesus would want them to. The point of all this is that we are not to do things according to the prevailing culture, or in the way other people do them. We serve the Lord Jesus. He died to claim us as his own. The question for each of us is, do you trust God enough to do what he calls you to do? We are part of a counter-culture bringing light into a dark world in the name of Christ.

C. The Contribution You can Make Toward Improving Your Work Environment. Now, in verses 5-9, Paul takes this idea of a counter-culture and gives us instructions on how we ought to deal with each of the four areas of workplace conflict.

1. Quality Control. In verse 5 Paul says we are to serve our masters, our employers, "*in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ.*" Let me put it this way: we are to do our best, with a good attitude, as if Jesus were the boss. There's a story about a man who owned a Rolls Royce. Rolls Royce takes pride in making the best car in the world. This man was driving his in the Alps when it broke down. He made a call to the Rolls Royce factory and they sent a company representative out to repair the vehicle. When he left, the owner thanked him for his excellent service and told him to send him the bill. But no bill came. Finally he phoned the Rolls Royce plant again and inquired

about the bill. The person to whom he talked searched the files. At last he returned to the line. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said. “There is no record of a repair on your car.” “There must be,” the man exclaimed. “Your mechanic came all the way to the Alps from England.” “Sir, I don’t think *you* understand. “Rolls Royces don’t break down.” That kind of commitment to being the best ought to characterize every Christian in all we do.

2. Motivation. In verse 6 Paul says we should do the same work whether anyone is watching or not. We are to work “*from the heart.*” I learned something about that long ago on my third Summer job in a steel mill. The company brought in a number of college students and put them on maintenance crews to spell the regulars who were going off on vacation, and to do extra maintenance work. That meant we got to do all the jobs no one else liked, like breaking down an open hearth furnace in the searing heat, shoveling slag, and cleaning out the grease pits. There were five of us on our crew and we discovered three of us were Christians. We decided we were going to be known as the best crew the company had. We gave ourselves a nickname—“the Shotgun Crew.” We cut pictures of shotguns out of the Sears catalogue and taped them to the back of our hard hats. We worked hard and we had a great time. Everybody at Aarmco Steel knew about us because we did all that was expected and more. And that gave us a platform to talk to others about Christ. We even led one fellow to trust Christ as his savior.

3. Compensation. In verses 7-8 Paul says, “*With good will render service.*” And then he adds that we ought to trust God to provide for us. I want to take a moment to commend our Cornerstone staff. Not one of them is paid what he or she is worth. Each of them could probably go elsewhere and be paid a higher wage. But they are serving Christ as they serve you. And they do so with a wonderful attitude. We have an obligation to provide for them fairly. But please appreciate their faithful work for Christ’s kingdom. That’s how every Christian ought to be. You serve Christ in your job whether it is a Christian enterprise or not, whether you have a Christian boss or not.

4. Leadership. In verse 9 Paul speaks to those of us who have leadership positions where we are in charge of overseeing the work that others do. Paul tells us to give up threatening. If you motivate properly, if you lead well, you don’t need to threaten. The Christian manager or employer has an obligation to learn how to lead competently, and to compensate fairly, and to act with fairness and justice toward his employees. Thomas Friedman has said, “*Tap into people’s dignity and they will do anything for you. Ignore it and they won’t lift a finger.*” That’s what Paul is saying here.

You and I cannot always change the way our workplace functions. But never forget that we serve Christ in our job. We are working for him. And even if we never say a word, people ought to recognize that about us. In most cases, by following what the apostle says, you can bring a higher level of happiness into your work environment. But during the trying times, pray for those you work with, for God does answer prayer. Be patient. We’re here to make the world a better place and to point people to the next one.