

The Christian in the Workplace

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Colossians 3, would you turn there? I don't know that there is a more effective way to impact others with Christ and the Gospel of Christ than to live out the admonition of this section of Scripture. In my own pilgrimage being converted at age 19 with almost no Christian background, when I was first taught this principle it transformed my life, radically changed the way I viewed things, gave a new liberty to my life that was amazing. I don't know, it was one of those that it wasn't always the easiest thing to do but to grasp it and joy in it was so easy for me.

Look at it there, Colossians 3, let's begin in verse 22 and go to 4:1.

22 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. 23 Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. 25 For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

1 Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

I'm going to talk about the Christian in the workplace from this text tonight. Let's begin by talking about slavery in the first century, that is, in this time that Paul wrote this letter to the church at Colossae.

We do know that Philemon is a letter written by Paul about Onesimus. It's a letter that Paul wrote to a slave owner and Paul's exhortation is for Philemon to receive Onesimus as a Christian brother and a partner in the Gospel. So on one hand, Paul writes to this slave owner, Philemon, and he does not tell him to change everything about that, he just says, "This guy is now your brother and a sharer in the Gospel." So in Philemon he points out that spiritual conversion changes the social relationship making all equal in Christ. One thing I think we ought to be sure about is there is no place in Christianity for one person to exercise power or authority over another person for selfish reasons. You may be in a position of authority or leadership but it is for Christ-centered reasons not for self-centered reasons. There does remain a spiritual hierarchy within the faith community for

the purpose of advancing Christ's cause, but all are equal before God and have equal access to God.

Now in the Roman Empire of this day, success and stability depended upon maintaining proper relations between the social classes and all the many rural and urban settings. Political and economic power belonged to the few, those who owned farms or ruled in civil government or in the military. The majority of the people belonged to the working class and they literally had a hand-to-mouth existence. One group of workers was the slave, and this was especially true in urban areas. One historian notes that in Rome, for example, and in all the major cities, about 1/3 of the people were probably slaves and about another 1/3 were former slaves, they called them freed persons. So a significant percentage of the population functioned in some form of slavery.

Now this was much different than pre-Civil War America. For example in the Roman Empire, the slave and the master were often indistinguishable. They could be of various races, various religions, various education or various occupations. It wasn't some sort of a slavery based on some sort of ethnic or cultural background of some kind. Free persons sometimes in this culture sold themselves into slavery voluntarily to find important and meaningful work. Often slaves, though as is always the case, were exploited and abused. They had no legal rights that the average Roman citizen was granted by the government of Rome.

Now reforms had been instituted in the time that the Scriptures were written. These reforms were written to protect slaves from abuse, but no abolition movement existed. One thing you have to understand when you study the Bible, Paul writes to reform not Rome but to transform souls. Paul was not about transforming civil government or even the structures of society. His goal was to transform people and, by the way, transformed people do transform cultures.

So when we have these guidelines here, you've got to understand there were so many levels of this relationship between what would be broadly called masters and slaves, and it was much much different than the horrific and horrendous era of our past in our country, and it very closely in most cases, and I think the way the Apostle Paul is writing it here, parallels our employer/employee relationship in our country today. Now there were some exceptions to that but generally speaking it would parallel the employer/employee relationship we have today. So there are some powerful principles for all of us under authority and all of us probably to one degree or another work for someone we answer to and we are under their authority.

First of all, notice in verse 22, he says, "Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth." Now one thing we need to remember is that God has given authority to people on the earth and liberty in Christ does not mean we can neglect the structures of authority that God's ordained for a functional and orderly society. There is a notion going around that off-the-cuff or just at face-value, you'd think, "Oh, that looks like a humble thing or a spiritual thing," and that is that everybody is equal and everybody is the same. I'm sorry, in the way God's ordained institutions to function, people are not equal. God

has not ordered it to be that way and any society that claims to work toward that, in the extreme it leads only to more authoritarianism and more tyrannical rule. It always does, ask the Communist about that.

He uses the phrase in verse 22, "Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth." Now there are those we all must answer to. Now the spirit of this world and the spirit of this age, which is the same as the antichrist spirit, wants to throw off all authority. Again, Karl Marx was a great proponent of this idea that the working class must throw off the evil of those who are over them. Well, there was significant and great abuse. Those who owned the businesses and had the rule in that day, fed right into Marx's ideologies but, of course, he went way out of balance on the other side. One of the things we need to remember is that God does not excuse the abuse of power to oppress but he does not change the structures of authority. The word of God is very very clear condemning those who abuse their positions or rule and authority or power, but he does not use that as an excuse to throw off his structures of authority and responsibility.

