

## Faith at Work: Working as for the Lord

Colossians 3:22-4:1

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on November 23, 2014

### Introduction

- ❖ In a recent survey that involved over 200,000 employees in more than 500 organizations, respondents were asked in relation to their work, “*What motivates you to excel and go the extra mile at your organization?*”<sup>1</sup>
  - To the surprise of many, “money and benefits” was seventh on the list. **[SHOW CHART]** At top of the list, 20% of respondents indicated that **peer motivation (camaraderie) was their biggest drive to do a good job at work**. The co-workers around you push you to excel, to do your best work.
    - Closely following was the intrinsic desire to do a good job (17%), feeling encouraged and recognized (13%), and having a real impact (10%). Money and benefits came in at 7% of respondents.
  
- ❖ The fact that peers/colleagues function so high as a motivator is interesting when you consider the results of another poll taken back in 2009 that asked a similar question, “*What motivates you most to do a good job?*”<sup>2</sup>
  - That time money actually came in second (29%), even slightly ahead of respect from colleagues or the boss (21%). **But nearly half of respondents said personal satisfaction was the primary motivate to work hard and do a good job at work (45%)**. I think that’s similar to having an intrinsic desire to do a good job.
  
- ❖ So five years ago, the reason why most people put in a good day’s work was personal job satisfaction. That makes sense since we’ve grown up in a culture where, from a young age, we’re encouraged to follow our dreams, to shoot for the stars. So I’m not surprised that most people see their careers as a primary means of personal fulfillment.
  - I’m more surprised (and encouraged) at the recent survey and the effect that peers can have on job performance. I’m glad there’s a recognition that we are a communal people and that peer accountability and a spirit of camaraderie among colleagues can have a great effect motivating us to excel and do our best work.
  
- ❖ All of this is affirmed in Scripture. We’ve already seen in this series on *Faith at Work*, in Genesis 2, how work itself is a part of God’s good design. God made us in his image – the image of a Divine Worker. **There was work to be done even in paradise**. The Garden of Eden was not a land of leisure but a place of work, of cultivating and keeping (Gen. 2:15).
  - That sounds strange to us but that’s because we only see our work through the lens of Genesis 3. Yet work was given to man well before sin’s entrance into paradise. **Work is not a result of the curse**. Sweat is. Toil is. But work itself is good and a blessing.
    - So if you feel personally satisfied by your job or if you’re motivated to do good work to satisfy an intrinsic desire, that make sense from a biblical standpoint. You’re wired that way. You were created to work.

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<sup>1</sup> See online: <http://www.tinyhr.com/2014-employee-engagement-organizational-culture-report>

<sup>2</sup> See online: <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=ae8B5szVF31E>

- ❖ And in Genesis 2, we also learn that it is not good for man to be alone (2:18). We were created to exist in community not isolation. So if your community, your colleagues, are motivating you, encouraging you, pushing you to do good work – for which God has created you – then that also makes sense biblically. This is how we are wired.
  - But here’s where we have to go further: **What if you’re in a job or on a project that you don’t like, that bores you, that doesn’t feel challenging enough?** Or what if you don’t like your peers? **What if instead of motivating you, your colleagues annoy you?** When then? What if personal satisfaction and peer motivation are not options as motivators for good work? When then? Do you fall back on money?
  
- ❖ **No, this is where Christians have to approach their work with a view to the Gospel.** This is where we have to turn to our faith in Christ Jesus as the Son of God who lived, died, and rose again. Not only to redeem us from death, to give us forgiveness of sin and the hope of heaven, but also to redeem our work, to give meaning and purpose to our vocations.
  - **Your work matters to God.** There’s no doubt. He made you to work. He’s redeemed work. He cares about *what* you do for work. Your work matters to God.
  
- ❖ And at the same time, **God matters to your work.** If Jesus is your Lord, your master, your highest boss, then that will inevitably affect how you do your work. As a disciple of Christ, you bring your faith to work every week. Your faith *is* at work. There’s no question. The real question is, “*Is your faith at work when you’re at work?*” Is your allegiance to King Jesus actively working itself out in your workplace? Is it making a difference to how you work?
  
- ❖ That’s what we’ll tackle this morning through our passage in Colossians. **Here Paul is addressing Christian slaves in the church of Colosse, and he’s giving them motivation to do a good and faithful job in serving their masters.** Now I’m pretty sure job satisfaction was low on their list. No one becomes a slave because it’s so fulfilling. And they’re probably not going to find many peers in the mood to motivate them.
  - **No, for a first-century Christian slave, what’s going to motivate him to excel in his job and serve his master well is his commitment to the Gospel.** And the same principles and instructions would also apply to modern-day employees.

