

## *Laboring For The Lord*

Colossians 3:22-4:1

September 3, 2023

Please open your Bibles to Colossians 3. I want you to pray for my friend who's having a hard time finding a job. Nothing is working out. The muffler factory was too exhausting and he wasn't suited to be a tailor. He couldn't cut it as a barber and he didn't have the patience to be a doctor. He wasn't a good fit in the shoe factory even though he put his soul into it. Pool maintenance was too draining for him and he got fired from the cannon factory. He tried to become a historian but he couldn't see any future in it. Pray for him. And for me.

Today we're going to talk about a four letter word many people hate. Say work. According to Max Lucado in *Cure for the Common Life*, at least one-fourth of all employees in the US are unhappy at work and one-third say they hate their jobs. Another study showed that problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than anything else including family or financial problems.

Tomorrow we celebrate Labor Day and it emphasizes a vital component of everyone's life. Unless we're retired or inherited millions, most of us spend 40 or more hours a week at work. Why do we do that? I owe I owe, so off to work I go. We all have bills to pay, right? But God instituted labor and work even before there were any bills. After He created Adam, Gen 2:15 tells us how He provided job placement and wrote the first job description. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." So Adam was the first farmer and gardener **and** the first laborer. His work, however, was not difficult or hard, but rather something at which he could use the body, energy, mind, and gifts God had given him. God made us to work!

It was never God's intention for us to lie around and do nothing. Not working can actually cause major mental problems. Our value doesn't come from our work, but our work should reflect our value. If we're not using what God's given us, it's not spiritually or physically healthy. Idle hands are the devil's tools. And the Bible tells that if a man won't work, he shouldn't eat. Not if he can't work but if he can and he won't. So God made us to work.

Now the opposite of laziness is overwork and many of you probably struggle with that more. This too is sinful and leads to all sorts of problems with burnout, stress, family problems, etc. God instituted the Sabbath Day as a rest from our work. Sometimes we begin to worship our jobs or draw our significance and value from them instead of from Jesus, and when we do, we sin. Sometimes we overwork to earn kudos from our boss or our parents or our friends or whoever. And when we do that, we've forgotten who we're

really supposed to be impressing. When I work too hard to please others but slight my family, I'm suddenly not pleasing my real Boss anymore which we'll get to.

So initially work was not stressful. But after Adam sinned, however, it all changed. After assigning the appropriate curses to the serpent and to Eve, God turned to Adam and said in Gen 3:17-19 "Cursed is the ground because of you; through **painful toil** you will eat of it all the days of your life. 18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 19 By the **sweat** of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground...." Suddenly, work changed from something pleasant and enjoyable, to work. Painful toil, sweat, grinding it out. And here we are. Say ouch.

This painful work and toil, however, along with all the rest of Creation, has been redeemed by Jesus Christ and the Christian should have a sanctified view of labor. To help us understand this, please stand if you are able as we read from Col 3:22-4:1 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; 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. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism. 4 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Yes, Paul writes this passage to slaves and to masters as that was the economic structure in those days. Slavery wasn't based on skin color but it was just as unpleasant and a difficult life. If Paul were writing to Antioch today, instead of the Ephesians, I believe he would address this to employees and employers. Most of us fit into one of those two categories. If you're retired, listen anyway since you can help the rest of us as we **work** out our salvation with fear and trembling. Many of you are working more now than then.

Notice that Paul calls workers to obey and respect their overseers. We would say our bosses. Our supervisors. We are to work hard not just when they're in the room, but when they're not. "Here comes the boss, look busy." No, Eph 6 says we are to serve and work wholeheartedly. You may have heard about the guy who said, "I always give 100% at work. 22% Monday-Thursday and 12% on Fridays." No. with sincerity of heart! Sometimes we don't like our bosses, sometimes they don't pay us enough. Sometimes they treat us unfairly. Very few employees can't point to some unfairness somewhere in their career. But that's not the point. Paul says our respect and work ethic are not motivated by our earthly boss, but our heavenly Savior. He tells us that it is the Lord Christ we are really working for, not "the Man."

