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Pursuing God in Our Work Colossians 3:22-4:1

I'll be finishing up the third chapter of Colossians. I got to do the part about Pursuing God in your family on Father's Day and now I get to do Pursuing God in our Work on Labor Day weekend. So we will be looking at Colossians 3:22-4:1.

I can sympathize with work. I've had a few jobs in my life. I started out pretty well, that's how I got here in the first place, I worked at NASA in college. I thought I was coming to a great job in a great area of Southern California. My vision of it was something totally different than what it is. I came from the deserts of New Mexico and to my disappointment; I came to a desert of California.

I worked at NASA at an office area called procurement, which I came to find out had the disdain of much of the work place. Our job was to buy things for people who basically thought they could have bought it better and faster than we were doing it, and they were probably right. Our job was to save money, and their job was to get good stuff, so you can see the problem there.

But I saved up enough money that I went on to seminary and worked at a golf course while I was at seminary. One of my greater challenges was to not hit the BMWs or Porches in the parking lot on my way to work. I adopted a nickname while I was there. My name was "Boy," as in "boy, go get me a towel," that sort of thing.

When I left there I went to Georgia, and Kelly and I got married. I had a time of being unemployed after moving there. The first month was fine, it was like a vacation; the second month was rather dreadful because no one wanted me. I applied for an accounting job at a computer store. I wasn't hired as an accountant but they did hire me to repair computers so that was what I took on myself. If you know me very well, repairing is not my forte. But they didn't know that. It took them five months before they figured it out and they fired me.

I then got a job in an office that did peoples taxes, so for 8 hours a day 5 days a week I copied tax returns. There was a commercial about that time, I don't know if you remember it, it said "a mind is a terrible thing to waste" and that was how I felt copying tax returns hour upon hour upon hour. The thing I had to dwell upon at that point in time was how much more money people were making than I was as I looked at their tax returns.

Then I went to work at an office in a manufacturing company that made painter's pants. They were in the business of going out of business. The business was failing and I got to participate in the failure of this company. Then I moved out here and worked mowing the lawns of the church thinking this was far better than what I'd had in the past, and eventually here I am today and boy am I thankful that I have the job that I have now. But I want to let you know that I feel your pain, it hasn't always been easy in my life as I've had different employers and different jobs. So as we head into the topic of pursuing God in our work I have probably been there and done that to some degree.

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Lets look at Colossians 3:22 to 4:1 and we will read this together: "**Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who {merely} please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.**"

This passage is dealing with masters and slaves, so on what basis do we make the transition to employers and employees? Can we do that? Well, first you need to understand what slavery was in the New Testament area. It wasn't Roots or Kunta Kinte, or the oppression of slavery that existed in America a couple of hundred years ago. It wasn't that at all, it was something different. Slavery was very common actually, back then. In the larger cities of Antioch or Corinth there might be a third of the city that were slaves and there might be another third of the city that were former slaves. You see the great degree of slavery that existed.

And also these slaves had certain rights: they could own property; they could own other slaves; people actually chose to be slaves to some degree. Many slaves were born into slavery, the offspring of slaves. But some of them were choosing to pay off debts and they were slaves because of that. They sought to do this maybe to climb the social ladder, to get a certain security of job or to gain a certain occupation, to have an easier life style and secure existence or to have a special job. Not all the jobs that the slaves did were the most menial tasks of society. Some of the slaves were educators or administrators or managers or physicians. Some slaves had great skill.

They could do some things, but they were limited, they had a limit to represent themselves in court, they couldn't do that. They looked to be freed and mostly could expect to be freed at about 30 years old. Generally speaking, many, maybe perhaps as many as 50 percent of the slaves, became freed before the age of 30. Sometimes they were freed because their master passed away and the entire household had been freed upon that event.

There is a fellow named Felix who Paul came before, he was a Roman procreator and he was judging Paul in the trial in Acts 23. In that time Paul came before him, Felix had an education that was afforded him because he was the product of being a slave in a household that gave him an education. When he was freed, he was able to use that in a high capacity in society.

So I think we can fairly say this, that these slaves where slaves in an economic sense more than in an oppressive sense. There might have been some oppression certainly, but this was as much an economic social system. So that's the sense that we can make this transition to today. We have an economic system that has employers and employees and supervisors and some of you might feel like slaves, but you are not exactly slaves. In the economic sense in society, this is the relationship between Colossians 3:22-25 and employees today.