### **A Word on Slavery in the Bible**

- ❖ Before we get into our passage, I think it bears repeating that we need to interpret the terms “slaves and masters” in proper context. A lot of people get tripped up when the Bible appears to condone the practice of slavery. They can’t get past *that* to hear what this passage has to say about faith and work. But we have to be care not to read the nuances of New World slavery into the New Testament context.
  
- ❖ We recently covered these nuances when we preached through 1 Peter (2:18-25). I don’t want to repeat it all here, but I do want to highlight the main differences. **Unlike New World slavery, slavery in the NT was not race-based, was rarely life-long, and most notably was sometimes a choice you’d make to improve your socio-economic position.**

- People would sell themselves into slavery. Usually as a means to pay off a debt or to obtain Roman citizenship. It's like what was later called indentured servitude where you agree to serve completely under the will of a master for a set length of time.
- ❖ But in no way am I justifying the practice or denying the abuses. Slavery is immoral. To treat anyone more as property than as person is inherently wrong because it denies the full personhood and dignity of individuals created in God's image.
- **But again my aim is not to explain the Bible's position on the practice of slavery per se, but to show the similarity between slave-master and employee-employer.** Think about it. Many of us work because we're in debt. A lot of us don't like our jobs. We'd rather do something else, but due to circumstances we work because we owe.
    - And some of us have indentured ourselves into contracts of a set length. Your company paid for your training or that graduate degree, and now you're obligated to work for them to "pay off" that debt, if you will. So when Paul addresses Christian slaves in relation to their master, it's totally appropriate to apply what we find here to our workplace context.
- ❖ *So what difference does your allegiance to Jesus as Lord make in that context?* There's an intentional word play here in v22, which is not apparent in English. It jumps out in the Greek.
- Look at v22 again, "Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters [lit. lords (*kuriois*) according to the flesh], not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord [*kurion*]." **In other words, obey your earthly masters because you fear a heavenly Master.** The wordplay is maintained in English in chapter 4:1. The word for master in both verses is *kurios*.
- ❖ Paul's point is that everyone has an earthly master – a lord according to the flesh – be it your supervisor, your project manager, your attending, your professor. But if you're a Christian, then Jesus is Lord. He holds the highest authority over you. *His* Word, *his* instructions, *his* policies, *his* performance evaluation are what matters most.
- And even if you are the supervisor, the manager, or the attending physician, remember that Jesus outranks you too. ***So if Jesus is your highest boss, how does that affect how you do your work?*** I want to show you three things in the text.

### **Freed from People-Pleasing**

- ❖ **First, when Jesus is your highest boss, you're set free from people-pleasing and giving half-hearted work.** That's Paul's point in v22. He starts by telling Christian slaves to offer obedience *in everything*. Of course, he's not saying that they should willingly subject themselves to immoral commands or anything that would compromise their allegiance to Christ. That would contradict his whole point about working as for the Lord.
- But he is talking about a fairly expansive obedience. Slaves were asked to do pretty unpleasant things, to carry out difficult work. And yet they were a people under authority and responsible to obey that authority whether they liked the task or not.

- ❖ Likewise, you're under someone's authority at work. You report to someone. **And even if you don't like this or that part of your job, every aspect of your job demands your faithful obedience – not just the parts you enjoy and find fulfilling.**
  - Paul says don't obey by way of eye-service. **That means don't just obey when the boss is watching, when his or her eye is on you.** In other words, don't do like we all did back in gym class when you had to run laps around the school. You're nearing that side of the building where coach is resting under the shade, and suddenly you pick up the pace and sharpen that stride. But once you turn the next corner, you're back to that leisurely trot.
  
- ❖ That's obedience by way of eye-service. You work hard, you do good work, only when your boss's eyes is on you or in order to catch his eye. **Paul calls that people-pleasing. You're just trying to impress your boss, to curry his favor, to get on her good side.** Or you're giving eye-service because you want to avoid your boss's wrath, her bad side.
  - Either way – whether to attract reward or to avert punishment – you're really just serving yourself. That inevitably leads to superficial, half-hearted work.
  
- ❖ But at the end of v22, Paul says we're to obey our bosses in everything "*with sincerity of heart*". To have sincerity of heart literally means to have singleness of heart. **It means you give wholehearted concentration to your work versus halfhearted.**
  - When you're on the clock, when you're billable, you put your whole heart into work. Not half of it in work and the other half in Facebook or the other half in planning your next vacation or even in prepping your next bible study. **If you find that the shoe fits, that you're guilty of people-pleasing, of giving eye-service to your boss, what kind of help can you find in the Gospel?**
  
- ❖ Think about it. The reason you feel this inordinate, excessive need to impress your boss, to catch his eye, to get him to like you, to get on his good side or avoid his bad side – is because you fear his authority over you. You're afraid of what he can do to you – fire you, reprimand you in front of others, give you a bad review, block your advancement, dock your pay, or simply make your life at work a living hell.
  - Bottomline, you fear your earthly master, which is why Paul has to remind us to *obey* our earthly masters but to reserve *fear* for your heavenly Master. **The fear of the Lord is liberating. It releases you from the grasp of lesser, unworthy fears.** "*The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*" (Ps. 118:6)
  
- ❖ Consider the words of Jesus in Luke 12, "*4I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. 5But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!*"
  - **If Jesus says you shouldn't fear those who can take your life, how much less should you fear those who are only authorized to take your work benefits or at worst the job itself.** No, fear God instead!

