

Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians XV

Colossians 3:22–4:1

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Please turn in your Bibles to Colossians chapter three, where we continue our study in Paul's great letter. Throughout we have said that believers are complete in Christ, particularly as we look at chapter three, we see Paul applying the principle of the Lordship of Christ, the supremacy of Christ, the rule of Christ in a variety of our relationships: our personal piety and walk with God, our relationship to one another in the congregation, our home and family life. And now today, he applies the principle of the rule of Christ, the Lordship of Christ, the supremacy of Christ to our work relations: how we live and operate in our work relationships. Let's hear the word of the living God beginning in Colossians chapter three verse 22.

Colossians 3:22–4:1

Our Lord, this is Your word, Your infallible word. It is as such meant for our instruction, our upbuilding. We recognize we need the grace of the Holy Spirit both to understand it and then for our hearts to be made willingly obedient to it. For this we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

The Apostle Paul, in this passage sets forth principles for the rule of Christ in our work. Have you ever thought of it, Christmas, the Incarnation has implications for how you work? Christ came to redeem our work, too. And so Paul sets forth what it means for Christ to be Lord in the workplace in this passage. This is a very timely thing, because we live in a day and time when people are talking about a loss of work ethic in our community, in our society. We hear the phrase that we have lost the Protestant work ethic and we have lost it so far that we scratch our heads and we wonder just what was the Protestant work ethic? Books are written about this all the time. Perhaps you saw Chuck Colson's book, co-authored with Jack Eckerd (of the drugstore chain) entitled, *Why America Doesn't Work*, asking the question: "What has happened to the work ethic in America?" Paul is here to address precisely that kind of issue. We see modern views of work everywhere we turn, and we even see those views pervading our own outlook on work. You've seen the bumper sticker I Owe, I Owe, so Off to Work I Go. I don't know how seriously to take that bumper sticker when I see it, but if the people that put

in on their cars really mean it, then they are saying that they are only, at least their main reason, for work is to retire their debts. Now to be sure that it is a good thing to do to retire your debts, but is that the only or the main reason that we ought to work? Paul has a different motivation for our work. Or perhaps you have heard friends to express that they can't wait for the weekend. The weekend is looked at as something to relieve them from the drudgery from work, which is viewed as a necessary evil. We work so that we can do what we really want to do on the weekends, is the philosophy of many people in our own day and time, and that's why we hear expressions, somewhat sacrilegious, like T.G.I.F.. We can't wait for the weekends. We can't for Friday to come so that we can get away from this thing which is only a means to help us do what we really want to do, which is escape into some world of recreation. That is not the biblical view of work, but we all have to confess that that sort of view of work has at least begun to influence some of us. And so Paul sets forth here principles which are applicable to anyone in the work relationship, even though he is speaking to a community and to a society two millennia ago, set up on a very different economic basis from our own. He has set forth principles which are eternally practical and applicable and I'd like to look at those principles with you today.

Before we do so, however, I think I need to make a brief explanation, for Paul has come under criticism in this passage and others for not condemning the Greco-Roman practice of slavery. So perhaps we need to say a few words about Paul and slavery. Paul begins this passage by saying, "Slaves in all things obey those who are your masters on earth." Those who are proponents of social change and social equality usually rail against Paul for this statement, 'Paul, you are simply reinforcing the evil status-quo. You are actually endorsing a system in society which exploits people. You are acquiescing to the cultural trends. You are simply a voice of cultural evil conservatism. You are simply wanting to maintain the status structure of this society.' Well, I hasten to add that I have never known Paul to acquiesce to anything. Have you? When you look at your Scriptures, do you find him acquiescing to things in his society? Not at all. And he doesn't in this passage either, my friends. For though Paul does not attack the institution of slavery, it is very important that we recognize that Paul is here, in chapter three, and all the way into the beginning part of chapter four, discussing the implications of the rule of Christ and Christian liberty, for our personal relationship with God, our life in the church, our life in home, and our life at work. And Paul is, at the very, very minimum saying the rule of Christ has implications for both those who work and for those who employ. The rule of Christ must be manifested in both sides of that work relationship. Paul does not, to be sure, teach a social gospel here. He is not preoccupied with systematic structural change. He is not asking the Christian Church to become involved in sort of a campaign against this particular form of economic relationship in the Greco-Roman society. But the apostle Paul does approach this particular issue from a God-centered perspective. You see, Paul knows that real change doesn't happen from structures within. It doesn't happen from below up to heaven; real change starts from the inside out, and is brought about by heaven coming down into our

experience. And so for the Apostle Paul, all real change begins with a heart change and understanding of our relationship to God, and then of course it necessarily begins heavenward because we must look to God to see real change. Every other kind of change, as far as Paul is concerned, is insignificant. We can change societal structures and create new problems as we have before, even as we try to remedy old problems that we did have. And yet, no ultimate change occurs until there is a change in the heart. And so the Apostle Paul begins there by saying, 'I want you to understand, that even in your work, Jesus Christ is Lord.'