Now there is another thing we have to look at and that is that Paul, in this passage, did not oppose slavery. He actually was teaching how to live in the midst of slavery and how to live righteously in the social system of slavery. And there is even more information and instruction given by Paul in another passage in 1 Corinthians 7:20-23, Paul wrote this, "**Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave?**"

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Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men."

So my explanation of this is if you are a slave don't be tremendously concerned about this situation that you are in. If you have the opportunity to be free that's better, take advantage of that. But you can serve the Lord quite well as a slave just like when Paul was in prison, he was able to serve the Lord quite effectively as a prisoner. The Lord is able to work through people in spite of the social situation that they find themselves in.

So there is not a call in the New Testament to overthrow the system of slavery that existed in the Roman government. The emphasis is rather on how to live righteously in the midst of this system and so too our emphasis should be on how to live righteously in the midst of the social system that we find ourselves within, and that should be our priority. And in that I think the Lord's work will be most accomplished, that seems to be the teaching of the Scripture.

What is the call that has been given to us? Verse 22, "*in all things obey those who are your masters on earth.*" The call, the prescription, is to submit. Obedience must be in our actions, it's in what we do, so when we are instructed by our employer, our supervisor, to do such and such a thing, we should do it. We should not try and figure out how to do that differently, like we would like to think it should be done but we should follow his instructions. We should do it more than just in actions, we should do it in attitude. Not just with external service as verse 22 says as those who merely please men but with sincerity of heart. From the heart, with our attitude seeking to further that instruction not simply externally. Who wants to be a supervisor and have people just doing it because you said so? It's far better to have people do it because they want to do it and that is their attitude to further the work place.

Now this obedience does have its limitations, it does and here are some of them. First, is the moral limitation because we cannot choose to obey men rather than God. God has given us moral instructions and we cannot just cast those off. So we cannot sin even if our employer instructs us to sin. As Peter put it in Acts, we are to obey God rather than men.

But there is more than the moral limitations, there are the physical limitations because each of us has physical limitations, weaknesses, inabilities, and as we age we tend to gain more and more of these physical limitations. We can only do the best that we can do, though we should do the best we can do while we are on the job, we have physical limitations and we cannot do more than our best.

And lastly are contractual limitations, this one is multi faceted. But in essence slavery in the New Testament didn't have the contractual agreements that we have today and in this sense that this instruction to the slaves is even more powerful to us because we have an out. Unlike slaves, we can change jobs, we can quit and we can do something different, so the instruction to submit weighs more heavily or just as heavily on us because we can change our occupation if we choose to.

Now in that there are some limitations, because we enter a job with the understanding that this is what's going to be required of us, and this is what the payment is going to be in return for the work that we provide. Whether its written or unwritten, it is an understanding, a contract, and there is a responsibility for our end of the contract as well as the employer's end of the contract.

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They really shouldn't go beyond their contractual agreement to press us into more than what they should.

However if they do, and I suspect they do because I know I've been in that situation where more has been demanded of me than should have been, for example working hours that I wasn't suppose to work and not getting paid for it, and that sort of thing, and this may have happened to you. Well what should you do? Well I think you should adopt the attitude of Matthew 5:41 in the words of Jesus said **this "if someone forces you to go with him one mile go with him another."** We should go the second mile and be willing to do this. However, we can factor this in to whether we want to keep this job or not keep this job, because at some point this is going to be rather burdensome to us. We could bring it up for discussion as I have done in my life as I felt that the agreement wasn't being honored by the other person's actions. If we get a hearing, great, if we don't we factor that in to whether this is the best thing for us to do or not. But there are contractual limitations, that's different than masters and slaves actually.

Now there is a principal that is under girding this whole section and that is serving the Lord rather than men. **"What ever you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord rather then for men."** Verse 23 is a great memory verse. This is this sentence that all of this section hinges on. We should do our work as to the Lord. Now when we talk about serving the Lord in Christian circles we often refer to that in terms of some ministry, and those people that are paid by the church are described as being spiritually serving the Lord and that is distinct from secular employment. Well I would offer that this distinction often made between spiritual and secular employment is unbiblical. What we find here is this statement in verse 24, **"it is the Lord Christ whom you serve,"** in your work you are serving the Lord. Really all of your life should be serving the Lord, 100 percent of your life. So there is not a false dichotomy between spiritual service and our work, all of it is unto the Lord. So don't be led to think that when you are serving yourself that you are doing that selfishly outside of the church, it's unbiblical, we should serve the Lord in all we do