Remember that when you go to work Tuesday or whenever. It's hard sometimes, but remember who your **real** Boss is. Be careful what you say about your Boss, He's always listening. Even the best earthly bosses are still made of the same stuff we all are, sinful humanity. Even the best bosses will let us down and sometimes be unfair or overlook our dedication. But God never will. And while your employer might not be paying you what you should be getting, your Heavenly Father will one day make up the difference with an eternal reward. "Plenty of people aren't being paid what they're worth... and should be happy about it." Remember who you're really working for and that you get to work for the largest, oldest, and most important corporation in the world! And the retirement plan is out of this world!

Understanding who our real Boss is helps us to endure the many problems we all face at work. I remember when I came to Central, Derwood Myers had retired a few years earlier after teaching ag for 40 years. I heard stories about how some of his students put screwdrivers in his gas tank and pulled other pranks and I didn't know if I wanted to get it into all that. I thought 40 years was a long time to do anything. And then my dad finished up his taxidermy career after 60 years. During any job for that long, you're going to endure garbage, bad employers, difficult students or customers, financial stresses, and it will never be perfect. That's why it's called work, not play. That's all due to Adam's sin, but we do what we have to do. And when we remember Who we're doing it for and why- for His glory, it makes it doable, even if it's not always enjoyable.

I'm thankful Paul also addresses masters, or in our case, employers. He says, "...provide your slaves/employees with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master/Employer in heaven." So what's right and fair? Decent and fair pay, appropriate benefits and time off, safe working conditions, honesty and respect, appreciation, etc. There are a lot of employers who will have a lot to answer for for the way they have cheated their employees out of what's fair and right. Those who pay the minimum when they could pay more. Now business owners deserve decent income. They're taking the risks, they're managing the businesses and making it all happen, and they carry a heavy load for all their company and all their workers. They usually work longer hours than any of the employees. But if they take advantage of their workers and underpay or overwork them, they will have to answer for that. And it doesn't cost anything to say thank you. By the way, Boss, when's the last time you **prayed** for your employees? Employees, when's the last time you prayed for your boss? How about if workers and bosses prayed together?

Working is actually part of what it means to be in the image of God. Jesus once said in John 5:17, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." So when **we** work, we reflect our Creator. He's actually the original and greatest worker, the greatest engineer, planner, mathematician, analyst, assembler, laborer, mason, administrator, assistant, accountant, banker, and server imaginable. He's

the greatest plumber (He plumbed the water cycle) and carpenter (He built the Redwoods), the master mechanic and welder (He buried all the metal), the best teacher and driver, farmer and electrician, and even the best preacher. Jesus actually did carpentry and probably stonework while He was here. And so as we do all these jobs today, we reflect Him and His work. And He can teach and help us be better at whatever job we do.

Years ago, people used the word vocation to talk about someone's job or career. Say vocation. That word comes from the Latin word *Voca* meaning to call. A vocation is a calling not just a job. It is employment that God called you to and gifted you to do. And that takes it to whole other level. It's not just about what am I good at or how much does it pay? But what is God's purpose for me? What has He designed and created me to do? All of those things above and so much more are callings from God and as we do them we are serving God. Some of us let God's calls go directly to voicemail. Your work is a way to fulfill the greatest command of loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Instead of just getting by. Instead of just going to work. Or just an occupation to occupy our time, it is a calling by which we can glorify the God who called us. We can do the exact same work we did yesterday but today see it in a whole new light. Our work becomes what God meant it to be, sanctified. Holy unto Him.

Now not all jobs glorify God. Drug dealers, porn promoters, pimps, thieves who steal catalytic converters, and the like. When you make your living from something God says is sinful, that's obviously wrong. The silversmiths at Ephesus who made idols had to find other ways to use their skills when they got saved. When farmers in Thailand became Christians, they switched from growing opium poppies for heroin to fruits and vegetables. It wasn't as lucrative, but they suddenly realized there were more important things in life and eternity than money. Of all people, we believers should see our entire lives as living sacrifices to God obeying Him not just in church or even at home, but everywhere all the time. All of our work belongs to God and not just the 10% we put in the offering plate.

