

Shaped by the Gospel: Work Colossians 3:22-4:1

Intro:

- As we begin our time in **Colossians 3:18-4:1** this morning, I need to connect last week's message on this text to this week's message on the same text. **Colossians 3:22-4:1** is a particularly challenging text because there is no one-to-one correlation of slaves and masters in our society. When you have a text like this you must work to find the main idea and strive to remain faithful to the text as you make application. As you work through the cultural issues that in the text there are two main ideas that rise to the surface: slavery (racism & prejudice) and an emphasis on how the gospel shapes our work.

Last Sunday we looked at the topic of slavery and the racism and prejudice that accompanies it. We spent time on the sins of racism and prejudice because of the immediate context in Colossians 3:11 and the larger context of Paul's writing.

The second emphasis we find in this text is on work. It seems to be somewhat providential that I am preaching on the topic of work on Labor Day weekend.

- What is the worst job you have ever had?** Mine was at a women's dress shop in the mall in Tupelo, MS . . . [Needless to say, I did not enjoy that job and therein lies the sinner's problem with work.]
- Many people do not find any joy in their work.** I believe if many of us were honest there are many days many of us feel more like the mythological figure Sisyphus who angered the gods and was condemned to the task of eternally pushing a boulder up a mountain. As soon as he reached the summit the boulder would roll past him all the way to the bottom of the mountain. Then Sisyphus would returned to the valley to repeat his pointless and wearisome work of pushing the boulder back up the mountain only to have it roll to the bottom again as soon as he reached the top. *The mythological gods thought there was no more dreadful punishment than futile, hopeless labor.*¹
- However, the true God designed work to be enjoyed.** So we need a right theology of work because we are going to spend many hours working during our lifetime. Think about it, if you work forty hours a week for forty years that means you will spend more than eighty thousand hours at your job in your lifetime. This does not include the thousands of hours you might spend in school preparing for work and in addition to the thousands of hours in cars, planes or trains traveling to and from work. One of the great needs of our day is to understand God's purpose for work in the world.²
- The Bible begins with God working as He created the universe, earth, all of life from plants and animals and then resting from His work on the Sabbath (**Genesis 1-2:2**). God concluded that all of His work was good. I don't think He said *it was good* because He was finally done but because He enjoyed His work.

Then in **Genesis 2:5** we learn there was no man to "work" the ground so God created man and put him in the Garden and in **v. 15** we see that after God had created everything and made it grow, God put man in the Garden to *work* the Garden.

From the very beginning work was a normal part of creation. Here is what we learn:

- Work was a gift to be enjoyed before the face of God.
- Work was a normal part of worship of God.
- Work was and is an important part of what it means to be made in the image of God.
- So in the beginning Adam and Eve's enjoyment of work and worship of God were one in the same. Adam and Eve worshipped and glorified God in their glad-hearted enjoyment of their work of taking care of the Garden.

¹ Alan Maben, *paper: God Glorified in Our Work*, p. 1.

² Sebastian Traeger and Greg Gilbert, *The Gospel at Work: How Working for King Jesus Gives Purpose and Meaning to Our Jobs*, p. 9.

However, when we get to Genesis 3 all of that changes. With the sin of Adam and Eve disobeying God, work was cursed. Work was not the curse but it was cursed in that it became difficult, toilsome, hard, and not enjoyable. Sin had broken the relationship between our glorifying God in our work and our enjoyment of work. The sin's curse brought futility to our work. No longer did mankind naturally work for God's glory but instead we worked for our own glory and our own purposes.

Our work fell into one of two ditches: We became idle in our work or we became idolaters of our work:

1. **The ditch of being idle at work is one of the effects of the Fall.** Sin corrupted us and work was cursed so work became a joyless task to be avoided and so instead of doing something we hate we avoid work and become idle. Proverbs calls this man "the lazy man" and "the sluggard". This person does not intend to work hard so he seeks to avoid work and also sabotages anyone else's efforts to work hard through gossip or slander. The sluggard desires everyday to be a Sabbath day of rest.
2. **The other ditch is that work becomes an idol and we worship work.** When this happens we find our meaning in life and our personal significance not in the King of Glory but in the work we do. This is the workaholic whose drive to succeed runs over everyone in his path. His desire for money or power or status means he does everything he can to get ahead. This is the man who never takes a Sabbath rest.

Without God's redemptive work we would have no hope. God's promise to redeem came in **Genesis 3** just after the Fall. God promised to send the seed of the woman to crush the head of the serpent. This is the promise of Christ to come and for all to pay for the sin of all mankind and reverse the curse.

