

SUBMISSION AND THE WORKPLACE  
COLOSSIANS 3:22-4:1

I.

It has been a rather strange environment for American workers in the last couple of years. As a result of the pandemic the Gallup Poll reports that 80% of us are doing our jobs differently than before the covid monster struck. Sixty percent of us are now doing our jobs remotely, in part or in whole. Just this month a group called the Institute for Family Studies released results of a survey that found that more than 50% of working moms and dads indicated that they would now prefer to work from home rather than their office at least part of the time.

A large proportion of us, especially in the Las Vegas area, were laid off during the pandemic. Nevada for much of the past year had the highest unemployment rate in the country. In April of last year the unemployment rate here hit almost 30%. Government jumped in to provide financial support for small businesses and unemployed workers. The result of that was that some workers found it more financially beneficial to stay at home than to go back to work. JP Morgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon told the US Senate Finance Committee a couple of months ago that many people **“don’t particularly feel like going back to work.”** (WSJ, 6/2/2021)

Darrow Miller, a 27-year veteran of the Christian nonprofit Food for the Hungry, spent much of his life working in the poorer countries of the world. He points out that Africa has abundant natural resources and that 70-80% of the people south of the Sahara Desert profess to have faith in Christ. Yet there is such horrible poverty in much of Africa. Why?

Miller argues that it has to do with worldview, especially in regard to work. In an interview he declared, **“If when you have ‘arrived’ you don’t work, and you’re a second-class citizen if you have to work, then the goal of society is not to work. I was sharing that idea once in Venezuela and a woman said, ‘I have a song that describes the concept of work as a curse.’ We were in a group of about 20 or 30 people and within the first line of the song everybody who spoke Spanish, from five different countries, started singing along. It talks about work being made for animals and human beings made to dance.”** (World, 12/5/2009)

Back in the sixties Walter Reuther led the United Auto Workers in several strikes as the auto workers sought to improve their wages and fringe benefits. The union was largely successful in bringing their members into a solidly middle class position. When Reuther was once asked about his operating philosophy, he replied, **“That stiff working on the assembly line has to have a reason for working, and there’s no reason to work unless he gets his share of the profits.”**

Why is it that you work? Is it only to get a fair share of the profits? What does that mean for a parent who devotes most of his or her work life to caring for the family? What does work mean for those of us in retirement? Studs Terkel, in his book *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, begins by saying, **“This book, being about work, is by its very nature about violence--- to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents. About shouting matches as well as fist fights. About nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations.”** Is that reflective of your experience with work? Does it describe your attitude toward it? What is God’s perspective on work?

Up to a third of the people of the Roman Empire in the first century were slaves. For some of them humiliation, mistreatment, and violence were a daily reality. Some of them could never hope to receive a fair share of the profits. So when the gospel came to places like the small town of Colossae in western Asia Minor, that message was received as a message of hope by many of the slaves in that place.

Having a new spiritual master these slaves would naturally have had questions about what implications this spiritual change had for their lives. “How do I relate to my wife, my husband, my kids, my parents and my master now that I have placed my trust in Jesus as my Savior?” In recent weeks in our ongoing study of the New Testament Book of Colossians we have seen what the Apostle Paul had to say about a Christian’s responsibility in marriage and the family. Today we want to see what he has to say about our responsibility in the work place.

I.

Before we deal directly with the text, I would like to say a word about THE BIBLE AND SLAVERY. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE BIBLE AND SLAVERY) The Bible has been criticized by some for its seeming acceptance of the institution of slavery. We see right here that the Bible encourages slaves to obey their masters. The Bible nowhere directly condemns slavery.

A.

Understanding that, we need to dig a little deeper to learn what the Bible’s attitude is toward slavery. It is helpful to understand first what the Bible’s attitude is toward SLAVERY IN THE SECULAR WORLD. (I. THE BIBLE... A. SLAVERY IN THE SECULAR WORLD) Our passage is an example of this attitude. Paul is instructing individual Christians who are slaves in the Roman world outside of Israel to work within the system. The other alternative was to rebel against their masters. There were a couple of rebellions led by slaves in the Roman Empire in these early times. They were put down forcefully and bloodily.

The Bible places a priority upon personal spiritual transformation over societal transformation. Isn’t it possible to have both? Yes, but it must begin with personal transformation. At the time when Paul wrote Colossians, Christians comprised only a tiny, tiny percentage of the population of the Roman Empire. What happened in the next

few centuries was that Christianity grew rapidly. Largely due to the influence of Christianity, and the transformation of thousands and millions of individual lives, slavery was eliminated in the Roman Empire.

