

Colossians: The Family Part 3

Colossians 3:22-4:1

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on September 17, 2023

Working for a Living

In a report released back in 2018, Forbes magazine shared four things employers can do to help employees find meaning and fulfillment at work. The article is geared toward helping workers find fullness of life in their jobs.

Almost 65% of workers in the United States, according to findings of studies used to source the article, believe that fulfillment and fullness can be found at work and a whopping seven out of ten workers will quit a job to find something more meaningful. The desire to experience fullness is so strong that one out of every three workers will consider taking less pay for something that seems more meaningful. And one third of those in the work force named their employers as obstacles toward finding meaning and fullness at work.

The findings show that modern employers need to consider building personal relationships, impacting employees by working toward a common goal all believe in and are invested in, and helping spur the worker's personal growth by challenging them to overcome obstacles toward development.

All of those things sound fine and even desirable. However, all of those things are found and fulfilled in relationship with Jesus. Paul understood that Christians need to be experiencing the fullness of God in Christ at work too. But that won't be something that comes from an external source. It is something that is found internally through salvation. There is meaning and fullness to be found at work. Paul laid that out for us this morning. I invite you to read with me in Colossians 3:22-4:1. (Read Text)

Fullness for the Family

The past few weeks in this study of Paul's letter to the Colossians have focused on the theme of domestic fullness. We have read and seen how Christ brings the fullness of God to the relationship of the husband and wife (vv.18-19) and to fathers and children (vv.20-21). Now we consider how Christ extends his fullness to slaves and masters.

The trajectory of Paul's teaching here brings with it a great sense of tension, for many reasons. First and foremost was how vast the extent of slavery was in the Roman Empire and the dehumanizing nature of it. Ancient historians estimate that there were over 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire – about half of the population.¹ Because half of the populace was enslaved, it meant that work was considered below the dignity free Roman man who owned slaves. Practically everything in the Roman Empire was accomplished by slave labor, including teaching and doctoring.

While there were instances of positive, appropriate relationships between the slave and master², the lot of the slave was largely unhappy. Dating back to Aristotle, people were taught that slaves were classified as things, a sort of living tool. The Roman Varro classified farm implements into three classes: the articulate, the inarticulate, and the mute – the articulate referring to slaves. Later, a Roman writer would grimly recommend the following advice when buying someone else's farm: toss out the old slaves to die, because they were broken tools. Sadly, that happened most of the time.

To further illustrate the plight of the slave, an influential lawyer named Gaius said, "We may note that it is universally accepted that the master possesses the power of life and death over a slave."

If a slave ran away, he was branded on the forehead with the letter *F* for *Fugitivus* and sometimes even executed without any sort of trial.³ Because the situation for slaves was so difficult, a sadness would overwhelm the lives of millions in the ancient world. Christianity's message and preaching of the gospel with its explicit doctrine of equality ratcheted up the tension.

Consider for example Paul's teaching in Galatians 3:28 – "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." We assume that Paul's teaching here in Colossians 3 and 4 was first read out to an eager audience in Colossae of both slaves and masters. And what Paul began in Galatians 3, he extends much more significantly in Colossians 3 and 4.

¹ It is important to remember that, unlike the chattel slavery of the 16th-19th centuries, slavery in the Roman Empire was largely voluntarily entered into by the slave. While there were instances of people being forced into slavery, most often it was a choice made by a person who either had a debt to be paid or wanted to be associated to a better family.

² William Barclay. *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), pp.212-214.

³ William Barclay. *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), pp.212-214.

And this teaching to slaves and masters is far more extensive than what was written to husbands and wives, fathers and children.

Paul's teaching to slaves and masters was revolutionary because of the influence it would have, leading Roman Emperor Constantine in the 4th century to grant the church elders permission to free any Christian slaves belonging to those within the church body. However, it was immediately revolutionary when Paul wrote it because it taught about the fullness a Christian can experience in life, regardless of whether or not the Christian was a slave or a master. This helped to strengthen domestic fullness in the ancient world.

For us today, who are not in the same structure, the application is largely focused on our professional lives of work. The average worker today still divides five or six days a week into blocks of time for work, rest, and the rest of his life. Work is still so important in our culture that society often defines people by what they do for a living. In order for Jesus to bring fullness to a life, he must bring it also to what we do for a living, whether slave or master, employee or employer.

A Full Life for Servants/Employees

Upon the initial hearing, a slave might have wondered whose side Paul was on! Consider how those words must have sounded to the exploited servant. "Slaves, obey your human masters in everything." We assume that Paul was not encouraging submission to immoral or hurtful commands, and yet "everything" encompasses everything.

Slaves were very often asked to do unpleasant tasks. This would have been a tough command to hear, especially when you consider what follows that: "Don't work only while being watched, as people pleasers, but work wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord." In the Greek, Paul wrote "eye-services as man-pleasers." He was referring to work that was only done when someone was looking. You know what that is like. In gym class, when the coach is looking, your push-ups are good form. When his back is turned...Eye-service results in jobs not being completed. The room may be swept but the dirt is brushed under the carpet.

This is not how it is supposed to be. Our service is meant to be "with sincerity of heart." "With sincerity of heart" doesn't distinguish between pleasant or unpleasant tasks.

It doesn't differentiate between dull or challenging jobs, menial or interesting activity. Paul simply states that everything must be done wholeheartedly, energetically. It doesn't matter if the boss is present or not.