The redemption of work is one of the glorious blessings of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The atonement of Christ redeemed work from the curse of sin. Those who trust in the person and work of Christ as their Lord and Savior are redeemed and are given new life in Christ. They have a relationship with their Creator who did all of the saving work for them.

One of the beautiful things about the gospel is that it begins to reverse the effects of the curse of sin that began in the Garden. The gospel redeems work for the glory of God for our enjoyment.

What we find in Colossians 3:18-4:1 is the restoration of the institutions that had their beginnings in the Garden. Restoration of the family: husbands, wives, marriage, children and parenting. We now find the restoration of the institution of work. Slavery is considered an institution but it was and is a distortion of God's creative order and a result of sin. The Apostle was writing to the Colossian church to teach them how the gospel redeems and restores God's creative order.

Colossians 3:18-4:1 is showing us how God is restoring the gladness and joy of work through the person and work of our Savior Jesus Christ.

Work becomes worship of the King again. If there is not glad-hearted work then there is no glory for the King. The gospel transforms the heart of the sinner by giving it new life in Christ so that we find gladness in our work. Do not hear me say work will not be difficult or boring or challenging but the heart of the sinner has been redeemed and now sees himself as working for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Now that the stage is set, let's look at our text.

- **Main Point: Jesus redeems work through His redemptive work.**

1. Gospel instructions for employees
2. Gospel instructions for employers

I. Gospel Instructions for Employees (Colossians 3:22-25)

We are going to look at two things in these verses: How the gospel shapes motivation for work and compensation of work.

A. Motivation: Work Heartily for the Lord (vv. 22-23)

- “Bondservants³, 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. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”
- **Verse 23 is the motivation for our work**, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” That’s the motivation to work heartily for the Lord. So . . . our obedience to those in authority over is to be carried with *sincerity of heart* and *out of fear of the Lord*.
- **TRANSITION:** Let’s work through the text and the first thing I want to do is look at the word obey.
- **Obedience:**

I want to consider the word *obedience* as it pertains to the relationship between the person who has authority and the worker. Paul used the word *obey* earlier in v. 18 when referring to children obeying their parents and now he uses the same Greek word in v. 22. The Greek word obey does not mean mere external obedience but an obedience that comes from the heart. The surrounding context bears out the importance of obedience that comes from the heart.

We understand the idea of slaves obeying their masters; however, as we apply this to our work ethic, we do not usually talk about obeying our bosses or those in authority over us in this way. We tend to say things like: “we do what we are told” or “my manager wants me to _____” or “my boss told me to make this delivery” or “begin working on this project”. The fact is these kinds of instructions from our supervisors imply obedience.

You may not like your boss. You may have a bad supervisor who does not like you. You may not like your teacher in school who has authority over you but the bottom line is this text instructs us to obey the directives they give us. Furthermore it is not just any old kind of obedience it is to be obedience from the heart.

Let me ask a couple of questions to help us apply obedience in this text:

1. **How do you obey when the person in authority over you does not like you or is difficult?** What we must so is look through that person and keep our eyes on things above, on Christ. When you do this, your obedience will come from the heart and you can do your work with glad-hearted obedience as unto the Lord and the grace of Christ will overflow in your work place.
2. **What do we do when obedience does not come from the heart?** This is the rub for us because as followers of Christ we still struggle with sin. The beauty of the gospel is that we are called to live a life of repentance. We must continually preach the gospel to ourselves so that we will keep turning from sin to Jesus. When we call on the One who obeyed God perfectly from the heart in the hardest of circumstances, He will give us grace and power to change so that our motivation will submit to His will.

TRANSITION: Now let’s consider what it means for work to be done with sincerity of heart and out of fear of the Lord.

- **Sincerity of Heart:** “Slaves (bondservants) obey in everything those who are your earthly masters not by way of eye service, as people-pleasers but with sincerity of heart . . . You are serving the Lord Christ.”
 - **The word *sincerity* carries a couple of word pictures that might help us.**
 - **The first is the Latin phrase “*sine cera*”, which means without wax.** It was a phrase used to describe pottery. Making pottery was a big industry in the ancient world and dishonest potters would use wax to fill in cracks or

³ We find a textual nuance in these verses. The 2007 edition of the ESV used the word *slaves* and footnoted the other textual translation option: *bondservants*. The 2017 edition of the ESV uses the word *bondservant* and footnotes *slave*. Apparently as textual critics kept working with the original manuscripts they felt *bondservants* was the more accurate translation.

flaws in the pottery they made. In normal usage the flaws might not be noticed but if held up to the light the cracks and flaws could be detected. Good pottery was sometimes stamped with the words: *sine cera* (without wax) as proof of its good quality.