Historically it has been Christians who have taken a lead in eliminating the institution of slavery. It was Christians like William Wilberforce in the English Parliament who led the move to ban slavery in the British Empire. It was Christians who led the abolitionist movement in the United States in the 1800s. It was Christians who led the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s..

B.

The second thing that we need to look at is what the Bible says about SLAVERY AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE. (I. A. B. SLAVERY AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE) The Old Testament did accept the institution of slavery. But we need to recognize how that slavery differed from the slavery of which we think in regard to the 1800s in the American south. Slavery in the OT was not based upon race. Slaves also had considerable legal protections in ancient Israel.

Slaves in OT Israel were acquired as the result of defeating people in war and purchasing fellow countrymen who could not support themselves financially. If a Jew got in over his head financially, he could not go to court and declare bankruptcy. A common alternative was to sell himself and perhaps his family as slaves to a wealthier Jewish family. A Jewish slave in this situation was largely treated as a member of the extended family. The master was obligated to care for his needs and the needs of his family. Usually the slave worshipped with the family. He was not to work on the Sabbath. Jewish law protected him or her from mistreatment. Then every seventh year these slaves were to be freed. (EXODUS 21:2) The Lord instructed His people in Exodus #21 v. 2, **“When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.”**

The Jews, for the most part, did not use slave labor in their building projects. Even King Herod the Great, who exceeded King Solomon in his public works projects, did not use slaves. He paid all of his workers.

II.

With that as background let's look at vv. 22-25 of Colossians #3 as we consider THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SLAVES AND EMPLOYEES. (II. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SLAVES/EMPLOYEES) The Apostle Paul tells the Christians in Colossae in v. 22: **“Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters...”** The original subject word here is the typical Greek word for “slaves.”

A.

So consider THE COMMAND. (II. A. THE COMMAND--- OBEY) The instruction to Christian slaves is to OBEY their masters. Treatment of slaves varied widely in the Roman Empire. Prior to the early part of the first century slaves had no legal rights or protections. A Roman lawyer by the name of Gaius wrote, **“We may note that it is**

**universally accepted that the master possesses the power of life and death over a slave.”** A couple of centuries before that Aristotle referred to slaves as “living tools.” Just before the time of Paul, however, the Roman government had begun to give slaves some legal protections.

At the time in which Paul was writing the treatment of slaves varied widely. It varied according to region, according to the skills of a slave, and according to the kind of personality of the slave owner. Slaves who worked in Roman mines, often acquired as the result of military conquest, could usually count on a short life. Slaves who had technical skills could, on the other hand, achieve a high social status. Many slaves gained freedom before they reached old age.

But whether a Christian slave had a good situation or a bad situation, his responsibility before God was to obey his master. In 1 Peter 2:18 (1 PETER 2:18) the Apostle Peter wrote, **“Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.”** For Peter and Paul freedom from sin was more important than freedom from earthly masters. The primary route to change was not through focusing on overthrowing cultural institutions. It was through personal transformation with the power of the gospel, through having lives changed by a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The challenge to us is to apply the lessons of the slave-master relationship to twenty-first century America. First century Roman slaves had a twenty-four hour a day commitment to their masters. If we have an employer, normally we have a 20, 40 or 50 hour a week commitment to that employer. It would seem that the lesson, or application, from Paul’s command is that we are responsible to be obedient to that employer during the time of our service.

Often the terms of our employment are governed by a contract. There are also national, state and local laws that may affect the conditions of our employment. Then there are workplace safety laws. What happens if we are part of a union and the contract expires? Is a Christian forbidden to strike? Must he still obey his employer? It seems to me that the nature of his employment is determined by the contract. So if the contract expires, he or she is not obligated to work and obey his or her employer, assuming that he is not a government employee who is barred by law from striking.

Unlike first century slaves we also have the option of quitting and changing employers. We may be under too much stress, our families may be suffering because of unreasonable work requirements, the ethics of our employer may be lousy, or we may just come across a better employment opportunity. Apart from these matters our responsibility as employees is to obey our employers, to faithfully serve those who give us a paycheck.

B.

Paul also indicates in v. 22 that THE ATTITUDE of a slave, or an employee, is important. (II. A. B. THE ATTITUDE--- SINCERITY OF HEART) Slaves are to obey their

masters “**not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.**” Literally the term for “external service” is “eyeservice.” In Greek it is *ophthalmodoulia*. (OPHTHAMODOULIA) *Ophthalmos* is “eye,” as in “ophthalmologist.” *Doulia* is “slavery.” So it is “slavery to the eye.”