And for Paul in this passage that means at least three things. First of all, Paul asserts the Lordship of Christ in work relations. He says to masters and slaves, 'Christ is Lord over your work and Christ is Lord over your management of those who work for you.' What a radical assertion, to those who lived in a society where slaves had very, very, very few rights, to assert to them, 'I don't care what the society says, Christ is Lord over your work relations.'

Notice also that Paul treats slaves as persons. In Greco-Roman law, slaves would have been cattle, they would have been possessions, things. They would have had no thinking to do. They would have had no rights before the courts. But Paul speaks to them as thinking, feeling, living, breathing Christian human beings here. Christian slaves, he says, 'be obedient to your masters.' And he gives them instructions as persons.

Thirdly, notice that Paul sets forth a principle of reciprocity. He expects masters to reciprocate slaves, and slaves to reciprocate masters. In other words, masters must be concerned about those whom they employ, and those who labor must be concerned about the needs of the masters. Just like he does in family relations, just like he does in church relations, he expects a principle of Christian reciprocity to reign in work relationships. He expects Christians who are employers and employees to take care of one another and to serve well with whom they work. That having been said, let's look at Paul's four great principles for our work relations as they are set forth in this passage.

I. The Christian should do all of his work as if he were doing it for the Lord

First of all, in verse 23, I want you to note that Paul says that the Christian should do all his work as if he were doing it for the Lord. The Christian should do all his work as if he were doing it for the Lord. In verse 23 we read: "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men." Here Paul brings to bear the great principle of the rule of Christ which brings freedom. And he says Christian freedom leads us to certain things: Christian liberty, for instance, strengthens our motive to work. It doesn't weaken it. You can imagine these slaves coming to Paul. 'We are free in Christ,' they say, 'does that mean that we no longer have to obey these horrible rules from our masters?' And Paul says,

'No, Christian liberty has freed you to work more effectively. It has not lessened your motive for working. It's freed you to give yourself in your labors and to do it as unto the Lord.' Christian liberty strengthens; it doesn't weaken our motive for work. That's why Paul can say in this case, "slaves obey." You are free in Christ, therefore do your work better than anyone else.

Notice also in verse 22 and 23, he tells us that Christian liberty frees us from man pleasing. Christian liberty frees us from eye service. In other words, we see the phrases in verses 22 and 23, obey "not with external service as those who merely please men." And then in verse 23, "as for the Lord," work for the Lord "rather than for men." Paul is concerned that our work not be done simply for the estimation that will be put on it by the one that we work for, by our earthly employer, our earthly master. Paul says, 'No, our work should be done as if it were before the eyes of God. It's not simply to be eye service or man pleasing.' You know, the tendency of a person who is underpaid and underappreciated, is to give a minimalist effort for his employer. As long as the employer is watching that person may try and look like they are working hard, but when the employer is gone, we reduce ourselves to that minimal effort necessary to get by and to please our master. Paul says, 'Don't work that way. Work as if you are constantly aware that the eyes of the Lord are on you.' Work in light of that reality. What would be the natural tendency of the slave? To give the very least amount of effort to get by. What in our day and time is often the natural tendency of the employee? To give the least amount of effort necessary to get by. The least amount of effort necessary to keep from getting in trouble with one's employer. But Paul says here, 'You work, not for eye service, not for man pleasing, but you work as unto the Lord.'

Notice also, that Paul teaches in this passage that Christian liberty frees us to do all our work as to the Lord. We must, he says in verse 22, we must "fear the Lord in our labor." It is to the Lord that we will give an account. We often think of the account that we will give to those to whom we answer on earth. Paul says, remember the one that you are ultimately to give an account to about your work. Could it be that Paul is saying here that God cares about your work? Absolutely. Paul is saying that work is valued in the sight of God, and that means that your work is valuable. Whatever you do, whatever area of legitimate labor you engage in, is valued in the sight of God. It has dignity attached to it as you do it well. And the apostle is saying, do your work for the Lord rather than men. He is our Master and our employer. All work done for the Master in heaven has dignity. It doesn't matter whether you are a member of a learned profession or do what is in the eyes of some, menial labor. Whether you are a street sweeper, a university professor, a member of one of the professions. No matter what you do, it has dignity in the eyes of the Lord as it is done well.