Now, he says in verse 22, "I want you to submit to them in all things, not with external service as those who merely please men but with sincerity of heart fearing the Lord." Now the challenging thing here is this is impossible in the strength of the flesh. It's just impossible. I mean, if you are not regenerate of the Holy Spirit, you're not going to get this. You can't receive it. You're going to buck up against it and push away from it. Only the Spirit can enable you to joy in and walk in these truths, and I might add as one who has been the preaching pastor here for a number of years, I think God has ordained all men to walk faithfully under authority before he puts them in authority. There is a proving ground, if you will.

So he says, "Don't do this with just external service but from the heart, that new heart, that transformed heart that God has changed." In other words, the Christian has a higher motivation for working than a man who does not know Christ. He talks about external service, merely pleasing men. Isn't that the way the world does it? Men who do not know Christ work hard when the boss is looking, they work hard when there's self-advancement on the line, only for a promotion or a raise or the praise of men. Perhaps sometimes they'll work even for the benefit of their employer which is good or bad depending on where the ultimate motivation comes. If you're just trying to advance your employer but you're not doing it for the glory of God, that itself can be idolatry and even be evil. He says here, "Don't do it for any of those reasons but fearing the Lord," and the phrase "fearing the Lord" does not just have the idea of terror or dread, it has the idea of respect and esteem; that you have such respect for the wisdom of God that your God tells you to do these things and you want to honor him and to do them.

He talks about doing it with sincerity of heart. Literally the word "sincerity" means "without folds or not hidden creases or hidden motives; just open and laid bare and genuine from the heart." My pure and true motivation, that is, is knowing that my obedience to a heavenly Christ is expressed through obedience to my earthly employer. Did you hear that? My obedience to a heavenly Christ is shown forth in my obedience to an earthly employer. That's practical, isn't it? The same way with wives who honor their

husbands, their honoring of Christ is shown by the honor they give to their husbands. Again, as I always say because I am one of those, not because husbands are worthy but because Christ is worthy. Not because your employer is the greatest guy or lady in the world but because Christ is the greatest and you honor them. So my motivation is that it honors and pleases my Lord and that's enough for me.

We've had several men through the years who we've taught these principles to and they have purposed to go into their workplaces and verbalize and better than that, back up with their behavior and their words this very spirit and have even had their employer pull them aside and say, "What makes you so different?" Wow. Then you get to talk about Christ. Joseph basically had that kind of position in Egypt, and Daniel basically had that kind of situation in Babylon where their extraordinary spirit was so influential the kings and others looked to them for wisdom and guidance in leading the kingdom.

Well, look at verse 23. He encourages them further, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men." "Hardly" means "from your soul." In other words, as a Christian in the workplace because Christ has changed you, you understand that God has sovereignly ordained the structures of authority in society and that you want to heartily be about this thing. You never want to do just enough. You never want to just get by at work. As a Christian, you want to go the extra mile. Often I caution all the brothers and sisters in labor unions. I would never tell you not to be in a labor union, Scripture doesn't give me authority there, but I would tell you this: you need to work heartily for your employer like working unto the Lord. Let that be the mark of your service in the workplace, know you're working for Christ.

Verse 24, "knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve." Yes, God's concerned that we can pay the bills and pay the light bills and pay the gas bill and put gasoline in the car and put some clothes on our backs and a roof over our head and food on the table. I'm not suggesting and the Lord's not suggesting that those are not concerns but he says as you go into the workplace and you've had a good quiet time and you've got a Scripture meditating on and you've sought the Lord in prayer, you go in there that day and I don't care what his character is like or what his past behavior has been, you decide, "I am God's and I'm going to work for this man today like working unto the Lord because I'm going to trust that all my inheritance has been set aside for me in Jesus Christ. I have rewards and a retirement system this company knows not of." And that's what he's talking about there, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance.

Hebrews 1:2, the Bible says Christ is heir of all things. In Romans 8:17 it says we are children and heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. Now listen, all that is, is his. All that is, is his and all that's his, is mine. That's what he's saying. That's what it means to be a joint heir with Christ. You know, actually your working down here is more an opportunity for you to exemplify the change Christ can make. It's not first and foremost for you to gain stuff. You're going to gain stuff in heaven far beyond your imagination. Hebrews 9:14 talks about our eternal inheritance. 1 Peter 1:4 says we're going to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and will not fade away.