- The other idea of *sincerity* comes from the Greek word in the text, which carries the idea of generosity or liberality as well as *sincerity*.
- **Taken together the idea is that the employee should not hold back from his best but should with singleness of heart pour himself out liberally in good, honest, quality service.**⁴
- Yet . . . Paul does not stop there. Next he goes negative in order to uncover the depravity of the heart. He instructs us, “*not by way of eye service, as people pleasers.*” The tendency of a slave was much like some people are today; they only work hard when the boss is watching. The motivation of the *people pleaser* is to **only** please the man in charge.

However, as followers of Christ we work hard because we are serving the Lord Christ. He is the One who sees us and the One whom we are serving. Whether our boss sees us or not we know we are serving the Boss of Bosses and His eyes are upon us. As **2 Chronicles 16:9** says, “*For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart [is completely his].*”

- **Fearing the Lord:** [I want us to read this text by squeezing the clauses in the sentences together. This will help us see the meaning.] “***Slaves obey . . . your earthly masters . . . fearing the Lord . . . [for] You are serving the Lord Christ.***”
- **It was not uncommon for slaves to work out of fear of punishment.** That would have been a big motivator for them. After all who wants to receive a beating or some kind of punishment for not working hard or making mistakes or for no reason at all? No one.
- **By contrast, Paul called slaves (and Christian workers) to obey out of fear of the Lord Christ instead of fear of their masters.** Fearing the Lord is a biblical theme that is found throughout all of Scripture. Fear of the Lord means to respect and be in awe of who Christ is. It does carry with it the idea of trembling because we understand the greatness of God as well.

Remember the theme of this letter is to emphasize the greatness and supremacy of Christ in all of life. At the beginning of the letter Paul had painted a picture of an exalted view of who Christ is as image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation and that all things whether in heaven or on earth were created by Him, thrones, dominions, rulers or authorities—all things were made by and under His authority. Christ is fullness of God, the head of the church of which they were a part. Christ had reconciled everything to Himself and purchased the church by His own blood on the cross. We fear Christ and stand in awe of Him because the punishment that should have fallen on us for our sin fell on the Son of God. The King became a bondservant in order to purchase the freedom of those who were slaves to sin at the cost of His life. He rose from the dead in order to set the captives free. All of those who turn from their sin and trust the risen Christ are set free from bondage to sin and its punishment.

Application: Let’s apply our text by asking the question: How does gospel motivation shape the work environment?

1. **Work as worship.** When we understand that the person and work of Christ on the cross has redeemed work then work can become worship again. Then the transformation of our motivation for work can begin. It may be a long slow process.

⁴ James M. Boice, *An Expository Commentary: Ephesians*, p. 220.

But what if your motivation to work is not worship? We will all struggle with this mindset in work. In short, we are still weak sinners.

If you are like me there will be days where work is not worship. It is on those days where we must continually practice repentance. That is the beauty of the gospel for it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance. We are to live a life of continually turning from sin to Christ. This is a life that glorifies God.

Look back at the worship guide:

- **The confession we prayed together earlier in the service helps to teach us how to confess sin in regard to our work motives and habits.** Who has not sinned in one of those ways we read together?
 - **Then we remember the gospel because** part of worship is being in awe of a God who is Holy and yet provided a sacrifice to pay for our sins by Him coming in Christ and rising from the dead. He offers life to us and we thrive and flourish in that life when we live a life of continual repentance. So if you are not approaching work as worship continually repent and cry out to God to change your heart.
2. **A low view of Christ produces sinful motives for work.** We will not work hard or study hard in school or we will be lazy or we will have defective motivation for work because we do not understand the supremacy of Christ. One of the main points of the letter of Colossians is that Christ is supreme in all of life, especially work. When we are not in awe of who He is and what He has done on our behalf we will not work for the glory of God.
- We must repent of our low view of Christ that produces our sinful motives for work and poor work habits. Repentance means we will apply ourselves to grow in our understanding of glory of God and the supremacy of Christ as taught in the word of God.
3. **Third: *Who you work for is more important than what you do.*** It is easy to forget that no matter what our job is we work for the King of Kings. One of the principles of the Sabbath day of rest is to remind us that all of life is about God. Christ said He was Lord of the Sabbath and by doing so He was saying that now all of our work can be infused with His presence because He is our Sabbath rest. So even when we work we can be confident that no matter what my job is, how stressful my job is, how difficult my job is at the time the Lord of the Sabbath can give me rest because I am working for the Lord Christ.
4. **Finally: Christ is the cure for idleness and idolatry.**
- a. **The supremacy of Christ will change my heart and ensure that my work is worship.** I will not be idle in my work nor make work an idol.
 - b. If your work is your **"primary source"** of satisfaction and significance then it has become an idol.
 - c. If you approach your work and desire to be the **"best you can be in order to make a name for yourself"** then your work has become an idol.
 - d. **If you are enjoying your job more than you enjoy God then work has become an idol.** The goal of work is to enjoy God in, by, and through your work. Work that has God as its center and source of all enjoyment is worship.