Here we see a great principle which the Reformers and the Puritans caught on to. We so often make a dichotomy in our view of work today. There are spiritual things like being a missionary, being a minister, being an elder, teaching a

Sunday School class; those are spiritual works. And then there are secular works, and in our eyes these are much lower and less important things: things like being doctors and lawyers and engineers and nurses and homemakers and teachers. These things certainly couldn't be as important to God as teaching a Sunday School class or saving people on the mission field. The Apostle Paul is saying, 'Oh, yes they are. Because Christ is Lord of your work, and no matter what you do, He wants you to manifest the Lordship of Christ as you do it.' You have a vocation. You have a calling from God, and it has dignity. And that is why Martin Luther could say, "A dairymaid can milk cows to the glory of God." All work done well has dignity and it is valued in the sight of God. Booker T. Washington said, a long time ago, "That no race can prosper until it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem." We live in a day and age where certain professions are honored above others, and yet if you do what you do for the glory of God, it has eternal value in His sight. He cares how you labor and He cares about the way you treat those with whom, and for whom you labor. And so we see this principle: Christians should do all your work as if we are doing it for the Lord.

II. The Christian should do all his work from the heart

The second principle that Paul sets down is this: Christians should do our work from the heart. The Christian should do all his work from the heart. See verses 22 and 23 where he says, slaves obey with "sincerity of heart," and then he goes on to say, "whatever you do, do your work heartily." There, Paul teaches the principle that Christian liberty frees us to work whole heartedly, with sincerity of heart, to work heartily for those that employ us. Paul is here speaking about that half-hearted work and service which characterizes so much of our community today. Have you ever gone to a service establishment and wondered if perhaps you were bothering the clerks by being there? Their hearts do not appear to be in it we think, sometimes. Paul is saying, 'Don't work that way. Work from the soul. Give yourself in your work. Enjoy your work. Throw yourself into this work that the Lord has given to you.' He is waging war against half-hearted service, and is that not the tendency of those who are either slaves or again underappreciated or underpaid? Isn't it the tendency to become half-hearted? Isn't it the tendency to have a drudging attitude towards the work itself, to not have our hearts in it? I thank God that He has given me a vocation and positions within that vocation consistently that I have loved. I used to say to friends while I was at the seminary, "I hope that the trustees never find out how much I love this work! Because I love it so much I'd do it for free." But I'd still like to get paid. That's how I have always felt about the labors that the Lord has given me. What a privilege it is to serve you. I look forward to serving you in all the aspects and activities. But that's what Paul wants for all laborers, no matter what area of service you are in. If God has called to be a clerk, if God has called to be a teacher, a homemaker, a lawyer, a doctor, or any other thing, God wants you to throw your heart in it, for him to do it as unto the Lord, whole-heartedly and with sincerity.

This, my young friends is why it is so important as you choose your profession, to remember that all work is a result of the Lord's calling, not just the ministry, not just the missionary work, but if God calls you to be a shoe salesman, to be the best shoe salesman that you can be. And if God calls you to be a manufacturer of something or a giver of services, or a professional, that you should seek the Lord's wisdom and guidance so that you can do whatever you do wholeheartedly. How sad it is when I run into friends who hate what they do. How can you possibly do well that which you hate while you're doing it? Paul is looking for whole-souled service in the workplace, and how we need that in our own day and time.

III. The Christian should realize that his work will be rewarded

Paul thirdly tells us that the Christian should realize that his work will be rewarded. Paul is speaking to slaves initially here. In the Roman world, slaves were obviously not rewarded with great remuneration for their labors. They had food and shelter and other basic forms of care, but they were not paid for their labors. And Paul is saying to these slaves, 'you will be rewarded.' But furthermore, he adds this phrase, you will be rewarded "with the inheritance." Now that must have been very special to the ears of those slaves, because under Greco-Roman law no slave could inherit, and Paul is saying, 'You will be rewarded with your inheritance.' Why? Because you serve the Master with a capital M. You serve the Lord who is in heaven, and He will not fail to give you your inheritance, even if men do not.

Every single one of us, at some time or another, must certainly be put in circumstances where we are robbed in labor of that which is due to us. Perhaps it is because of frivolous suits that we are not able to take into the care of our families the money which we have earned. Perhaps it is because we have been defrauded in a business relationship. Perhaps it is because we work for an employer who does not pay us appropriately, or perhaps we are an employer who has employees who steal from us. All of us surely have faced situations where we are defrauded of that which is rightfully ours, and Paul is saying here, no matter how difficult the situation is in which you work, no matter if you are being robbed of that which is rightfully yours in your labor, you will be rewarded.

