

# THE CHRISTIAN WORKER

## *A Meditation on God-Glorifying Work from Colossians 3:22-4:1*

Ancient historians estimate that there were some 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire, or about one-half the population. Because of this, work was considered below the dignity of the slave-owning Roman free man. Practically everything was done by slaves, even doctoring and teaching. Though there were some felicitous relationships between masters and slaves, basically the lot of a slave was not very happy. Slaves were not classified as people made in the image of God, but as things, living tools.

Gaius, the Roman lawyer, 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 put to death, with no trial.

This was the historical context in which the apostle Paul wrote, “Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters... Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly” (Col. 3:22, 4:1). And we should be clear that what applied to slaves and masters in the first century, equally applies to employees and employers in the twenty-first century. Even if you think you have the worst job imaginable, it’s a far cry from being a slave.

In this section of Scripture, Paul has commands and motivations, for both slaves and masters. And both groups were shocked by what Paul wrote.

Paul begins by commanding slaves/employees to obey their earthly masters. He doesn’t tell them to revolt. He tells them to become the best possible slaves they can be. If you’re a slave, that’s probably not what you want to hear. But it gets worse (depending on your perspective). Paul goes on to say, “obey...not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord” (vs. 22). We all know what “eye-service” is. That’s work done when the boss is around; a job performed only when it is seen by others. A Christian is to be an industrious worker, all the time, even when “the cat’s away.”

Paul exhorts Christians, “Whatever [your job], work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (vs. 23). This work is literally “from the soul.” The Christian employee should not be a loafer. He should not waste time on the job. He should not try to get by with the bare minimum. None of this is work *from the soul*.

Why should the Christian work hard? Paul gives us four motivators for obedient, enthusiastic work. First, we see that work is to be done “fearing the Lord” (vs.22). Hard work is one of the ways in which we honor God. Even if a Christian has little or no respect for his boss, he will work hard due to his reverence for God. The key to diligent labor for the Christian is to see how it relates to Christ.

Second, Paul tells us that we are really serving Christ: “You are serving the Lord Christ” (vs. 24). For a slave this was a liberating thought. This turns even the most menial vocations into opportunities for adoration and worship. This means it is possible for the housewife to cook a meal as if Jesus Christ were going to eat it, or to spring-clean the house as if Jesus Christ were to be the honored guest. It is possible for teachers to educate children, for doctors to treat patients, for accountants to keep books and for secretaries to type letters as if in each case they were serving Jesus Christ, because that’s exactly what the Christian worker is doing.

Third, Paul motivates us to be good employees by telling us that “from the Lord [we] will receive an inheritance as [our] reward” (vs. 24). A slave in the first century inherited *nothing* on earth. But in heaven, he will be a co-heir with Christ and enjoy all the blessings of the kingdom. This paycheck may not come at the end of the week, but it will come eventually, so we should work for it.

Fourth, this is a negative motivator, but we need to remember that God in his wisdom has determined to use promises of rewards and the threats of punishment to motivate us: “For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality” (vs. 25). God doesn’t care if you’re a slave or a master, an employee or an employer. Anyone who does wrong will reap what he has sown.

Above all motivations, a Christian desires to glorify God with his work so that “in everything [he] may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (Tit. 2:10). What’s at stake in how we work from 9 to 5 is not simply our pay or our benefits or climbing the corporate ladder, but the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom.

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