B. Compensation: Work heartily for the Lord (vv. 24-25)

- *"... knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your **reward**. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality."*

- **Paul words in Colossians 3:24-25 are an encouragement and a warning.** They remind everyone: that employees, employers, housewives, and students alike will give an account to God for how they discharged their duties. God *rewards* the faithful and *pays back the wrongdoer*. There is no excuse for half-hearted, shoddy work as a Christian.
- **Illst:** Highway Department workers

Application:

- **First is encouragement: We will be rewarded for the display of the supremacy of Christ in our work:** You may never make the salary you desire to make or even need to make. You may never work for a supervisor or boss who treats you fairly and recognizes your extra effort to bless him or the business. If these things never come your way in your profession it does not mean your job was meaningless for the Lord will give you your *inheritance as your reward*.

On the Day of Judgment He will reward you for how you carried out your work and adorned the gospel with labor that was beautiful worship of God. You never escape the eyes of Lord.

- **Second is the warning: we will be paid back for the lack of the display of the supremacy of Christ in our work:** The Lord will hold both employee and employer accountable for dishonest, double-minded, half-hearted work. If we choose to be idle (lazy, sluggard) or an idolater (work for wages or a people pleaser) in our work then the Lord Christ would pay us back. Remember poor work habits reveal a defective view of God. They say more about us and what we believe than anything. God will not play favorites with anyone.

II. Gospel Instructions for Employers (Colossians 4:1)

Colossians 4:1 closes with a charge to those who have authority over others. The charge begins with much the same language as vv. 24-25 by reminding masters that to treat their *slaves justly and fairly because they will have to give an account to the One who is their Master*.

I cannot help but think of Paul's letter to Philemon who was the master of Onesimus. The letter to Philemon accompanied the letter to the Colossian church. Paul appealed to Philemon's relationship with Christ and with him as the reason to show grace to Onesimus. God had shown grace to Philemon by saving him so now show grace to your slave who is being returned to you as a follower of Christ.

Application:

- **If you are one in authority over others, remember you represent Christ in all you do.** God is the ultimate authority over everything and He has graciously delegated to us a measure of His authority. We must use our authority wisely and remember He has authority over us.
- **Authority has a bad rep in our society today.** So as Christians, if we have the opportunity to exercise authority as a boss or some other kind of leadership, it needs to be carried out in such a way that it makes the name and authority of God look great.
- **Carry out your authority in godly, humble, loving, caring and responsible ways.** The way you exercise your authority will speak loudly to your employees, revealing not just your own authority but ultimately the way you submit to the One who is in authority over you.
- **Finally bless your employees with a good wage.** Paying them a good wage shows you appreciate them and you want to take care of them. Be a conduit of God's blessings by passing a wage along to them.

We need to remember that the money we are given is not ours. We are like the UPS man delivering packages to people. If we begin to hoard money and build up our resources at the expense of our workers then we are like the UPS man who stops delivering packages but instead began to keep packages meant for someone else.

Conclusion

When your life is over how do you want to be remembered and what do you want said at your funeral. I was listening to an interview with Michael Cromartie who recently died of cancer.

Cromartie was a very influential evangelical leader in his life. He was Chuck Colson's first assistant back in the 70's. He eventually founded the Faith Angle center, which reached out to journalist in top press agencies to educate them on matters of theology.

After Cromartie was diagnosed with cancer he began to evaluate his life. He said as one contemplates the end of his life he should consider the difference between *Resume Virtues* and *Eulogy Virtues*.

He said *Resume Virtues* are your professional and educational accomplishments. *Eulogy Virtues* are the things in your life that reflect a life that was a display of God's glory in how your loved God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength and loved your neighbor as yourself. He said of all his professional accomplishments in life what he wanted said at his funeral were *eulogy virtues*.

I think for us here in Ames with Iowa State in our backyard, with the emphasis on education and the drive for professional success and development it is tempting and easy to allow *resume virtues* to be the driving factor in our lives.

How do we keep that from happening? We must look to our Savior. Paul says in **Philippians 2:4-11**: "*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*"

May we live our lives not trying to build our resumes but proclaiming the resume of another. For our salvation depends not on our work but on the work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the God-man, whose work was to empty Himself on behalf of sinners. He laid aside His resume as God and took on the form of a servant and died on the cross for us. Our only work, our only contribution to our salvation was our sin.