

“Take This Job and Love It!” (Colossians 3:22-4:1)

One day several employees gathered around the office water cooler for their mid-morning break. One employee noticed a memo that appeared on the wall: “The management regrets that it has come to their attention that workers dying on the job are failing to fall down. This practice must stop, as it becomes impossible to distinguish between death and the natural movement of the staff. Any employee found dead in an upright position will be dropped from the payroll.” Does that sound like your workplace?

According to *USA Today*, firms are spending billions of dollars to fire up workers—with little results. The article states: “There has been exhaustive academic research trying to find out what motivates workers, and it has turned up almost no evidence that motivational spending makes any difference. Polltaker Gallup analyzed its massive database and determined that 55 percent of employees have no enthusiasm for their work—Gallup uses the term “not engaged”—based on several criteria, including loyalty and the desire to improve job performance. One in five (19 percent) are so uninterested or negative about their jobs that they poison the workplace to the point that companies might be better off if they called in sick. Further into the article, Spencer Johnson, author of *Who Moved My Cheese?* states he “believes research may one day show that the only long-lasting motivation will come from employees who bring it to work in the form of God, spirituality, or something else that causes them to ‘rise to a higher purpose.’”¹

The Bible teaches that this is true. Having an important title, being paid well, and experiencing job satisfaction will not keep most people motivated long-term. That’s why we must look to God’s Word to see what motivations He provides. In Colossians 3, Paul motivates us to show our love for Jesus Christ. In 3:15-16, Paul talks about our worship and how we are to benefit one another by the way we speak and sing. Verse 17 gives us a principle: “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”² This principle should affect every area of our lives. Paul then says we also show love to Christ in the way we relate to our spouse (3:18-19) and children (3:20-21). After discussing worship and family and before discussing prayer and evangelism (4:2-6), Paul speaks of our work. Colossians 3:22-4:1 teaches that we show our love for Christ in the motive and manner in which we do our work. In these five verses, Paul asks the question: “Who do you serve?” He then shares three ways to rise to a higher purpose in our work: Change your boss, change your retirement, and change your mentality. First...

1. Change your boss (3:22-23). Paul writes, “Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.” In Paul’s day slaves comprised the bulk of the workplace in the Roman world. Rather than using the terms “employee” and “employer,” as he would if he were speaking to us today, he addressed slaves and masters. It is interesting to note the amount of space devoted in the New Testament to slaves. This is significant. It shows that no matter how low a person’s social status may be, he still can attain the very highest in the Christian life through faithfulness to God’s Word.³ Perhaps it also reflects the foreknowledge of God that most Christian people would occupy places of service rather than positions of authority.⁴ Though our circumstances today are different from the first century, the context is the same—the workplace. Paul’s words to those slaves in the first century can apply well to us in the 21st century.

We are commanded to “obey.”⁵ This verb is an active present tense command. As slaves, we are to obey our earthly masters in all things (e.g., changing diapers, washing dishes, taking out the trash, typing letters, answering phones, pouring concrete, making proposals, teaching students, etc.). God isn’t suggesting blind submission. If your boss commands you to do something immoral or illegal, you must obey God and disobey your boss. But most of our troubles at work aren’t caused by a good versus evil struggle. It starts when you are asked to do unpleasant things. But as disciples, we must be above this. We must be willing to obey whether we feel like it or not.

The quality of the Christian employee should be different from those without Christ. An employer should see the difference immediately. These masters are only **“masters on earth.”**⁶ Our true Master is Jesus Christ. He is our ultimate employer. God wants us to work at our employment as if we were working for God.

The phrase **“external service”** is a compound word that is made up of two Greek nouns: eye and slavery. The word refers to “service that is performed only to make an impression in the owner’s presence, eye-service.”⁷ We are guilty of this type of behavior when our boss leaves and we exclaim, “It’s party time!” Or when our boss isn’t around and we play solitaire on our office computer, make personal phone calls, or surf the Internet for personal reasons. It may also refer to doing something to catch the master’s eye that is to please those in authority. Or it may refer to working only when one is being watched.⁸ Yet, Paul makes it crystal clear that the eye of God is always upon us. It should make no difference if the eye of the boss is upon us. God is watching whether your employer is in sight or not and His eye should govern all that we do at work. The quality of our work should reflect that He is watching.⁹

Imagine walking into work tomorrow morning and your boss informs you that you will be under surveillance all day long. When you sit at your desk, take a break, or go to the bathroom, you will be watched. How hard would you work? Now let’s go even further and imagine that this surveillance camera is capable of discerning your inner thoughts and motives. What kind of attitude would you have? We must recognize that we are under the surveillance of God every moment. Paul says, “When you change your boss you’ll perform one way, around the clock.”

The phrase **“with sincerity”**¹⁰ means literally “without wax.” A common way to repair damage done in the oven, of a piece of pottery, was to fill the cracks with wax, thus deceiving the purchaser. Paul exhorts us to be honest in all our actions—no wax in the cracks.¹¹ This means that we make a conscious decision to fear our heavenly Master more than our earthly master.¹²

A man was having dinner with his parents at a stylish London restaurant. The food was superb, and the setting—complete with chandeliers, crystal and silver—was unbelievably elegant. Nonetheless, when his mother’s main course arrived, she felt the need for a little salt. Trying the three silver shakers that were on the table, she discovered each contained pepper. She called the waiter over only to be told that she must be mistaken. Each table always contained two dispensers of pepper and one of salt. A second attempt, however, showed that their table did, indeed, have three peppershakers. Horrified, the waiter immediately brought her a saltshaker. When it was time for dessert, the maitre d’ appeared, insisting that because of the oversight they choose something “on the house.” The woman protested, “It’s not that important.” “But, Madame,” he replied in all seriousness, “what if you had been the Queen?”¹³

This restaurant understood that the Queen could come in to dine at any time; therefore they had to always be at their best. If this is true for a restaurant, how much more so is this true for a disciple? We’re not to be concerned about a queen, a king, a president, or a CEO; we’re to be concerned about what our Lord thinks of our work.