To help her remember who called her to the work of homemaking and how it is so much more than just routine monotonous duty, and to help her family understand that as well, one woman hung a plaque near their table that said, "Worship services held here three times a day." Another mom keeps a sign over her kitchen sink that says, "Divine tasks performed here daily."

We tend to separate our work and our service to God. We should not. We separate our work from our worship. Worship we do on Sunday at church, work we do Monday-Friday or whatever our schedule is at our jobs. Nothing could be further from what it should be. Our work can and should be worship. We are using God-given abilities, health, energy, and time. Should we not be using it for His glory? Our theme

verse, **Whatever** you do, do it all for the glory of God! That includes our jobs at which we spend most of our time. There is no mundane, useless work when we approach it from this angle. Pulling weeds, washing dishes, mopping floors, digging ditches. It's all for His glory! People may benefit, our boss may make money, but ultimately, it's all for Him!

If you carry mail, carry it for the glory of God, if you build houses, if you nurse patients, if you make products, if you run computers, whatever you do, do it all for the Glory of God! Does the quality of your work reflect that you are actually working to please Jesus? Or just to get by? Just punching the clock and puttin' in time. I know, when you work hard, coworkers begin to snap at you. Some of my co-teachers in Culpeper told me to slow down, that I was making them look bad. I couldn't help what they did, but I could help what I did. I wasn't working primarily to please our principal, the parents, or even the students, but God. If the others benefited, great. But if God's happy with our work, the others normally will be too. That's not always true, but at least if you've done your dead level best, you can still have a satisfaction even if your boss reams you out.

Marin Luther once said, "The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays—not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship." Some of God's best witnesses are respectful workers who work hard and with excellence.

The great artist Michelangelo gave extreme attention to detail which yielded some of the finest works in all history. When someone implied that he was wasting his time in the corners of the Sistine Chapel where no one would ever see, he replied, "God will." Lucado says, "God's eyes fall on the work of our hands. Our Wednesdays matter to Him as much as our Sundays." It is a huge blunder to not see our jobs, at which we spend most of our time, as something less than sacred and not do our best. Even if it's close enough for government work, you're not working for the government. Is it close enough for God's work? Our deeds actually follow us to heaven as Revelation 14:13 tells us. What kind of following do you want?

You may have heard about the carpenter who worked all his life for a contractor and always did a great job. When he was getting ready to retire, his boss said, I've got one more house for you to build. Don't spare expense. This is going to be for me to do with as I please. The man felt like he'd been cheated all those years and since it this was for his boss, he cut corners, did shoddy work, and really a poor job. And much to his surprise, the boss gave him the house as his retirement gift. He forgot who he was really working for.

Eph 6:7-8 says, “Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does.” Every house a Christian builds he really builds for God. Every animal my dad mounted he mounted for Jesus. Every meal my mom fixed, every car you repair, every patient you treat, every student you teach, every customer you serve, even the contrary ones, they’re all Jesus in disguise and you’re really doing it all for Him. Becky Wolverton glorified God in her nursing career and in her work as a mother changing diapers and shuttling children. How are you glorifying God with the work He has gifted and called you to do?

Finally today, I want you to know that God rewards those who work hard unto Him. Those who labor for the Lord at whatever our job is. We’ve already seen in Colossians 3, He has an inheritance waiting for us. But Ecc 5:12 also says the sleep of a laborer is sweet. That’s a reward. 2 Tim 2:6 says the hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crop, the tomatoes, the fruit of your work. Prov 14:23 tells us that hard work brings profit. And many other Scriptures speak of the blessings God gives when we work unto Him. But perhaps the best promise of God for those who work and who may be weary and tired this labor Day comes from Jesus Himself in Matt 11:28, where He said, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

If you need some rest from your labors today, ask God for that. If you’re one of those who hates your job, if you need vocational guidance or advice for work or strength or grace to put up with a difficult boss or employee or student, seek God’s help as we pray today.