

Colossians 3:22 – 4:1 *Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, 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.*

Work is to be seen as a gift of God, not as a curse. After all, work was given to Adam and Eve before the fall – to take care of the Garden of Eden. And God Himself is a constant worker, from the creation, to His sustaining our universe, to His never slumbering nor sleeping in His Godly oversight of His children (Psalms 121:4). Work is not only a means to accomplishing a needed task or earning necessary wages to pay bills. It is also a gift of God to keep our minds and bodies occupied with accomplishment, progress and purpose. Scripture speaks of Christians ruling over cities in the coming kingdom (Luke 19:17). And the mention of heaven as the “Holy City” might well imply some sort of government, commerce and education in which we will be involved. It appears that there will be blessed work in heaven for us to do and enjoy!

As we come to our Scripture passage of the day, we receive wonderfully practical instruction as to “The Christian Work Ethic,” which is the title of today’s message. This is yet another lesson on our being “Complete in Christ.” Let us heed well the divine instruction!

REGARDING SLAVERY

It should not pass our notice that Paul speaks here to slaves and slave masters. And many students of Scripture have stumbled over the many references to slavery that seemingly condone it to acceptable practice. But never think that the Bible condones slavery.

1 Timothy 1:9-10 (NIV) *We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine.*

Note that “slave traders” is “kidnappers” in the NASB but literally “men-stealers,” and is most assuredly referring to the wide-spread practice of slavery in the first century. Historians have estimated there were upwards of 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire of that day.

Yet we acknowledge that slaves were often directly addressed in the Biblical epistles with no condemnation of the practice. (Eph. 6:5-8, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Peter 2:18)

- √ Many early Christians were slaves, and so also for centuries thereafter. The beautiful American spirituals that arose from the slaves in our early country bear witness to this.
- √ Christianity has always appealed especially to the poor, mistreated, orphans, imprisoned, women and all who were considered as “less than.” Why? - because all are equal in God’s eyes.
- √ Jesus never taught or sought the abolishment of slavery. Rather, regulations were given to ease the oppression. Many who were poor willingly sold themselves into slavery, finding it a way to survive and provide for their family. Scripture taught that after seven years a slave should be set free, unless he wanted to serve his master forever, in which case he would put an earring in his ear to commit to lifelong service (Exodus 21:2-6)

Christ came to change the hearts of men, not evil institutions. But through the changed hearts of believers eventually has come the eradication of many evil institutions. For instance, God used Christians such as John Wilberforce in England and Abraham Lincoln in America to bring the end to legalized slavery in their countries.

Yet slavery still exists today in our world – most notably in the tragic sex-trade of young women. And note that it is not the governments of our world that are working hardest to eradicate this tragedy and travesty of our society, but Christians. Once again, spiritually changed hearts of men and women who are called to change evil institutions are making the difference. Likewise, it is Christians, not governments, who are making the greatest impact on abating and ending the travesty of abortion in our society.

God has ever been working in the hearts of His children to change the course of evil practices in our society. We Christians, with the Holy Spirit living in us, are indeed the force that holds back and restrains evil in our world. This is our calling and our all-important “work” in the world.

2 Thessalonians 2:7 *For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.*

APPLICATION TODAY

We must not dismiss this passage as applying to only the slaves and slave-masters of yesterday. For the principles here given are clearly applicative to employees and employers in today’s workplace. And beyond even that, the principles apply to all of the work we do in whatever capacity. For most of us Christians the workplace will be our primary mission field. For homemakers it will be our spouses and children and grandchildren. For teachers it will be our students and staff. For business folk it will be our clients and co-workers and management. It is in the workplace of our lives that we will most likely be “salt and light” for Jesus, shining forth His light. (Matthew 5:13-14) So having a Biblically correct work ethic is essential.

The Key Verse

The complete life that we are in Jesus includes a work ethic radically different from the work ethic of the world. We Christians don’t just work to accomplish a task or earn a dollar. We work “as for the Lord” rather than for men. The key verse of our passage is clearly 3:23 and is worth a close look and even committing to memory.

Colossians 3:23 *Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.*

“Whatever you do” This speaks not just to slaves, or to businessmen or workers in the field. This speaks to all of us. It speaks to us whether washing a window, giving a speech, studying for a test, cooking a meal, or assembling a piece of equipment. It speaks to tasks large or small, to those easy or difficult, to those greatly important or seemingly insignificant. That is the “whatever” of the verse.

“Heartily” This speaks to how God want us to approach any task. It speaks of diligence, attentiveness, full devotion and even enthusiasm. The effort is to come from our “heart,” meaning we are emotionally and willingly given to do our very best.

“For the Lord” And why? Because we are to do our best as unto the Lord, not just for ourselves or for another. We are to do the task as if God had directly asked you to do it for Him as a favor. And would we ever deny a request from God for something we could do for Him? And would we not do it “heartily” and with special effort to do our very best? This right here is the “heart” of the Christian work ethic – doing “whatever you do,” “heartily,” “for the Lord.”

Regarding “Slaves”

And backing up to verse 22, we learn that to obey and please the Lord in our work is to also obey and please those who are our “masters” or authorities, or bosses – who might also be our spouses or parents. And again, this is “in all things,” not just in those tasks that we choose to do well.