Now, Christians are tempted not do this, and here is a couple of reasons why Christians are tempted to not serve the Lord heartily in their work. The first is there is a temptation to merely please men because perspectives on life are temporal. We are tempted to only look at the short term not the long term. And as we look only to the short term we are seeing the benefits that come from maybe being lackadaisical in our effort of pleasing men. Pleasing men rather than the Lord may make it nicer for us in our job and that people will respect us and maybe even pay us more. But our priorities, our focus, must be on serving the Lord rather than men. Because there will come a time when serving men and serving the Lord will be in conflict with each other. Jesus put it this way, **"you cannot serve God and man,"** you're going to have to make choices and you can only serve one master. No one can serve two masters as Jesus put it. We have to choose, and if the Lord is the Lord then He is the one who we are serving in the midst of our job, we are serving Him. That is an eternal perspective not just a temporal perspective. It may not benefit us, but it will in eternity serve everyone.

The other reason why Christians are tempted to merely please men is because their perspective on life is self-serving. Because we want people to think well of us and want people to respect us and give us more things in our occupation, but we need to be careful because this can be very self-serving.

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We want to serve others in the context of serving the Lord, not to please ourselves and to make people think better of us by pleasing them. That's the wrong motivation. The right motivation is in serving the Lord. Hopefully people will appreciate that. But if they don't, that's not our priority, our priority is to serve the Lord not ourselves.

Now as you read this phrase, "***whatever you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord rather than man,***" you shouldn't think of it as an emotional thing, with enthusiasm and great energy because the phrase literally means from the soul, inspired from the core of our being, that's what it is. Because of this principle we're in our occupation, whatever our work is, even if it's preparing for occupation, in education, school or at home supporting the family in our work, it's from the soul. Now as I was making copies hour after hour, day after day, it's kind of hard to do that with great enthusiasm, but I can do that from the soul, inspired that this is what God is having me do and to do my best faithfully, even though it may not be extremely exciting that hour or the next hour but I can do my work heartily as to the Lord rather than for man.

Now there are some reasons that should motivate us to do our work heartily, to please the Lord rather than please men, here are five of them. Five reasons why we should do our work heartily for the Lord rather than men.

One reason is it is our responsibility. This is like letting your yes be yes, and your no be no. It's our responsibility. We have entered into this agreement and we should fulfill it. It's simply the right thing to do, that's what we would have wanted. If we were employing someone we would want them to do the job that we hired them for, and to do that faithfully and to not slack off and not have a different agenda. It's our responsibility that's first and foremost. But there's more.

It builds our reputation, our reputation is at hand. This is so important, it is a qualification for church leaders. In 1 Timothy 3:7, Paul writes, someone who seeks to be a church leader, "***he must have a good reputation with those outside the church so he may not fall into reproach in the snare of the devil.***" This is important because in our work we are hopefully seeking to impact the lives of others for Christ. And if they look at us as someone who's not doing our work heartily, that's going to have a dramatic effect on our ministry to them. We will lose credibility, and this is easy to do because people are self-oriented themselves and they will look at us and think, "well, you're not holding up your end of the deal." We are very quick to think that because we tend to view things toward our benefit. Even if we are doing our work heartily and doing more than we need to do, sometimes people can think this.

But if we really aren't doing our work heartily then people can think less of us and it will damage our reputation. It will spread because people are not only self-oriented, but they can talk and if they get upset about something they tend to talk more and more and other people will learn about us and our lack of faithfulness in our work because other people are having to pick up the slack for us, and they don't like that. So it will damage our reputation, which then hurts the reputation of the Lord as we identify ourselves with Christ and our attempt to seek to serve other people for Christ sake will be damaged. So our reputation is important in this.

Next is the Lord will reward us. Verse 24, "***know that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance.***" This phrase "the reward of the inheritance" I think is in there because of slaves were not able to inherit.

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Remember that they could own property but they could not pass that property along to their offspring, so there was a limitation in the society of Rome to inherit. But in spite of their inability to inherit earthly goods, they would receive the reward of the inheritance and we too will receive the reward of the inheritance. The Lord will store it up for us because He who sees and seeks it will repay (Matthew 6). He will do this in a way that will not be fleeting, that moth and rust won't destroy, where thieves won't break in and steal, but it will be stored up for us in heaven. This should be a great motivation to be faithful in our occupation and do our work heartily as for the Lord rather than for man because He will repay us. His repayment is worth far more than whatever the payment is coming to us from the company that we work for, the business that we work for. The reason is because when you get more money what do you do with that money, you generally spend it and sometimes can't even remember what you spent it on and it just disappears. The Lord's reward will not be so fleeting. It's a wonderful thing and it will cause us to be more content with our wages and less apt to be discontent with our situation because we are serving the Lord rather than ourselves.