This calling to do everything at work with our whole hearts would be impossible except for one clarification. Paul tells us that the rationale that makes it all possible is that it is for the Lord. *“For the Lord...from the Lord...You are serving the Lord Christ.”*

Mother Theresa was inspired by this text among others when she began her work in Calcutta along with the Sisters of Charity. This verse along with Matthew 25 were taken seriously. Mother Theresa believed that when she and her co-laborers were cleansing sores and touching the ill and sick for Christ, they were doing it for Christ and ministering to Christ himself. Even the most menial tasks – scrubbing, washing – were done for the Lord.

A lot of us may be convinced that we work “nothing jobs,” that what we do is not that important. Perhaps you shuffle meaningless mounds of paper around the desk or the office. Maybe you just dig holes or fill them back up again. Some people struggle to see anything meaningful or noble in the work they undertake. Paul lets them know, regardless of what you're doing, you are serving the Lord as you work. That truth has transformed so many lives, especially the lives of those first century slaves. A “nothing” job becomes a noble work when done for Christ. Because of this idea, Christians slaves in the ancient world invariably brought higher prices at the slave market.⁴

Paul adds that our work is to be done “fearing the Lord” at the end of verse 22. The pagan slave served his master because he was bound by fear. The Christian slave served his master better because he feared God. Working hard at our jobs from the heart brings glory to God.

Looking further, we see that in verses 24-25, Paul expanded the rationale for the believers' work ethic. He added the idea that God would reward his servants. “...knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he has done and there is no favoritism.” Regardless of what we do, good and bad will be “rewarded.” This idea of blessing or judgement to come was good news to first-century Christian slaves.

⁴ William MacDonald, *Ephesians, the Mystery of the Church*. (Carol Stream, IL: Harold Shaw, 1968), p.229.

Under Roman law, a slave could not inherit anything.⁵ But Paul teaches that a slave could receive “an inheritance as reward.” God rewards faithful workers. This ought to be an encouragement to us, whatever our lot in life.

So, Paul is teaching Colossian slaves in verses 22-25. How could these verses impact our lives and our work ethic?

First, let’s not assume that if we live up to this Biblical ethic and teaching regarding work that all will go great on the job. Christian workers who do their very best can still struggle and have issues at work.

Second, Paul’s teaching is not a license for people to overwork or become workaholics. Over time, you could see the American ethic wealth and power begin to influence the Christian ethic in the workplace. This would lead to the exploitation of workers.

A third aspect of our work ethic is that Christians ought to be the best workers. They ought to have the best attitude. They ought to be the most dependable and have the best sense of integrity. All Christians who are employed are called to faithful, hard work.

There is also a sense of nobility in the work offered to the Lord. Our lives will be full when we do our very best, “not by way of eye-service, as people pleasers,” serving whole-heartedly, fearing the Lord.

A Full Life for Masters/Employers

Under Roman law, slaves had no rights whatsoever. So these words had a strange ring to non-Christians and to the newly believing master. Also, considering the social conditions of Paul’s day, this command may have been harder work than the actual jobs the slaves performed. The master who attempted to treat his slaves, “justly and fairly” (v.1) ran a strong risk of being ostracized by fellow slave owners.

The guiding reality for the master/employer is that both he and his servant have the same Lord: “Masters, deal with your slaves justly and fairly, since you know that you too have a Master in heaven.” Some over the ages have criticized this teaching as being too general. But, as Alexander Maclaren once said, “If we try to love that commandment for twenty-four hours, it will probably not be its vagueness of which we complain.”

⁵ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 229.

Employers, if you truly realize that you must answer to God for the way you conduct yourselves with your employees, you will care about what happens to them. You will be concerned with their illnesses, their spouses, their children, their education. Along with this, you may have more problems. In fact, caring this way almost guarantees that you will. But you will also experience the fullness of Christ.

Regardless of whether you are an employer or an employee, one thing is certain: ignore Paul's teaching and you will never know the fullness in your domestic/professional life. The level of your success does not factor into it. Ignore Paul's teaching and something will always be missing.

Jesus Christ is the fullness of the universe. He wants each one of us to be full in our marriages, full in our relationships with our children, and full in our professional experiences. Jesus also wants that fullness to overflow into the world around us. As people work with us, may our fullness become their fullness!

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

MEN'S BIBLE STUDY: MONDAYS at 6:30PM at Pastor Craig's Home. Beginning September 25th. All men of all ages are invited. See Pastor Craig for details.

Children's Ministry Trip to Orr's Farm. October 7th. Pumpkin patch and other fun things. 10AM to noon. See Pastor Jason for details.

Wednesday Morning Bible Study at 10:30AM. Our study continues in Mark.

Middle School Discipleship Groups Resume TONIGHT at 5PM. Guys meet at the church building; ladies meet at the Gerver home.

Ladies Fall Fellowship: Saturday September 30th, 6-8PM. At Sarah Duckwall's home. Bring finger food and check the craft list to bring supplies for a craft at the Women's Ministry Table.

Baby Shower for Loizos! Sunday October 1st, immediately following worship. If you want to help with food, contact Danielle Smith.

FBC Kids Wednesday Nights. 6-7:30PM See Pastor Jason for details!

LIGHT THE NIGHT: October 31. It is time to start preparing for Light the Night. If you are interested in hosting a Light the Night location at your home, please see Pastor Craig. Next Sunday, we will begin collecting candy donations. We also need 50-60 empty gallon sized milk jugs. Your help with this is greatly appreciated!

Silver Wings Pizza Fellowship: Shirley's Pizza Party, Wednesday Sept. 27th at noon in 101. Cost is by donation. You provide your own water, soda, or tea. This honors the memory of Shirley Parsons who passed away in 2018.)

Come to the Table at Ridge Road: Friday October 6th at 6:30PM. Bring a side or dessert to share. Childcare is provided for free at the church. Sign up today at the welcome center!