We get three additional and specific stipulations to our work ethic in verse 22.

a. “Not with external service” “External service” would be half-hearted work that is designed to get only the minimum done in order to “get by” and move on. This would be work that might be good enough to please the one asking, but not to please the higher expectations of our Heavenly Father. This is the work that looks good as far as the eye can see externally, but internally might not be the most precise, complete and excellent job that could be done. “External service” is like unto sweeping the dirt under the rug!

b. “With sincerity of heart” This doubles down on the “heartily” of verse 23. Literally the word “sincere” means “without wax.” This term came from the market place where merchants would often try to sell pottery that had cracks in it. To do so they would fill the cracks with wax and cover with paint. But if you, the buyer, held pottery up the light of the sun you could readily tell if the pottery was “without wax” (sincere) and worth a better price. This is also where the term “crack-pot” comes from. God doesn’t want “crack-pot” workers, but sincere workers “without wax.”

c. “Fearing the Lord” Obeying my parents was always at least partially motivated by the fact that to not obey them would reap consequence of punishment of some kind. I wasn’t afraid of them, but I was well aware that they held the authority over my young life. In the same way, we are not to do our daily work task in fear of God’s retribution. But we are to realize that there will be reward for work well done and consequence for work shoddily done. That reward or consequence may be immediate, or it may be delayed until our life beyond this one. That is exactly what verses 24 and 25 teach us.

Colossians 3:24-25 ... *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.*

And the “wrong” of verse 25 is shoddy, incomplete, lazy and half-hearted work. We must always do our tasks knowing that God is lovingly, but watchfully expecting us to do our very best for Him, as a testimony to the world that the work ethic of a Christian is of the highest standard.

Regarding “Masters”

The first verse of chapter 4 seems best to belong to chapter 3. Remember that the chapter divisions were added long after the Scriptures were compiled, and are not part of the original manuscripts, which are infallible. Verse 4:1 gives a final word to “masters” or “bosses” or “authorities” over others who are doing the work for them. It has 3-fold instruction.

a. “Grant justice” “Justice” would imply not seeing the worker as a “thing” to accomplish your task, but as a person deserving respect and dignity as a child of God. Slaves in the first century were seen as “things” and “less than” those who would be master. This is one of those times when God’s Word elevated the slave/worker to an equal plane as a person. Those in authority over another, whether parent, teacher, boss or other, must treat their worker with the Christian wardrobe mentioned in verses 12-14, including kindness, gentleness and above all love. This teaching was revolutionary to the ancient world, and still today is a divine teaching for the Christian “master.”

b. “Grant ... fairness” “Fairness” probably referred mostly to giving an equitable and unbiased wage, or compensation. Slaves were often taken advantage of, and surely the same is true of workers today, to the shame of their employers. “*A laborer is worthy of his hire*” comes from Luke 10:7, from Jesus Himself. And Paul taught metaphorically when he told the Corinthians, “*do not muzzle the ox when he is threshing*” (9:9), making clear that he was not speaking about oxen, but workers who were to be treated fairly, earning the full wages owed them.

c. **“Knowing you have a Master in heaven”** Every master should know that he/she has a higher Master in heaven who is keeping watch over his/her actions. And like with the slave/employee, there will be either reward or bring consequence for right or wrong leadership.

THE BIBLICAL WORK ETHIC

We have looked closely at our passage. But to close I want to give you a summary of other Bible passages teaching on work, to give a well-rounded Biblical work ethic.

The book of Proverbs gives us some 20 verses or passages on the subject.

√ If I was to sum up the teaching in one word, it would be **“diligence.”** A few examples:

10:4 *Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.*

10:24 *The hand of the diligent will rule, but the slack hand will be put to forced labor.*

10:27b *The precious possession of a man is diligence.*

21:5 *The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage.*

√ If I was to give the favorite Proverbs word for the lazy worker it would be **“sluggard.”**

19:24 *The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, but will not even bring it back to his mouth.*

20:4 *The sluggard does not plow after the autumn, so he begs at harvest and has nothing.*

21:25-26 *The desire of the sluggard puts him to death, for his hands refuse to work. All day long he is craving, while the righteous gives and does not hold back.*

24:30-32 *I passed by the field of the sluggard and by the vineyard of the man lacking sense, and behold it was completely overgrown with thistles. It's surface was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. When I saw, I reflected upon it. I looked, and received instruction.*

√ If I was to give a one word example of the diligent and non-sluggish worker from Proverbs, it would be the **“ant.”** Here is Solomon's wise teaching in poetic, visual and even comical manner:

Proverbs 6:6-11 *Go to the ant, O sluggard. Observe her ways and be wise, which having no chief, officer or ruler, prepares her food in the summer and gathers her provision in the harvest. How long will you lie down, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and your poverty will come in like a vagabond and your need like an armed man.*

And finally, I end with Paul' teaching to the Thessalonian church, many of whom were so waiting for the Lord's return any day they were not working to provide for their family.

2 Thessalonians 3:10-12 *When we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.*

Now for all you parents of children at home who may tend to be a bit lazy at times (or most of the time), you might just use Paul's order from 2 Thessalonians 3:10: *“If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.”* And that is not even taken out of context!

May we all strive to embrace and practice the Christian work ethic of the complete life in Christ!



Diligent

adjective dil - i - gent
characterized by steady,
earnest and energetic effort

