

## ***Serving Christ through our Work***

***Colossians 3:22-4:1***

Today we are returning to an important topic, namely, serving Christ through our work. Your work is the main thing that you do each week, whether you get paid for it or not. Your work may involve teaching, the building trades, agriculture, computers, military, animals, administration, medicine and health, caring for your children or your parents, volunteering, school (preparing for a career or simply getting an education), or something entirely different than I've mentioned. Your work is the main thing you do each week, whether you get paid for it or not. It would be a strange thing indeed if our discipleship had nothing to do with how we spend the best hours of our week.

Dorothy Sayers was an author in England during the first half of the 20th century. What she says here clarifies what we'll be talking about this morning in relation to work.

*"The church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him to not be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours and to come to church on Sundays. What the church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables."*

(Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos*, pp. 56-57)

Of course the carpenter shouldn't be "drunk and disorderly" in his free time. Of course worshiping with others is important. But a Christian carpenter should also make good tables.

Many Christians (and many churches) have a two-tiered approach to work. The top tier would be pastors, missionaries, campus ministers, etc. The bottom tier would be everybody else - the people who make money to support those in the top tier who do the important, spiritual stuff. If there's any real value in the work of the bottom tier, it lies in opportunities their work gives them to share Christ with others.

That is not the teaching of the Bible. Of course there's a place for vocational ministry; if that's your calling you should pursue it wholeheartedly. And there's a place for sharing Christ in the workplace. But we don't see a two-tiered view of ministry or work. Rather, Scripture teaches that all work has dignity (unless, of course, that work is inherently sinful). All believers should do their work as an expression of their devotion to Jesus.

This morning we are going to consider Colossians 3:18-4:1. In this passage Paul puts forth the perspective that every believer "serves the Lord" through his/her work. Beginning in verse 18 Paul gives a list of instructions that is sometimes called **household code**. Such instructions were common in the Greek-speaking world in Paul's day. One thing that made his household codes unique is that he not only addressed the members of the household who had all the power (husbands, fathers, and masters); he also addressed the more vulnerable members of the household (wives, children, and servants/slaves). We are going to draw some foundational perspectives about "work" from Paul's instructions to servants and to masters.

A couple points about Paul's context in the first century Roman Empire. . . Paul didn't directly challenge the institution of slavery. He did urge slaves to become free if possible (1 Corinthians 7:21); if freedom was not possible, he urged slaves to remain in that condition and do their work heartily, as unto the Lord.

Our work context is very different, isn't it? We have the freedom change jobs and even careers. We can get training and education that give us many different options. And in our places of work, in theory at least, we have laws that protect us from being mistreated. Workers who are mistreated can make appeals to HR departments and/or governmental agencies. I know that there are abuses, but we have many advantages in our work that slaves in the first century didn't have. Nevertheless, the overarching perspectives Paul gives in Colossians 3 are supremely relevant to us.

***A Christ-centered Perspective on Work***(Colossians 3:22-4:1) As we read this passage, we'll notice that the same term shows up seven times in these 5 verses. Three times it is translated "master" (once in verse 3:22 and twice in 4:1); four times it is translated Lord (referring to Jesus). Paul's overarching perspective is that all believers - both slaves and masters - have a Master (or Lord) in heaven. That reality should inform the way we do our work.

Notice in verse 22 how Paul urges "sincerity of heart" instead of mere outward obedience.

22 Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

The term "eye service" is found only here and in the parallel passage in Ephesians 6 (where it is sometimes translated "external service"). Paul is telling them not to work hard (and well) only when their master was looking. They shouldn't work merely working to "please men." That way of working isn't sufficient for followers of Jesus. Followers of Jesus should work "with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord." In other words, as in all of life believers should care more about what our Lord in heaven thinks than about what our lord/master/boss on earth thinks. When you "fear the Lord" you really, really want to please Him; you have a healthy fear of being on His bad side.

Notice how Paul restates this idea in verses 23 and 24:

23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

The term translated "work" is the same term used in Acts 18:3 for Paul's "work" as a tentmaker. [Btw, Paul was able to remind the Thessalonians that he "worked night and day" as a tentmaker so that he wasn't a burden to them (1 Thess. 2:9).] Because they were followers of Christ, they were to do their work **heartily**, from the heart. Instead of going through the motions, they were supposed to put their heart into their work.

And they were to do their work “. . .as for the Lord, rather than for men.” Their work was to be an expression of their devotion to Jesus. In our context, this means that we are to say to Jesus, “I am making this table for You, not merely for the people who are paying me. . . I am preaching this sermon for You, not merely for the people who hear me. . . I am teaching these children as an expression of my love for You, not merely because they live in my home.”

There *is* a sense in which we do our work **for other people**, for the common good. But here Paul is saying that our ultimate audience is the Lord Jesus Christ, as an act of devotion, even worship, to Him. ***It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.*** Because of verses like this, we need to avoid making a sacred/secular distinction between different types of work.

In verse 24 Paul mentions the “reward of the inheritance” that believers will receive. Some people don’t want to think about rewards, somehow thinking that rewards are incompatible with grace. But as Dallas Willard (and others) have pointed out, grace is incompatible with earning but not with effort. A basic component of faith involves believing that God exists and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

In verse 25 Paul mentions the flip side of rewards, namely the consequences of the wrong we have done (even in the context of work):

25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

The biblical authors are very consistent in saying that there are consequences for disobedience. Here Paul is saying that the believer who is careless or unfaithful in his/her work will “receive the consequences of that wrong.” What we’re talking about in this morning really matters.