So when I work, I am working for Christ. When you work, you're in God's will. God ordained work and you are his joint heir. He owns everything and all that is, is his and all that's his, is yours. So I can work with sincerity from my heart knowing God's ordained these things and these things are pleasing and honoring to him.

I found this little thing some years ago in a Boston newspaper that ran an ad about a woman who had cleaned an office building for 40 years. I mean, she cleaned the same office building for 40 years, mopped the same floors and dusted the same tables and took out the same trash out of the same trash cans and they interviewed her and said, "Has not this been monotonous and boring for you?" Here's what the woman said, "Oh, I don't get bored. I use cleaning materials that God made. I clean objects that belong to people that God made and I make life more comfortable for them. My mop is the hand of God." She got it. She got it. You think as Satan doesn't whisper in your ear but screams in your face that, "No! No! To have joy and satisfaction you've got to accumulate and possess and get more!" And that's not always against God's will but if that's your heart and that's your goal, you may die frustrated thinking, "I didn't get that next acquisition." Well, this lady cleaned the same office and she wasn't bored at all. She got the biblical principle.

Now verse 25. I think he's talking now for all concerned, not just talking to the slaves. As you know, in 4:1 he exhorts the masters or those who I think would parallel employers, and before he gets to them, in verse 25 to both groups he says, "For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality." Now we do not know exactly but if following Paul's writings to all the different churches, I can almost guarantee you Paul has heard that a lot of Christians are slacking in their office work down at the factory, or down at the mill, or wherever they worked, and they were probably using some sort of justification that because they were Christians they no longer were under the dominion of these earthly employers, they were under the dominion of a new lord, and some of them had Christian employers and they thought, "Well, now he's a brother in Christ so he can cut me some slack and I don't have to come in right on time, etc. etc. etc." And Paul is very very strong, he said, "Look, you work for that man like working unto the Lord and if you do wrong, you'll suffer the consequence. And vice versa, if those who are your employers are mistreating and abusing and taking advantage because they have the position of power, they too will suffer the consequences."

We do know that God is sovereignly behind all things. Now listen to me: God controls everything your employer does or does not do. You just have to rest there. When you are so hurt and so frustrated and so angry, you have to go out to the break room or to the car or whatever you have to do, and raise your hands toward heaven and say, "O God, by faith I trust you for orchestrating all of these things for your glory and for my good." He's behind it all. Proverbs 21:1, "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes." Now in this day, the king had ultimate authority, absolute authority on earth, and the Bible says that God can take that king's heart and just move it wherever he wants to. He can move the king's heart to favor you and he can move the king's heart to show disfavor toward you, but God is sovereignly

behind it all. You see, he who cared enough to bleed and die for me will look after my best interest as I obey his will in my work environment.

Well, 4:1 now. He takes the other side of this employer/employee relationship and he says, "Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven." Men that employ other men, men that have other men on their payroll, those men should have some fear and trembling knowing that they answer to a God for how they take care of those men. They have a responsibility before God for those men. Masters must rule and instruct those under them not for selfish ends but for the glory of God. The Bible is very clear about this. Leviticus 19:13, "The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning." You're to faithfully make sure you deliver the paycheck to the man who puts in his work for you. Deuteronomy 24:15 says to pay a poor man his wage so that he will not cry out to God against you. Let me tell you something, if you employ somebody and you work somebody and you know that you're taking advantage of them, you'd better hope they're not on their knees lifting that issue up to God. There are two people you don't want to take advantage of, widows and the legitimate poor. God says he defends those, widows and the legitimate poor.

Now we have a lot of poor people today that aren't the legitimate poor. I know we live in a society that has preached this central government messiah to everyone. Can I chase a rabbit right quick? Do you know what we have? We have a feminized country. We have a feminized country. Women run this country today. Now they dress up their men and send them out but women run it and what happens when you have a feminized country is this: women have been made by God to need headship and the security that comes with it. So here's what they do, when women with the feminists, not godly women but women with a secular feminist spirit get in a lot of positions of rulership and authority, they greatly esteem and expand the central government's authority because that's their new surrogate husband. Washington becomes their new surrogate husband because every woman wants that security and she wants that provision and she's learned that men can't be trustworthy, that men will take advantage of you, and often she's right but she still wants it so she casts her eyes toward the central government and wants more entitlements, more federal programs, more federal assurances and that's where we are in this country. There is a great spirit of feminism behind this and actually they've done surveys among women including very liberal feminist women and said, "In your heart of hearts, don't you really want somebody to take care of you?" And almost without exception every woman said, "Yes, I do." So they looked past men who have, I think, dishonored God, not taken care of their wives, not been the men of God they're supposed to be in this country. We've got the biggest bunch of wimpy men in this country you'll ever see. I mean, wimpy, wimpy, wimpy men, men that won't stand, men that won't lead, men that won't humble themselves to say they're wrong when they need to, men that don't provide and don't care. We have so many men that they want to have children but they don't want to be parents. I mean, it's just a plague of it and so what happens? The ladies of the country begin to feel insecure and fearful and they run to whatever they can find to get some security. Well, that's my rabbit. I chased it. I think we gutted it and dressed it.