Next, another motivation is that the real Lord is Christ, not someone who thinks they are the Lord. The real Lord is Christ, this comes from the phrase "***It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.***" And this title, "the Lord Christ," this is unique here, this is not a common title, Lord Christ. We find Lord Jesus Christ but Lord Christ seems to emphasize the Lordship of Christ. In other words, He is the master, that's what Lord means. He is the master and anyone else is only master on earth as verse 22 puts it. The masters on earth are not the real masters, there is one Master and that is the Lord Christ and when we serve the Lord Christ He is able to trump everyone else and we can trust Him in our occupation, whatever that is, that He can accomplish His will. If we are serving Him, He can overcome our master on earth even if our master on earth is not particularly well motivated in doing good. He can still work through that person to accomplish what the Lords desires are in your life. It is the Lord that we serve, the real Lord not the fake Lord, the lords of earth, the masters of earth.

Next is the Lord is righteously impartial. Verse 25, "***he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong that he has done and that without partiality***" and if you are an employee you will undoubtedly encounter, if you haven't already, partiality. It's very common that there is partiality in the work place where people will favor certain people over other people for reasons that have nothing to do with the work place. The Lord is not so partial, He is impartial. He renders the consequences impartially, righteously. And that is a wonderful thing for people that are dealing with masters of earth who are rendering inequality in favoring certain people wrongly. We can trust the Lord in that. So let's say it this way: who you seek to please indicates who you value. So if your desire is to do your work to please the masters on earth that indicates your value system, who you value, you value them and their opinions. Essentially, you value yourself because their opinions have a great effect upon you and that value system exposes your beliefs. Who you value exposes your belief system. If your belief system is the Lord, is the real Lord, and He is able to reward us and He is able to accomplish what He desires and we are really busy about seeking to please Him, then that will be manifested in our work, whatever our work is. So let's trust the Lord in our work place.

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The last section is on supervisors. Colossians 4:1, "***Masters, grant your slaves justice and fairness knowing that you too have a master in heaven.***" In our day and age we have employers, or in larger companies, supervisors, who are over people and determine how people will function. So there is something said for these people "*Masters, grant your slaves justice and fairness.*" Supervisors should be just.

What is just? Well here's what just isn't. This comes from James 5:4, "***Behold the pay of the labors who mow your fields and which has been withheld by you cries out against you and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord.***" Justice means that we provide for people what had been promised them. We do not manipulate them for our end or our company's end but we treat people justly, rightly, that's good. We should treat people as we would have wanted to have been treated and not manipulate them. We should not only be just if we are supervising people we should be fair, justice and fairness. We should be treating people equally, not favoring people for things that are outside of the work place, because they are related to us or they say they are a Christian or whatever it is. We should not be unfair, we should try to treat people fairly. Now this may be hard to do but it's necessary, it's even true in church, we should treat people fairly, not favoring certain people for things that are beyond the work place.

Why should we? There is a motivation, "*knowing that you to have a master in heaven*" and this is the common thread that ties masters and slaves together. All of us have a master who is in heaven whether we acknowledge that master in heaven or not we still have a master in heaven. He is the Lord Christ and He renders us all equal. Chapter 3 verse 11 says this, "***there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.***"

So whatever position you might have, whatever respect may come from that position is really in the long term rather irrelevant. What is most relevant is how faithful you are to do your work heartily as to the Lord in that position. Whether it's a highly thought of position or whether it's a not so highly thought of position. Whether you have a supervisory position or a slave position, under the thumb of someone else you are able to serve the Lord heartily in that position and so you should.

Suffice it to say this. If we acknowledge our master who is in heaven we will not abuse the men who are on earth. If we see ourselves under the Lord in heaven we will not be tempted to manipulate people on earth. Whether we are in a supervisory position over them or whether we are an employee, we will not be seeking to manipulate people and abuse the system for our benefit. We will be seeking to serve the master who is in heaven and from Him we will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ who we serve, not men.

Let's pray together that this would be true for each of us. Lord, we thank You for Your Word and Your instruction that comes in it that we can live righteously and wisely in this present age. We ask Lord that You would accomplish this in our lives. That we would understand better and better how to truly serve You in the circumstances that You have put us in. Help us to be wise as we conduct ourselves with the people of earth and respond to them as we should with responsible living and able to serve You well in the midst of our work. We pray that we could have Your Spirit manifesting heartily eager service to you in our lives and in our work place and we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.