



## LIVING CHRISTIANLY AT WORK

**Colossians 3:22-4:1**

April 19, 2009

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### Introduction

Jesus said to his disciples: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). How do you do that where most of you live most of your week: not at church, not at home, but at work? As a follower of Christ, how do you let the light of your life shine at work? Does it mean talking to your colleagues about Jesus or handing out tracts? Does it mean praying for or sharing the gospel with your boss? Does it mean having an evangelistic Bible study during your lunch hour? What does it mean to live christianly, as a Christian, at work?

Today’s passage from Colossians, I believe, helps us address this question. It helps us think about how it is that we are to let our light shine before men, not when we gather with other Christians, but when we scatter throughout the rest of the week to our various places of employment and work responsibility. And let’s face it: that’s where many of you spend perhaps even half or more of your time every single week—not at church, nor at home, but at work. So thinking about what it means to live christianly in that context is absolutely critical; for that’s where you live!

But, first of all, you may be wondering what a passage about slaves and masters is doing in the New Testament! Does its presence in the Bible mean that the Bible condones slavery? This is obviously an important question, and one we won’t obviously deal with fully here. But I will say that what this passage is doing is not condoning or encouraging slavery, but simply describing how it is that a slave, or master, who is a Christian, is to act within the situation. The Bible is not thereby sanctioning the institution of slavery; in fact, a close reading of this passage, as well as others in the New Testament, not least Philemon, which would have circulated together with Colossians, actually sows seeds for the subversion of the institution of slavery. Regrettably, it must be admitted, that it took many years for Christians, as well as for the West in general, to come to terms fully with this dehumanizing institution. But it is important, nonetheless, to appreciate that this passage does not condone slavery, but simply instructs slaves, or masters, on how to live christianly within it.

Because slavery was an economic relationship within the ancient household, I think the relevance or applicability of this passage for the twenty-first century reader is fairly obvious: we can glean from this passage important principles and perspectives on how it is that we ought to conduct ourselves in our economic relationship; relationships that involve service and remuneration or payment for services rendered. That is, this passage sheds light on how we ought to live christianly at work. Having said that, let’s turn now to what this passage actually says about living christianly at work.

## **A Word to Workers: How to Live Christianly At Work (3:22-23)**

Paul's first word is to workers and is about *how* to live christianly at work. There are two principles in this passage. First, at work a Christian is to be *thorough* and, second, a Christian is to be *sincere*.

### ***Be Thorough***

Christians are, first of all, to be thorough in their work. "Slaves, obey your earthly masters *in everything*," the opening verse of this passage says (3:22). Obviously, there is not a perfect one-to-one correspondence between what this verse calls for and what you are required to be for your boss or employer. But the principle that does transfer from the first-century context to the twenty-first century context is that if you are an employee you are to be *thorough* in your doing what you're asked to do.

You will note this verse doesn't make any distinctions but instead is quite comprehensive. "In everything," means just that—everything! The application, it would seem to me, is that Christians are to be *thorough* as opposed to *selective* in the doing of their tasks and assignments at work. There is also no distinction between the easy tasks and the hard ones: rather, *in everything*. Furthermore, there is no distinction between the menial tasks and the meaningful ones: rather, *in everything*. As a Christian employee, it is simply not an option to cut corners or take shortcuts that would compromise your work or go against your boss's request.

### ***Be Sincere***

The second principle helps supports this first principle. To live christianly at work means to *be sincere*. Paul puts it this way: "and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord" (3:22). The phrase we see in our English translations, "when their eye is on you," is actually a single word in the original. It's a compound word, in fact, like doghouse or playpen. The word is a combination of 'eye' and 'service' or 'slavery': hence, eye-service or eye-slavery. And Paul is here likely invoking a play-on-words. Slaves, don't be eye-slaves! That is, don't let your work be in the service of what can be seen by the eye. Of course, as Paul notes, when you're given to eye-service, your intention is to win the favor or approval of others who are watching.