Jeremiah 22:13 says, "Woe to him who uses his neighbor's services without pay And does not give him his wages." So don't you love the beauty of the Bible? Here Paul was not preaching a social revolution but he says within the Christian community those who are under your employment, you take good care of them or God will avenge them. Then he says to you that work under those in authority and employment, you be faithful. Work for them hard from the heart not for external reasons but for the Lord in your employment.

One of the things we need to understand, you may in some way, shape, form or fashion be enslaved to someone, these people, the great majority of them were under Roman dominion. Well, actually the whole known world at the time, but though they were enslaved to Rome, he wants them to know something, you're still free in Christ. One of the great lies of the secularists who are beginning, the secular progressives who are beginning to overwhelmingly influence if not run our country, is that you can have these liberties without godliness, and they just end up into more bondage because it's not a liberty founded on the truths of the word of God and the liberty that's found in Christ.

Now I want to quickly give you some conclusions for practical application just for you to think on, just for you to take with you. I'll just go through these quickly. 1. Work is a part of God's perfect plan. Now you know that but work wasn't a creation or something that was the result of the fall. Work was ordained of God for Adam and Eve before sin entered the garden. I believe we're going to work in heaven, as a matter of fact, I'm confident we're going to work in heaven. God told Adam and Eve to cultivate and keep the garden. Work is good. Elisha was a farmer. Paul was a tentmaker. Dorcas was a seamstress. Moses and David were shepherds. Luke was a doctor. Joseph a statesman. And Jesus for many years before he entered his public ministry was a carpenter. Oh, he blessed and dignified the role of work. The problem is today not everyone looking for a job is looking for work.

Today we work hard at getting out of work and I don't want to wade too far into this water but I've been looking at some of the things on television that's been happening and personally I believe probably school teachers, the good ones, the ones that I know, are probably some of the most under-compensated people in America, but I don't think anarchy and mob rule and taking over the state capital is the right way in a representative democracy to air your grievances. I don't think that's becoming either.

Your vocation, even if it seems monotonous and without challenge, is a part of God's gracious provision for your life. I challenge you, I exhort you in the name of Jesus Christ to get on your knees before you go into work tomorrow and thank God for the gracious provision of work that he's given you and see if that doesn't change everything. Your sales may go up. If your sales don't go up, I guarantee your attitude will go up. Everybody else will be thankful for it who has to work around you. Labor if it were not necessary for existence would be indispensable for the happiness of man.

Well, I've just got to tell you about this one thing that I found some time ago. It's a little story about a beekeeper who had all of these beehives and I don't know all that about beehives but I do know that they'll work and work and work and they'll fill those things

up with honey. What are those things called that are filled with honey? Hives, combs. They make a comb, don't they? What's the thing they put down in there that they make the comb on? A slat. Yeah, thank God there's a country boy in the audience here.

So anyway they're all filled up and he's noticing the honey is running over and so these are very tame bees but since their work was done and everything was full, they just had been swarming around kind of agitated on the outside of this beehive and the beekeeper went over there to change things out and to dump that honey out and get them back to work, and they attacked him and stung him all over his head. He never wore protective gear because they were always such tame bees but the problem was they'd grown idle, their work was finished, and I think that's a consistent parallel for man today. We don't need just to be hanging out and just doing nothing and not having a job and a project before us.

Well, 1. Work is part of God's perfect plan. Secondly, honoring and obeying God means I honor and obey my employer. Here's what I want to challenge you with, are you trusting God or are you trusting the union? Now if you have a peace about being in the union, I think there are good things unions have done certainly but don't you trust in the union, you trust in God. Put your salvation into him. Put your rest in him. In other words, make God your union. "Well, I joined this and there's good in this. Some guys may be abusing it but there is some good in my union position, but that's not where my reliance is. God is going to be my union."