Most of us have worked in places where we have seen *ophthalmodoulia*, haven't we? Perhaps we have been guilty of it ourselves. I worked in a door and window factory for seven summers. Some of the men there were eyeservice workers. When the foreman was not in the area, the pace of work was slow. When the foreman was around, the pace of work was pretty fast. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Instead of having an “eyeservice” attitude Paul says that we Christians should have sincerity of heart in our work. The original word means “singleness of heart.” We are to be single-minded in our service to our employer.

We are also to fear the Lord. What does fear of the Lord have to do with our work? Ultimately we are accountable to God for our faithfulness in our jobs. By “fear” Paul is talking about a healthy respect for God. Before David became king, he was under the authority of King Saul. Saul was a lousy king. He was paranoid. He even sought to kill David, whom God had appointed to become the next king of Israel. Yet when David twice had the opportunity to kill Saul, he refused to lay his hands upon him. David, you see, regarded Saul with fear and trembling. He saw the evil intent and character shortcomings very clearly. But he treated Saul with respect because he recognized that God had placed Saul in a position of authority over him. David determined that he was going to allow God to deal with Saul rather than to take personal vengeance into his own hands. So we too, as Christian employees, are responsible to respect even those difficult bosses, if not for their character or their ability, at least for the positions that they hold over us.

In 1 Timothy #6 v. 1 (1 TIMOTHY 6:1) we are told, “**Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.**” When we treat unreasonable and difficult bosses with respect in spite of their bad behavior, we glorify God. To grumble and complain is typical of everyone else's reaction in these situations. If we are known as Christians, our good behavior will be a testimony to the truth of our beliefs.

C.

In vv. 23-25 the author goes on to speak about THE MOTIVATION that Christians should have in their work. (I. A. B. C. THE MOTIVATION--- SERVING THE LORD) He says that Christians at work should be SERVING THE LORD. The apostle writes, “**Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.**” If we have trusted in Jesus as our Savior, He is our ultimate boss. Because of that, whatever job we have is holy work. The Bible doesn't recognize a distinction between secular work and religious work. If we are Christians, then we are

employed by Christ. Whatever work we do ought to be regarded as service for Christ--- even if we are slaves, as were some of Paul's first century readers.

That way of thinking was completely contrary to the Roman mindset. The Romans would have agreed with Studs Terkel. Work was inherently degrading, especially strenuous work. For that reason even some positions in government that we would regard as very prestigious were given to slaves. These positions involved too much work or too much technical expertise. That was beneath the dignity of a wealthy Roman aristocrat.

The Biblical view is completely different. Paul says that whatever your job is, it should be regarded as service for Christ. Whether you are a slave or a Roman senator or a computer programmer or a housewife, look at your job as an opportunity to serve Christ.

Hugh Whelchel, the director of the Institute for Faith, Work & Economics, argues in his book *How Then Should We Work?* that work for Christians serves three great purposes. It glorifies God, it serves the common good, and it furthers the Kingdom of God.

The Communists at the height of their influence recognized the strategic significance of work. Douglas Hyde, an ex-Communist, wrote in his book *Dedication and Leadership*, **"... the Communists set about trying to use just as effectively as they can the human material which is at their disposal. 'Every Communist a leader, every factory a fortress is one of their slogans. .... The meaning ... is this: each party member must be so trained that no matter where he may find himself he will be qualified to come forward and lead; and, when you have sufficient such members together in a given factory or within some particular organization, they can make this a fortress for Communism."**

When I was a college student at a public university, I was part of a Christian group that recognized the opportunity that being a student presented for spreading the influence of the gospel. I was especially impressed by the vision of a sister organization at another campus, Northern Michigan University. The Christians at this school got together and voluntarily decided to divide up and move to places in the dormitories so that there were at least two committed Christians living on every floor of every dorm on their campus. They had a great influence for Christ. They saw their jobs as students as an opportunity for serving Christ.

The Christian slaves in Colossae may not have seen much tangible reward for their faithfulness. But in v. 8 there is reference made to an additional motivation. Not only should we be motivated by the truth that our work is service to Christ but also by the prospect of rewards for good behavior and consequences for bad behavior.

In v. 25 Paul says, **"For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality."** Verse 24 makes it clear that it is Jesus Christ who is meting out these consequences. I suspect that the author is talking about both consequences that come out in this life and loss of rewards that we may experience in

the life to come. The Lord has a way of disciplining us in this life when we mess up. Workers who try to get by with eyeservice work are usually found out by their bosses. The Lord may sovereignly see to it that this happens to Christians who are messing up. Christians who are behaving like this in their work need to realize that they will miss out on rewards beyond the grave.