- We're not talking about being scared of the Lord, fearful of his wrath. No, that's the kind of fear we have towards earthly masters, the kind that enslaves us in our workplaces. We're always trying to appease our boss's wrath.
- ❖ But the wrath of God has been appeased once for all at the cross. **Those who trust in Jesus have no need to fear God's wrath. He bore the wrath so that you wouldn't have to.** So when, as a Christian, we say we fear the Lord that doesn't mean we're afraid of God.
    - We revere God. We fear him. We know that even if our earthly master is inattentive and not watching or heavenly Master always is. We're always under his fatherly gaze. When you're in Christ and secure in the Father's love that doesn't inspire a cowering fear but a holy reverence that produces attentive work, sincere, wholehearted work.
  - ❖ In Paul's day, the pagan slave might obey his master in everything for fear of him, for fear of what he'll do to me if I disobey. And the Christian slave would offer the exact same kind of obedience in everything but, in his case, *for fear of the Lord*.
    - That kind of obedience is not just eye-service. It doesn't depend on whether your master is being attentive and watching. Whether he's harsh or lenient. The fear of the Lord frees you from a slavish dependence on the opinion and praise of man.

### **Freed from the Indignity of Work**

- ❖ That's one way the Gospel liberates and redeems your work. **Second, when Jesus is your highest boss, you're set free from the indignity of having to do dull or unpleasant work.** When Paul writes in v23, "*Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men*", that's probably the most subversive thing he says in this chapter. Yes, it's true he didn't outright condemn the practice of slavery or call for abolition, but here in this one verse he turns slavery on its head and lays the groundwork for its eventual demise.
- ❖ Being a slave in the first-century was a bleak existence. All I said earlier about it being a means of socio-economic improvement that some would actually choose is true but no one said it was a welcomed choice. No one aspired to slavery. Slaves were treated as property, as tools to be used till they're worn out and replaced with something(one) newer.
  - **Just think how disheartening it must be to be treated like property. To feel used by your boss like a tool. That doesn't inspire workplace productivity.** That doesn't make you want to do your best work.
    - Some of you can identify with that. That's how you feel like you're being treated at work. You're just being used as a tool to serve your boss's agenda.
- ❖ But once you have Jesus, it changes everything. Once you realize that Jesus is your highest boss, the minute you begin to work *as for the Lord* – then it's possible to "*work heartily*" (v23). Literally, to work from the soul. No matter what the work. *Whatever you do*.
  - This is why Paul can tell a slave – with a straight face – to serve your master with all your soul. **Because as a Christian you know your dignity as a worker is not found in specifically *what* you do for work but *who* you ultimately work for.**

- So even if your work is undignified, even if you're being treated in an undignified manner – that does *not* affect your dignity as a child of God. Do you see how subversive that can be?

❖ **Did you know that Christian slaves were at a premium in the ancient world?** They were known to be better slaves. And therefore they drew higher prices in the slave market.<sup>3</sup> It's not because they were more compliant or tractable than the average pagan slave.

- No, it's because slave masters could tell that when these Christians worked, when they gave themselves even to menial, dull, unpleasant work – they seemed to be working for someone else. A greater cause, a higher authority seemed to be the source of their motivation. And it positively affected the manner and quality of their work.

❖ Wouldn't it be great if one day Christians in your line of work actually go for a premium? If they were in hot demand because employers have this impression that Christians make the best doctors, the best engineers, the best teachers, the best plumbers, the best janitors, the best hole diggers. **Whatever the job, whatever dignity the world assigns to it, they do good work – as if they were working for some higher purpose, some higher authority.**

❖ Are Christian employees known in my workplace for hard work, dedication, integrity, company loyalty? Or are we better known for our preoccupation with things unrelated to work, for our indifference to the organization's health, for our avoidance of company socials or significant friendships with co-workers?

- Ask yourself: **How does the quality of my work impact how the Gospel is being perceived in my workplace?** Are my non-Christian co-workers – pushed to excel by personal satisfaction or peer motivation – considered to be better employees? If so, then what does that say about your God? Sadly it suggests that self-satisfaction or the praise of peers or just money has greater power to motivate than Jesus.

