

The Onesimus Experience

Colossians 3:22–4:1 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: Suppose you are in a social situation where you are meeting new people for the first time. Typically, in our culture the first two questions are very predictable.

1. “Hi, I’m Zach, what is your name?”
2. “Oh hello, _____, what do you do?”

You see when we are trying to **KNOW** another human being, we want to know **HOW** they identify themselves and **WHAT** they occupy their time with.

Once we know their occupation we will be able to:

- **Categorize** this person and apply certain instinctive norms to the situation.
- Not only do we categorize this person we begin to form a mental **Network** and determine whether they have any *formal* or *informal* associations with other people we know in that line of work.

All of these things are *methods* human beings have employed to aid in our survival and success. But it is not accident that soon after we meet a person we want to know their occupation.

Annie Dillard famously said, “*the average person will work 90,000 hours in a lifetime*”. That is **1/3rd** of your life.

How you spend your work life IS often how you spend your life.

The majority of your creative energy is spent at work. Your mental energy is spent at work.

Meanwhile, **Business Insider** reports that 87% of Americans have no passion for their jobs and 80% are outright dissatisfied.

CONSIDER: At practically every juncture the scriptures speak into this aspect of your life.

- **CREATION** - When God **created** Adam and Eve, even before the fall - they were placed in the Garden to **WORK** the garden. It was not a punishment. There was work to do, and they were fashioned for doing it. Even in Paradise, Adam’s room didn’t clean itself.
- **CURSE** - It is no surprise that when the curse of sin fell, it fell on this most meaningful aspect of a person’s life - his or her work. Work was before the curse, but difficulty with work came with the curse. Your cubicle is cursed. :)
- **LAW** - When God gave the Law through Moses - the fifth commandment instituted one day of rest in 7, but it also commanded very Clearly that 6 days a man shall work in a week.
- **CHRIST** - The very **first** recorded words of we have from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ, were at the age of 12 - “I must be about my Father’s business”. Jesus was a business man working for his Dad. The **final** words he uttered from the Cross were, “It (that is the work) is finished”.
- **CULMINATION** - When we look into the future through the lens of scripture we see that eternity is filled with **WORK**. The Kings of the Earth are producing things, marvelous things, and bringing them into the Holy City to lay before the Ancient of Days. **ILL:** Can you imagine?

If man can build a rocket and land on the moon under the curse of sin... can you imagine what marvelous things will will build once the curse is lifted?

Jesus said in John 5:17 (NASB95)

17 ... "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working."

You may be thinking - Pastor, You are speaking spiritually... in other words the volunteer church work I do? No, Absolutely not - I'm speaking of your JOB. Sale, Marketing, the Hospitality Industry, Real Estate, Homemaking, Politics, Banking, you name it - that's what I'm talking about.

So what you do is very much a part of who you are! **Because of that, there may be no better proof of the reality of your Christian experience, than how your Christianity is expressed in the context of your vocation.**

**THERE IS A WAY TO WORK THAT GIVES YOU LIFE
THERE IS A WAY TO WORK THAT TAKES YOUR LIFE
TODAY, I intend to show you the difference.**

CONTEXT: Here in **Colossians 4** Paul has been giving what **Martin Luther** called, "*His Haustafel*". The Household Code. The role of each person in the home. This was a common section in any teaching of a Philosopher in Paul's day. Aristotle had a Haustafel, Socrates had one, Plato had one. The interesting things is that they are all very similar. Paul, Aristotle, Plato - all agreed on the role of the Husband, the wife, the children... with very little variation.

But it changes when they begin to talk about the role of worker...or as the text calls it the Bondservant.

According the Kent Hughes,

- *"It has been estimated that there were some 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, and that as many as 1/3 of the populations of large cities such as Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus were slaves.*

Sweeping changes had been introduced through Roman law which radically improved the treatment of slaves.

- Under Roman law first century slaves could generally count on eventually being set free.
- Around half of the slaves were free before the age of 30.
- While a slave remained the master's property the slave could also own property, he could make investments, save to purchase his own freedom, even own his own slaves.
- There was no racial component in Roman slavery - slaves and masters were often from the same ethnic strata.

The closest thing we can compare first century Roman slavery to in our day is the relationship between an **employer and an employee.**

Generally there were two camps that the Philosophers and Teachers of the First century fell into when it came to the role of slaves.

1. Rebellion - Just 125 years previously **Spartacus** (a former Gladiator) had been such a man as he led a rebellion of thousands of slaves to mobilize, militarize and and escape their Masters. The Roman legions had been at war in Spain so there was little more than Militias to oppose Spartacus and his army.

Once the Legions returned from Spain they quickly suppressed Spartacus, defeating his forces and crucifying **6,000** of his survivors on the Appian way.

2. Cooperation - So you see the intent of questions raised to **Jesus** when he was asked, "It is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" They were trying to get him to acknowledge that he intended to also lead a revolt against Rome or to fully cooperate.

PAUL - How would Paul address the practice of slavery?

- Will Paul be a **Christian Spartacus** and mobilize a rebellion fighting for equality among men?
- Will Paul side with **Rome** and affirm the institution of slavery and the existence of inequality?