Instead, what this passage calls for is actually something profoundly challenging. It calls for us to work "with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord." This is the way in which we should work: with a genuine desire, stemming from your own heart, to do whatever it is you do ultimately to please, not your boss or supervisor, but the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Thus we are to work out of a "reverence for the Lord," literally, "fearing the Lord," or seeking to please the Lord.

Of course, it's not easy to be either thorough or sincere when you've got a bad boss or he gives you bad tasks. Like many of you, I've had bad bosses and bad tasks. I'll never forget one summer working on my first painting crew. I was the low-man on the totem pole, so I thought I'd have to paint all the really tedious stuff rather than the fun stuff. Much to my chagrin, however, I worked with the painting crew for a whole summer yet hardly ever saw a paint brush! Nope, my boss gave me all the scraping and all the power-spraying. In fact, I spent my entire first day on the job with the power-sprayer; when five o'clock finally came, I was drenched and freezing and hating life!

Some of you, I'm sure, can relate. You've either got a bad boss or a bad set of responsibilities at work—or both. Well, if you find yourself in that situation, then the advice this passage gives is this: *go over your boss' head*. If you don't like your boss, or if you don't like what he or she has asked you to do, than simply go over his or her head. In other words, appeal to your boss' Superior—the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't gripe about it to your boss; take it up with Jesus Christ! Realize that as a Christian you are ultimately serving him.

Verse 23 provides a pithy summary of how it is that Christians are to approach their work: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." That about says it all, doesn't it? Let me encourage you to make this verse a screensaver on your computer. Or put this on a Post-It-Note at your desk or on the dashboard of your car. Perhaps you could write this verse on a three-by-five card, keep it in your pocket, and refer to it throughout your day. Better yet, memorize this verse and turn it into a prayer every morning, before you leave the house or as you ride the train or when you drive in your car to work: "O Lord, may you enable me to do whatever I have to do today with all my heart, ultimately as serving you."

Perhaps the most powerful picture of someone living out the principles of these verses was a man named Andy, whom I worked with for a month in Calcutta, India. I was a college student at the time, and spent a month working in Mother Theresa's home for the Destitute and Dying in the heart of Calcutta. Andy was from Germany and had been working six-days-a-week in Mother Theresa's home for several years. The working conditions in the home were very difficult. The heat was at times unbearable and the people we were serving were on the bottom-rung of life; some were literally abandoned on the doorstep of the home, dying of tuberculosis or some other awful disease, often times just days from death. For the first several days, perhaps even week and a half or so, I was upbeat and did everything I was doing "with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord." But then, as time went on, and I became more and more fatigued with the environment, not to mention being homesick, it was a temptation to want to just get through the day—cut corners, do the bare minimum. But Andy, who had become a kind of supervisor, would not tolerate it. One incident stands out in my mind. I was putting a shirt on one of the patients, a blue hospital gown; and the patient had severe mental disabilities. I remember putting the gown on and the top was backwards. I thought, "So what?" Andy came over and gave me a piece of his mind, "You dress him as though you're dressing the Lord Jesus Christ. You clean the plate as though you're cleaning the Lord Jesus Christ's plate." So work heartily, serving the Lord not men.

### **A Word to Workers: Why to Live Christianly At Work (3:24-25)**

Paul's has another word to share with workers. The first was about *how* to live christianly at work; this second word is about *why* we ought to live Christianly at work. What's the reason? What's the rationale? Or what's to be gained or avoided by seeking to live christianly at work?

#### ***Realize the reward to be gained (3:24)***

We are to work with both thoroughness and sincerity, we are to do whatever we do with all our hearts, as for the Lord, not for men (vv. 22-23), because, as Paul says in verse 24, "you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." This would have most certainly caught the attention of the slaves in the church at Colossae, who were listening to this letter being read, for in the Roman world it was virtual

impossible for slaves to receive any inheritance for their work. However, as believers, as those serving “the Lord Christ,” they can be assured of an inheritance as a reward. And the reward is not, as may have been the fantasy of a first-century slave, just some posh villa on the Mediterranean coast! No, in the Gospel, slaves, as well as masters, are co-heirs with one another and, more importantly, co-heirs with Christ; so they, together with Christ, will inherit, quite literally, the “whole world” (Romans 4:13), the news heavens and the new earth. Not a bad reward for a lifetime of work, eh?