Paul is setting forth the principle of God's remunerative justice. We often think of God's judging justice, His retributive justice, where He punishes those who are wicked. But the Bible equally teaches the fact that God will reward His children's well-doing. Did you know that? That God cares about your work, and as you do your labors faithfully for Him under the Lordship of Christ, He promises a reward to you? He says, 'You will not fail to receive the inheritance which I am preparing for you.' God rewards His children. What an encouragement.

But then, in verse 25, comes that reciprocal side. He sends out that word of warning, 'wrongdoers will be repaid,' he says. He doesn't say whether he is speaking about masters of slaves there. I think Paul purposely left that ambiguous. I think Paul wanted them to know that slaves, that employees that defraud their employers of the rightful work that they owe them, the Lord will be watching. And those employers who exploit those who serve them, God will be watching, and He will repay every wrongful activity. Isn't it amazing that God cares about your work! He does. And He wants it to be done unto the liberty and the rule of Christ.

IV. The Christian master/employer must treat his workers with justice and fairness

And that leads us to the last point where Paul teaches us, that the Christian master, the Christian employer must treat his workers with justice and fairness. In 4:1, we read, "Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you, too, have a Master in heaven." Masters, Paul says, are to be just and they are to be fair. They are to be equitable in their treatment and their provision for their employees. Paul here, not only lays strictures on Christians servants, but also on Christian masters. There are reciprocal responsibilities. And he says to these masters, in a community where they had absolutely no legal obligations or at least minimal obligations for their slaves, he says, 'I don't care what obligations the law has for you. I've got one for you. Be just and fair with those who are your servants, for you have a Master who is in heaven. Everyone will give an account to Him, especially you masters.' He reminds masters that they have a Master in heaven, they have a Lord in heaven to whom they will give an account. And though it may seem like the slave has no recourse in law or in social justice in his society, Paul says there is One who is watching how you conduct yourself, master, how you conduct yourself, employer. And therefore you treat those who works for you fairly.

Chuck Colson tells the story of Richard Halverson visiting a man who had recently become a Christian in his congregation. And Halverson went to speak with this man, and the man owned a number of car dealerships throughout the city in which he lived. And he was not known for his honest dealings either with customers or with his employees. As an expression of his gratitude to God for the salvation which he had been granted in Christ, he excitedly told Richard Halverson, "You know, I have a new plan. My plan is to hand out a New Testament to every customer who comes into the place and to give one to all my employees as well." Halverson paused and said, "Well, that's a good idea, but you know, an even better idea would be for you to treat your customers fairly and to treat your employees fairly. Because I suspect that if you give out New Testaments and you continue to conduct yourself the way you've been conducting yourself, it's going to be detrimental to the gospel, not helpful." Halverson had hit on a very Pauline principle, that God cares how we conduct

ourselves as masters and as employers. He cares that we treat people justly and fairly, and that we, above all people, are seen to be fair and equitable in our practices, both in our business relations and in our treatment of those who work for us. Sinclair Ferguson said, "Man was made to work, because the God who made him was a working God." All work has dignity in the sight of God, and He cares about the work that we do and how we do the work that we do. These principles are set down as gospel principles to direct Christians in the way we go about our vocations, and they are universally applicable whether we worship and work in the church, or whether we are working somewhere outside of the church. The rule of Christ brings freedom, and that freedom that the rule of Christ brings, leads us to greater and deeper and richer obedience, not to less obedience in the realm of our work relations.

The man who was a great testimony to me in Scotland of his faithfulness, was a man who held a position very much like a janitor in America. His name was Mr. Bill Anderson. He was called a 'college officer' at the Free Church College. Mr. Anderson was gracious and wise and intelligent and humble, and he went about his duties with great care. And though his position was not valued in the eyes of the world, yet all those who knew him were blessed by his winsomeness and love and faithfulness. On one occasion. Professor McMillan was ushering an English lady onto the lift to go up to the Thomas Chalmers housing association, to talk with her about a grant for the creation of inner city housing. As she went up the lift, she was asking questions about the building. The building they were in was almost 300 years old. She asked question after question to Professor McMillan. He knew none of the answers. But Mr. Anderson, the college officer, the janitor, knew all the answers. And so he kindly volunteered those answers to her. As they got off the lift on the second floor, she turned to Professor McMillan and said, "What does he teach?" He said to her, "Well, he ought to teach Church History and I ought to be the janitor!" No matter what we do, if we do it well, what we do is valued by the Lord and can be a testimony in our community. May God bless you by grace to do well in your work and so honor the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Father, we bless your Holy name, that You have given us work to do in this world. We desire to do it well for Your glory. All in Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

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