If I had to summarize what it looks like to “do your work heartily unto the Lord,” I would say two things. First, ***you do your work well.*** If you’re a carpenter, you make good tables. If you’re a tax accountant, you know the tax code and you skillfully prepare people’s taxes. If you’re a teacher, you know the material and communicate it in ways that help your students learn. First and foremost you do your work well.

Second, to serve the Lord Christ in your work, ***you do your work “Christianly.”*** That’s what the rest of Colossians 3 has been talking about. We can’t flip a switch and serve Christ in our work if we aren’t actually living a life of discipleship. In verse 8, for example, Paul tells us to put aside “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.” If you bring anger and “abusive speech” into the workplace you won’t be able to “serve the Lord Christ” through your work. In verse 12 Paul says to “put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” If you wear those virtues to work, you will be Christlike in the way you do your work. You don’t have to be a follower of Christ to make good tables; but you do need to be a follower of Christ to

make good tables Christianly. Our lives are supposed to be a seamless whole in which there is continuity between our home life, our church life, and our work life.

A few years ago I asked three people to describe their their work (what they do and how they do it). After I read each one, I'll give some thoughts about how each one serve the Lord through his/her work.

- \* A kindergarten teacher describes her work this way: "I invest in the lives of 5 and 6 year olds, teaching them the skills they need to succeed in their daily life!" She might serve the Lord Christ in her teaching by preparing well, teaching with creativity and energy, and by showing compassion for her kids and their families.
- \* An engineer who develops software (and sometimes hardware) . . . describes his work this way: "I use technology to engineer solutions that improve efficiency and safety and generate new opportunities for our clients." Sounds like an engineer, eh? He might serve the Lord Christ in his work by investing time and energy in understanding what his software is supposed to accomplish and then by using his knowledge and God-given intellect to develop good software, which promotes the common good.
- \* A mom who has both biological and adopted kids describes her work this way: "I provide sanctuary where needs are met and minister to little (and big) spirits. I shepherd my children toward Jesus as I draw near to Him myself and I release the power of God in the lives of those I love as I pray my guts out for them." She might serve the lord Christ by saying to her children the very things Jesus would say to them. She serves Christ by entrusting her kids to Him in prayer.

Hopefully those examples are helpful for you as you think about your work.

Let's consider one more verse, Colossians 4:1, in which Paul addresses masters/lords;

1 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Christian masters lived under the same spiritual reality as their servants: they too have a Master/Lord in heaven. They should do **their** work mindful of the fact that they too have to answer to Someone. Since they want their Master/Lord to show them "justice and fairness," they need to grant "justice and fairness" to their servants.

As I mentioned earlier, this command isn't exactly analogous to a "boss" in the workplace here in our culture. The dynamics are very different. But the overarching perspective applies. If you have authority over others in your workplace (if people answer to you), know that you too have to answer to your Lord in heaven. We are to treat others the way God in Christ has treated us.

Let me give you an example of how this might look. Tim Keller tells the story of a young woman who began attending the church he pastored in NYC. She wasn't a believer; she

would come in a little late and leave a little early. One day Keller met her after church and introduced himself. She said, “I come in and out sometimes. I’m not sure I believe what you do, but I’m intrigued.” Keller asked her how she found out about Redeemer (where he was a pastor). She told him her story.

She worked for a TV network in NYC. When she had worked there for only a short period of time she made “a really bad mistake” - a career ending kind of mistake. When she thought she’d be fired, her boss (who was well respected and who had a lot of credibility with everyone else) went in and took the blame for what had happened. He said, “I didn’t train her well. . . I didn’t prep her well to do her job. If you have to be mad at somebody be mad at me, but don’t fire her.” When he did this he lost credibility and social capital. But the woman got to keep her job.

When this woman found out what her boss had done, she went in to thank him. He kept saying, “Don’t worry about it. . .” But she kept asking him why he would do what he did. She said, “I’ve had bosses in the past who’ve taken credit for **good** things I’ve done; but I’ve never had a boss take the **blame** for something bad I’ve done. . . I’ve never seen that before. . .” Finally he said, “You’ve forced me to say this, and I’m only going to say it once: I’m a Christian. And **my whole life is based on the man who took the blame for me**. And that tends to shape everything I do.” She said, “Where do you go to church?”

I love that story for many reasons. For starters, this man obviously did his work “for the Lord Christ.” And because he was shaped by the gospel, he was compassionate and gracious in the way he did his work. He treated this woman the way Christ had treated him. And because he modeled redemption, he had the chance to share Christ with her. My observation is that those who do their work heartily for the Lord are the ones who have opportunities to share Christ with coworkers.

Your assignment this week (should you choose to accept it) is found in your program. These two questions might help you live out this Christ-centered perspective on work.

### ***Living out this Christ-Centered Perspective on Work:***

*How can I serve the Lord Christ through my work?* Think about the actual work you do and how you can do that work as an expression of devotion to Jesus. If you’ve been doing the bare minimum in your work, perhaps you will begin doing your work from the heart, even if it’s hard. Perhaps you’ll begin praying for your attitude and your perspective about work.

*What aspects of Christlikeness might I embody in my work?* (see Colossians 3:12-17) Maybe you need to clothe yourself with humility. Chances are somebody in your workplace annoys you. Humility means that you don’t merely look out for yourself; you look out that that person’s interests also.

Since we spend the best hours of our week doing our work, we would be wise to invest some time thinking about doing our work well and doing it Christianly. “Whatever you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord. . . it is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”