### ***Remember the penalty to be avoided (3:25)***

But we are to realize not only the reward to be gained, but also the penalty to be avoided. There is not only a positive incentive, but a negative disincentive, that should motivate our living christianly at work. Paul identifies the disincentive in verse 25: “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism.” What’s he driving at here in this verse? I think the gist of what he’s saying is that as Christians we cannot do shoddy work or be immoral or lazy or sloppy or inconsiderate on the job and expect to get a pass from our Boss. While our earthly boss may not see—and in some cases, he may see and not care—our heavenly Boss not only sees, but cares. If you do wrong on the job, you will be repaid. And don’t think being a Christian gives you a pass on having integrity on the job. It most certainly doesn’t. “There is no favoritism” —that is, no favoritism with God. He is just and equitable and doesn’t say it’s okay to cut corners at work just because you love Jesus!

Virtually all employer-employee situations have some sort of annual review process, some kind of job performance review. Often these reviews are tied to some sort of remuneration or reward, perhaps even promotion (if one is doing well) or demotion if one is not. Well, as we see in 3:24-25 Paul wants us to realize that as Christians working ultimately for the Lord Jesus Christ, we too will have a job performance review. It is called the judgment according to works, where, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

Friends, did you know that this applies to what is done while you’re at work?

### **A Word to Employers: How & Why to Live Christianly At Work (4:1)**

The first verse of Chapter 4 turns our attention from slaves to masters. And, again, the relevance of this verse is to employers: those who employ others and provide them, directly or indirectly, with a wage for their work. Hence, this applies to many of you: whether you’re a shift supervisor at Starbucks or a CEO of a fortune Five Hundred company.

The *how* of living christianly at work when you’re an employer is this: provide your employees with what is, as the first part of this verse says, “right and fair.” Provide them with what is just and equitable, what is an honest remuneration for their labor. And not just pay, but I believe this principle applies to what we might call “benefits,” as well. Don’t try to skim on giving your employees. Just as your employees should cut corners on the job, so too, you should not cut corners in providing them with what they need for their job. Do what’s right and fair.

The *why* of living christianly at work as an employer is in the second half of this verse. Why should an employer be right and fair with his or her employees? Because, as Paul says, “you know that you also have a Master in heaven.” Regardless of how high you are in your organization, you nevertheless have a Boss to whom you’re accountable. And he has a keen

interest in how it is that you conduct yourself toward your employees. By the way, employers, you'll notice, there's nothing here about profitability or market share or competitive advantage; instead, your primary concern as a Christian employer ought to be to be just and equitable with your employees, to provide them with a fair wage and an honest living for honest work. For this is what ultimately pleases your Master in heaven.

## **Conclusion**

So we see that the Bible has some pretty probing and practical instruction for those in the workplace. And it's not complicating advice either, is it? That of course doesn't mean it is easy advice! In fact, I suspect we would all find ourselves deeply challenged and calling out for grace if we were to try to live a whole week in faithfulness to just the simple instruction of this passage!

Several brief comments are in order as we conclude. First, we must remember that living christianly at work does not mean that all will go well for you at work. Second, living Christian at work does not mean that you must be a workaholic! Finally, living christianly at work does mean that you should be a good worker: good, not in the sense of having the most skill or training or competence; but good in the sense of being full of integrity, honesty, hard-work, reliability.

Living christianly at work not only is the right way to live, but it has the potential to witness to what you believe without you even saying a word. In Titus 2:10 Paul instructs workers that they should be faithful and reliable "so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive."

That's our calling as we seek to live Christianly at work: to not only honor Jesus Christ with what we do and how we do it, but to do so in a way that actually makes the Gospel appear compelling in the eyes of others.