Neither - Paul like Christ will show a **third option** - Paul saw the possibility of living out the entirety of one's life in a SERVANT/MASTER or EMPLOYEE/EMPLOYER relation with God, which redeems the expression of your work on earth and serves to proclaim the Gospel effectively.

TEXT: Colossians 3:22–4:1 (ESV)

²² Bondservants,

The Greek word is Doulos - Which is translated as either slave or servant depending on the context. A **slave** was the property of a Master the **servant** was typically free. The greek word is the same for both.

²² Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters,

This is the same Greek word for obedience that was used in the command of children to obey their parents. It was an absolute term. In other words - if it is not sin, you are expected to comply.

^{22b.} not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

Notice that our quality of work is not derived from our opinion of our earthly employer, but rather our heavenly. This is very important.

²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

So Paul is making it very clear that the man or woman who is enslaved under the Roman system is not to view themselves as the slave of a man, or the property of a man - but as the slave of the Lord and the property of the Lord.

Vrs. 22 - Fearing the Lord - not fearing your earthly Master

Vrs. 23 - work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,
 Vrs. 24 - You are serving the Lord Christ.

So the earthly slave is the slave of NO MAN but is the Doulos of the Lord.

Then look at 4:1 -

¹ Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Do you see that? Earthly Masters in the church at Colossae - ***you are also the Lord's Slave*** - you have been assigned a different earthly station and mission field. But you are no less a slave of the Lord.

Do you see that we are no less slaves than they were? We are the Lord's slaves.
 So whatever our station in life, whether -

- You are an **Entrepreneur**, you have started a business and you employ others - you are the Doulos, the slave of the Lord. You are to lead your company for the Glory of God.
- Perhaps you are an **employee** that is paid by the hour to perform various tasks - you are the Doulos, the slave of the Lord. Do you work well, work hard, be productive.
- Are you a **student**, engaged in study so that one day you can work with greater effectiveness? you are the Doulos, the slave of the Lord.
- Are you a **stay at home mom**, engaged in cultivating a healthy atmosphere for your family to thrive? you are the Doulos, the slave of the Lord. Work your home like it is the very Garden of God.
- Are you **retired** and for all effective purposes working only for yourself? you are the Doulos, the slave of the Lord. Engage your time in meaningful pursuits.

ILLUSTRATION: Paul Harvey said years ago that the concept of a mandatory retirement originated many years ago in China when one of the Warlords discovered that all of the threats to his rule were over 65. It seemed that was about the age when a man had enough skill and sense to be dangerous. So what did he do? He gave them a stipend of a salary and told them to relax.

If you have managed your life and wealth in such a way that you can no longer work in the traditional sense, God bless you - you've done well. But you have no right to absolutely retire. 6 days work is the lot of every man. You have the liberty to change your work, but friend the day you stop contributing you start dieing.

NOW - I if you have a pen... you may want to draw a line from COL 4:1 down to COL 4:9. There you will find the power of this verse was found in the man delivering the letter.

Colossians 4:9 (ESV) *Paul is speaking of those delivering this letter...*

⁹ and with him **Onesimus**, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

Onesimus.. he will deliver this letter and he will also do some teaching while he is there. Does the name Onesimus ring a bell? If you are a student of scripture.. is should.

Turn to the book of **Philemon (NASB95)** Philemon was a wealthy man that knew Christ – He had a worthless, lazy slave name **Onesimus** that ran away, wound up in prison and was placed in a cell right beside the Apostle **Paul**. Paul leads this run away slave to Christ... now he brings the Gospel to bear on the fact that he was a run away slave.

Upon further investigation Paul discovers that he knows his Master Philemon. He knows he was a Christian, as a matter of fact Paul lead his Master to Christ. So when Onesimus is released Paul sends him back to Philemon with this letter. Listen to what he says...

⁸ Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ **to order you to do what is proper,**

That is receive Onesimus back...

⁹ yet for love's sake I rather **appeal to you**—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child **Onesimus**, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, ¹¹ who formerly was **useless** to you,

That was his reputation as an unbeliever, he was useless. Have you ever had someone who works with you that for all practical purposes was useless? That was this guy... you wondered why they paid him.

BUT - Onesimus had gotten saved... now look what Paul says about him.

11b. but now is **useful** both to you and to me.

The Gospel can make a sorry employee worth every penny they are paid!

Christian Businessman - you should seriously consider creative ways to get the Gospel in front of your staff - according to Paul they will increase in usefulness.

WHY?

1. The Gospel changes the **MOTIVATION** of your Work -

Knowing Jesus as Master and Lord gave Onesimus and gives YOU a NEW WHY.

You recognize that the one who DESIGNED you also EMPLOYEES you.

God gave you a specific **SHAPE**. That is:

- Spiritual Gift
- Heart
- Abilities
- Personality
- Experience

All of those things combined make up who you are.

Seth Goodin says, *“Your job is what you are paid to do your work is what you are made to do.”*

The goal is to get those two things to intersect. That’s the sweet spot.