But the positive side of the motivation is in v. 24 where the apostle says that **“from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.”** Under Roman law slaves could never inherit anything. So this promise of a heavenly inheritance was a source of great hope for Christian slaves. It should be a source of hope and motivation for us as well.

I have encountered various versions of this story, but I have not been able to track down an original source. Whatever the truth is, you can appreciate the point of the story. Early in the twentieth century a missionary supposedly returned to the United States with his wife to retire from years of missionary service in Africa. They happened to travel on the same ship that was bringing President Teddy Roosevelt home from a big game hunt in Africa.

When the ship docked in New York City, there was a huge crowd waiting to greet the President. The missionary couple slipped off of the ship unnoticed, with no one to greet them at all. They found a cheap hotel and spent the night there. That evening the husband confessed to his wife that he was feeling some bitterness about their arrival: **“It just doesn’t seem right. We give our lives in Africa to win souls to Christ, and when we arrive home, there’s nobody to meet us, and there’s no reward. The President shoots some animals, and he gets a royal welcome.”**

Before going to bed that night, the missionary said his prayers. The Lord seemed to impress upon his mind the thought: **“You haven’t received your reward because you aren’t really home yet.”**

That is the thought which we need to keep in mind when our faithfulness at work doesn’t seem to us to produce recognition or tangible results--- when instead we encounter trials and persecution. Our ultimate reward is given only in heaven.

III.

Just as in marriage the husband has a responsibility to the one submitting to him, just as in parenting the parent has a responsibility to the one submitting to him, so also in the work relationship the employer has a responsibility to the one submitting to him or her. Thus in v. 1 of #4 we have a description of THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MASTERS OR EMPLOYERS. (III. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MASTERS/EMPLOYERS) Paul writes, **“Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”** That’s what most employees want. If they know that they are being treated justly and fairly, they will be content.

John Wanamaker, who lived around the turn of the twentieth century, is considered the “Father of Modern Advertising.” He once was asked, **“To what, Mr. Wanamaker, do you attribute your great success?”** Wanamaker replied, **“To thinking, toiling, trying, and trusting in God.”**

Among his many innovations, he opened the world’s first major department store. He introduced price tags to the retail economy because he didn’t want people to worry about whether or not they were getting fair prices while they shopped. In addition, he started the first mail-order catalog and was the first to run a large advertisement in a newspaper.

Committed to taking care of his people as a reflection of the character of Jesus, Wanamaker was a pioneer in employee benefits programs. Long before these programs were considered standard in corporate employment, his company offered its employees access to the John Wanamaker Commercial Institute, free medical care, recreational facilities, profit-sharing plans, and pensions. (Theology of Business Institute)

Justice and fairness also mean, according to a parallel passage in Ephesians #6 v. 9 (EPHESIANS 6:9) that masters must **“...stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.”** Roman slave owners could threaten their slaves with a lot, but Paul reminds the Christians that God sees and knows what is going on. They will be held accountable by Him. When threats and warnings are the primary motivation provided by an employer in the work place, the result is likely to be workers who are unhappy, angry, and less productive.

A graduate of the seminary that I attended once pastored a church in Canada. One of his church members owned a large company. An attempt was made to unionize his workers, and a neutral party was needed to oversee the vote. The pastor was asked to fill that role. When the vote was taken, the pastor discovered that unionization attempt was unanimously rejected. The employees told the pastor, **“The owner of the company has been so good to us. Why would we want to unionize?”**

That was Christianity in action. Here was a guy who knew that his commitment to Christ affected much more than what he did on Sunday mornings.

When Christianity took root and grew in the Roman Empire, it began to transform society. By the second century the powers-that-be began to recognize Christianity as a threat to their belief systems. The Roman philosophers called Christians “atheists” because they refused to worship the emperor. False rumors were spread about their practices of worship.

Christian leaders responded in a variety of ways. But their final apologetic was their lives. The love, the honesty, and the diligence of true Christians could not be denied.



That remains the final test in our day as well. What will make the biggest impact on the unbelievers in the secular world around us is not our statement of faith, not what we do in church on Sunday morning, not how much Bible doctrine we know, but rather how we live our lives at work, at home, and at play.

The one who notices may be the neighbor across the street who watches how we raise our children. It may be a coworker who notices how we talk about our wife and our marriage. It may be a boss who notices how our attitude stands out above that of fellow employees. It may be a teacher who observes the consistency of our life. It may be an accountant who looks at how we handle the books. It may be an employee who notices how the boss goes out of his or her way to show compassion and fairness to the employees.

But know this for sure. They are out there, and they are watching. When they find out that we claim to be born-again Christians, they will scrutinize us. The only way that we will make a positive impact is the personal realization that the master we serve in every aspect of life is the Lord Jesus Christ.