❖ I know that's not what you want to communicate with your work. I know you want the opposite effect. **You want your co-workers to know by your work ethic that you're driven by a higher ethic, that you serve a Master greater than the almighty dollar, more satisfying than a job well done, and more uplifting than the closest of companions.** That's why it's so important for you to recognize that you're really working for the Lord.

### **Freed from the Fear of Exploitation**

❖ Let's consider our third point. **When Jesus is your highest boss, you're set free from the fear of exploitation and unfair compensation.** I see this in v24. Let's read that again. Paul says to work heartily as for the Lord, *“<sup>24</sup>knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”*

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<sup>3</sup> William MacDonald, *Ephesians: the Mystery of the Church*, p. 229

- ❖ This is significant, what Paul is saying. **He's telling slaves to work heartily for Christ recognizing that constant exploitation and zero compensation would be their lot. Why?** Because you know that as a Christian you're going to receive an inheritance from the Lord.
  - This is huge because slaves don't have earthly inheritances to look forward to. They're slaves! Inheritances are for legitimate sons.
  
- ❖ This again is where the Gospel changes everything. Through the Gospel slaves become sons. **Undeserving sinners like us become adopted and welcomed into the family of God as legitimate sons and daughters.**
  - So if you're a Christian slave, you can be thinking even if my master pays me a poor wage or no wage at all, I know that a gracious and lavish inheritance is waiting for me in the kingdom come. I don't deserve it one bit. But it's mine because the only One who does deserve it – Christ Jesus – has freely given it to me.
  
- ❖ The thing about the Gospel is that, yes, God is our highest authority, we do work ultimately for him, but he doesn't treat us like employees. **His love you, his favor on you, his blessings to you are not contingent upon how well you perform but upon how gracious he is.** A boss is really not the image we should have for God. It's father. In Christ, God is your Father.
  - And he loves you as any good father. As any good father, he cares about your performance. He cares about your obedience. **But just as any good father, even when you underperform or disobey, his love is constant.** His love for you does not waver. Because it's not based on what you do and how well you did it. It's based on what Christ has done for you that you could not do for yourself. It's based on grace.
  
- ❖ I know many of you don't like who you work for. Your company or your boss in particular. You feel like you're being unjustly treated or unfairly compensated. They're overworking you. Or they're cutting your hours. They're taking credit for your work. Or they're not giving you enough work. They're passing you up for the promotion. They're forgoing the annual raise. Whatever it is you feel exploited. Under appreciated. Under paid.
  
- ❖ **Paul's point is to remind you that, if you're a Christian, you're inheritance is not here on earth.** It's secure for you in heaven. Where moth and rust don't destroy. Where thieves can't break in and steal. You have to put your gripes at work in proper perspective.
  - It would be like Prince William complaining about the British military paying him too little. Are you kidding me? You have a huge inheritance coming your way. You're royalty. You're going to reign on a throne! What are you complaining about?
    - But that's what we do. We have a glorious inheritance coming. **We're going to reign with Christ on high. And yet we're fearful and frustrated over what we perceive to be unfair compensation in our present jobs.** Why? We are serving the Lord Christ. He is coming with our reward.

- ❖ **Let's also be careful that our frustrations don't lead us to cut corners, to offer shoddy work and half-hearted obedience – because there are consequences.** You will be held to account. That's what Paul warns of in v25. "*For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*".
  - With God there is no partiality. That word literally means that God doesn't "receive the face". It's based on a Hebrew idiom for treating people on the mere basis of their face, of their appearance. This is a necessary word for both slaves and masters.
  
- ❖ So Paul turns his attention to masters in chapter 4:1, "*Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.*" For those in the church who were actually masters, who were employers, those in authority, Paul reminds them that they're accountable to a higher master, a higher boss.
  - **If you're a man or woman in a position of authority – a manager, an attending, an executive, an owner – recognize that yours is a delegated authority.** You've been given the responsibility to steward power on behalf of God for the good of those under your supervision.
  
- ❖ **If you realize you're in this position of authority by the grace and commission of God and that you're ultimately answering to him, then you're more likely to treat your employees justly and fairly.** You won't show partiality. You won't receive the face and be more favorable or lenient based on appearances. You'll be sure that your employees are fairly compensated. You'll be concerned when they're sick. You'll take an interest in their family, their spouse, their children.
  - I'm sure managing in this way will be tough. **Exercising God-like compassion and protection for those under your charge will definitely make your job harder.** But it'll make your walk with God much sweeter and your work much more fulfilling.
  
- ❖ Let me conclude by asking how you would answer that survey question. *What motivates you to excel and go the extra mile at your organization?* You're co-workers will have all sorts of answers because they're driven by all sorts of motives.
  - But may we be able to say, "I want to excel, I want to go that extra mile, because I'm working for my Lord Jesus. In whatever I'm doing, in word or deed, in work or play, at church or in the workplace, I'm doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Col. 3:17)