Your LORD has perfectly designed you for the work that He has for you. If you find yourself unable to do the job before you... you ought to ask, *“is this what God has called me to do, or do I need to make a change?”*

ILLUSTRATION: I was recently interviewed by my hometown newspaper about my life’s calling. One of the questions they asked was how I first knew I was called to teach. I said, “Well, there was a realization one day that I can do this, and other people can’t”.

I would have adult Sunday school teachers asking me to help them with theological questions when I was in college.

Those were clues... there was much more to it.. but God leaves his fingerprints on the vessel He creates to give you clues to the origin and purpose of the vessel.

Not only does the Gospel change the MOTIVATION...

2. The Gospel changes the QUALITY of your work -

When you view yourself as a bond servant of the Lord, even the most mundane task becomes sacred.

ILLUSTRATION: When I preach a sermon. I imagine that Jesus Christ is sitting on the front row. When it is all said and done, I don’t look at the alter call to see how I did. I appreciate the kind comments on Facebook, but that’s not my barometer. I internally bow before the Lord Jesus Christ and look to his countenance for approval.

If he is pleased, it matters not what any man thinks. If he is displeased, it matters not how many likes I get on Facebook.

NOW - that’s true of me. But that’s also true of you!

HISTORY - With the Advent of **Roman Catholicism** two classes began to emerge within the Church. **Clergy and the Laity** – Those who do ministry and those to whom it is done.

One of the ideas that Martin Luther championed was the idea of the Priesthood of all believers. In other words you don’t have to go through a human agency to approach God. The plowboy with personal faith in Christ has the RIGHT of ACCESS to the throne of God. Thus, no longer is the secular work and sacred work - all work is sacred.

The result is what has been called, the **PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC**.

Think of it! Now a blacksmith wasn’t just a blacksmith, he was the Lord’s blacksmith, so he was to hammer his horseshoes as if they would meet him again at the Judgement seat of Jesus Christ to determine his eternal reward.

What if you approached your work that way? How would the quality change?

What if this year's graduates went into the future with that heart?
FBC would become the leading staffing organization in North Florida.

*Not only does this effect the Quality of your work...
and the Motivation of your work...*

2. The Gospel Changes the ATTITUDE of your work -

Because I work for Christ - His opinion of me and my work determine my attitude and outlook.

- So, I don't have to check social media to see what my attitude is going to be.
- The balance of power in the Senate doesn't determine my joy.
- Big tech can't cancel it.
- Conspiracy theories can't rattle it.
- Nancy Pelosi can't impeach it.

I serve a risen Saviour, He's in the world today
I know that He is living, whatever men may say
I see His hand of mercy, I hear His voice of cheer
And just the time I need Him He's always near

I've made it a habit of **not** getting up in the morning and checking the news to determine what my attitude is going to be that day. I look to the Word of God. I lift my eye to the Heavens and I call upon the name of the Lord before I look to anything man made.

Jerry Vines said, "*Seek to see the face of God before you see the face of any man.*"

When you see the face of your Master you can go to work knowing that NOT ONLY is He working through you, He is also working ON YOU. So yes, expect there to be thorns, difficulties, office politics, mean bosses, why? God uses those things to shape you.

Do you think this would change your attitude at work? Do you allow your supervisor to determine your attitude? If you let him determine your attitude - you will also allow him to determine your altitude!

CONCLUSION/INVITATION: The classic movie Chariots of Fire is based on the 1924 Olympics and two prominent runners—**Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams**. Both were gifted and successful athletes who carried the hopes of their respective nations on their backs when they raced. **Eric Liddell** was a devout Christian who represented **Scotland**. He was a missionary, and some believed he should give up the sport to preach, but Liddell believed that God had called him to race and to race for the glory of God. **Harold Abrahams** ran for **Great Britain**. He loved his country as well as the sport and was obsessed with winning. He studied the sport, threw himself completely into it, and made running his overarching passion.

In the movie you see a clear contrast between Liddell and Abrahams. They both run. But they run for very **different reasons**.

- In one scene Abrahams says, "And now in one hour's time I will be out there again. I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor, 4 feet wide, with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But will I?"

- In a different scene Liddell says, “I believe God made me for a purpose, but He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.”

Tim Keller, in comparing the two runners as depicted in the movie, states: “Harold Abrahams was weary even when he rested, and Eric Liddell was rested even when he was exerting himself. Why? Because there’s a work underneath our work that we really need rest from. It’s the work of self-justification.”

- Two artists paint a similar picture. One seeks joy in the painting and is never quenched. The other seeks joy in God and feels His pleasure as he paints.
- Two doctors perform surgery. One performs surgery because she loves the feeling of being needed. Another performs the surgery for the glory of God, and she senses God’s pleasure as she operates.
- Two parents raise their kids. One seeks joy in her children, and she builds her life on their success. If they misbehave, she is crushed as her identity takes a blow. Another parent finds her joy in God and offers her children to Him. As she parents, she feels His pleasure

YOU DON'T WORK SO THAT GOD WILL LOVE YOU. GOD LOVES YOU, HE HAS ALREADY PAID THE PRICE... SO WORK BECAUSE WHEN YOU DO, YOU FEEL THE PLEASURE OF GOD.