Well, IV. View my employer as God's tool to fashion Christ's character in me. Ouch. View my employer as God's tool to fashion God's character in me. "Yeah, but my boss is like this and like this, and then he's like this." Yeah, it's just exactly what you need to deal with your sin and grow out of some of the strongholds and character flaws and ugly dispositions that the Lord has been wanting to work for in your life. Repent of the idols that are there. All things do work together for the good to those who love God and are called according to his purposes. Joseph had those who took him under their authority. They were gypsies that his brother sold him into. Then he was put in a prison and had others who were over him who were cruel and unkind and he had no reason to be in prison, he was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, but in all of those situations, Joseph was growing and receiving and understanding a sovereign God is behind all of these things, and then God one day made him Prime Minister of Egypt.

Well, the next one, make it your goal to make your superior successful. Make it your goal to make your employer successful. Get up in the morning, get on your knees and say, "God, thank you for the provision of work, this blessing you've put before me. My goal today is to make my employer successful."

I've told you many times but I want to say it again because a number of you haven't been around all that long and I want to encourage you. I remember as a very very young minister, goodness, this was 30ish years ago when I was taught some of this biblical principles and I meditated on that. At that time I was the associate pastor here at Grace Life Church and I went into Dr. Bob Pittman's office and I sat down in front of him and

you can imagine that I was probably a challenging staff member, and I looked at him and I said, "I've understood something about God's will and about my role as an associate pastor here." I said, "I want to tell you something, my job from this point onward is to make you the most successful pastor in the Southern Baptist Convention." And I believe I kept that commitment. There was a time or two when I blew it and I went back and asked him to forgive me and I got back on track. "My goal is to make you the most successful pastor in the Southern Baptist Convention." And I am convinced I would not be senior pastor today if I had not by God's grace to a good degree lived that when I was associate pastor. I'm telling you, there's just such freedom in that. Such freedom in that.

Well, we'll be through with this one. Working for my employer is investing in my own inheritance. Verse 24, "knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve." You're building your own inheritance. You're creating your own inheritance. Now it's bought for in Christ and I don't know how exactly it works but there are going to be rewards in heaven for your diligence and faithfulness. Now I think there are certainly rewards in heaven for your work in your small group and teaching Bible studies and going on visitation and whatever else we do, the 1,001 things that the Lord ordains for us to do, but how many of you have thought about the fact that I'm getting rewards in heaven for the way I honor and serve my employer tomorrow morning? Probably hadn't thought about that one, have you? "That's just a necessary evil." It's not a necessary evil, it's the most spiritual thing you'll do tomorrow and it builds your inheritance.

I found a story about a fellow who was a contractor and he was down on his luck, as a matter of fact, he had been down on his luck a long time. He was living in not much more than a little shanty house and didn't have much but he was a good worker, a good builder, and a very wealthy friend called him and said, "Hey, I want to hire you to build me a grand home. I mean, a very very nice home." And this contractor was very excited and he thought, "This will give me a step in the right direction and help me get my finances in order." He began building this house for this wealthy man and he decided in his selfishness and his greed, which probably got him where he was to start with, that he'd skip on the materials and he bought a lot of sub-grade brick and sub-grade shingles and sub-grade wood and appliances etc. etc. He skimmed on labor. He got some people that he could get very cheaply who weren't far and away the best craftsmen or builders that there were out there. Then when he got through with that whole house, that wealthy man who he built the house for said, "I want to tell you something. I've been wanting to do something for you for a long time. Here's the keys to your new home. I was building this for you." Well, that's what we're doing. When you're working and serving and laboring for others, you're building your own house. That's what the Lord says. You're working for your own inheritance. It is the Lord who will repay and who will reward.

Now there's not a person sitting under the sound of my voice, internet, radio, television, who ever will hear these messages that doesn't need on some front to repent and say, "Lord, I haven't been willful but I've just forgotten." Amen? Just forgotten the sanctity, the holiness of my work life, and I want to challenge you tonight to etch it down in your heart it's going to be new tomorrow. I'm going to go into work with a spring in my step,

with a smile on my face because I'm not serving that man anymore, I'm serving my Christ who has ordained this blessed provision of work and has blessed me to have this job. If you'll have that attitude for two weeks, you'll have three times the witnessing opportunities you've had in the last three years. I guarantee it. People will see the difference and doors will open for the Gospel. Amen?