Paul continues his exhortation to change your boss. In 3:23, Paul says, **“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord¹⁴ rather than for men.”**¹⁵ Have you ever seen the bumper sticker, “My boss is a Jewish carpenter?” This bumper sticker alludes to this verse. According to Paul, every Christian has the same boss: the “Jewish Carpenter,” Jesus Christ. The word **“whatever”** is important. Remember, this passage is addressed to “slaves.” One of their jobs was no doubt emptying chamber pots. Serving the Lord at our job gives dignity to what we do. We may sweep floors, wash dishes, change diapers, or empty the trash. We tend to think of work as a necessary evil or as a means to make money or as something that keeps us out of trouble. But actually our work is God’s will for us. It is part of what God is using to conform us to Christ’s image (Rom 8:29).

One of my favorite books is, *Practicing the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence. Lawrence was a clumsy, seventeenth century monk who worked in the kitchens in his French monastery. Even in the mundane tasks of his life, he sought to practice the presence of God and be intimate with God every minute of his day. I don't care what you do; you can worship the Lord through your work and offer to Him expressions of your love throughout the day.

It is worth noting that Paul hits work hard in this verse. The Greek uses two different words for "do" in this verse. The first means to work or labor, the second word is an adjective meaning to work diligently. There is a double stress in this verse upon diligence: (1) "**heartily**"¹⁶ or "from the soul" and (2) "do" with diligence. God expects us to put in whole-hearted day's work at our employment. This could be translated, "Put your whole heart and soul into it." Do what you can, where you are, with what you have. Wherever you are, be all there for God. If you love the Lord and desire to serve Him it will be reflected in your work. The people to ask about your love for God might be the boss or the people you work with. The question would not be, "Have you witnessed to them about Jesus Christ?" but, "Does your work demonstrate by the way you do it that you love Jesus Christ?" Only then will your co-workers lend a listening ear.

Here are some questions worth asking: Is the quality of my work and my attitude at work pleasing to Jesus Christ? Does my work bring glory to Jesus Christ? Am I the very best I can be at work?

[Paul insists that the key to working well is to change your boss.¹⁷ Now he will give a second piece of advice...]

2. Change your retirement (3:24-25). In 3:24, Paul shares a motive for obedience: "**knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance.**" Paul begins by emphasizing the importance of "**knowing**" certain truths. This theme runs throughout the New Testament. When we lock in God's truth between our ears, it will affect our feet. In this verse the truth God wants us to know is that He will be faithful to reward us if He is our boss.¹⁸

Paul assures us that if we are faithful at work we will "**receive the reward of the inheritance.**"¹⁹ This is not a reference to salvation; it is a reward. It comes as a result of work. We normally think we receive eternal rewards for spiritual practices like reading the Bible, praying, or evangelism. Yet, Paul asserts that all work done to the glory of Christ will bring an eternal reward. This reward is something that moth, rust, and thieves can't take away (Matt 6:19). Paul is saying, "Work for the Lord—the retirement plan is out of this world!" No matter how little or how much you were paid this week, it is nothing compared with the coming reward from Christ.

In 3:24b, Paul writes, "**It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.**" This could also be translated, "Serve the Lord Christ" (cf. Rom 12:11). This alternative best explains the "for" that follows and makes it parallel to the imperative "work" in 3:23.²⁰ Paul uses the phrase "**the Lord Christ.**" This is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is called "**the Lord Christ.**" Paul does not say "Lord Jesus" (The title "Jesus" means "Savior"). Rather, he says, "**Lord Christ**" (The title "**Christ**" means "King"). This title would have had great meaning to a slave of the first century. The slave serves a person of great dignity. Think of this—a slave with dignity! Jesus is the King over my life at work! These slaves will experience through Christ a true reversal of their fortunes.²¹

A question worth meditating upon is this: Do I look forward to the Lord's evaluation of my work at the judgment seat of Christ?

Verse 24 is the good news; in 3:25, Paul states the negative equation: **“For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.”** This verse states a general principle: “If you mess with God, He will mess with you.” The force of this warning seems to be intended for both the slave and the master and is twofold: It encourages harshly treated slaves that their masters’ could not escape due judgment, in the final judgment, if not in this life, and it warned the slaves themselves to maintain their own high stands of integrity so far as possible.²² If the Christian employee does not put in a good day’s work, then he must reckon with his God. He may hide his sloppy work from his boss but he cannot hide it from God. God is impartial (see Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9; Jas 2:1). Laziness, insubordination, inattentiveness can be causes for the Lord’s discipline. This is also true for masters.²³

Please consider these questions: Could some of my financial problems be discipline for my bad attitude at work? Could some of my relational strain be the result of my complaining spirit?

[To serve well and express your love for Christ you must change your boss and change your retirement. But Paul is not finished, he also urges you to...]

3. Change your mentality (4:1). Paul writes, **“Masters, grant²⁴ to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.”** This verse has a poor chapter division. Chapter 4:1 belongs to chapter three with its focus on various roles in the Christian life. The **“master”** in our society is the employer. Paul states that masters must behave with justice and remember the judgment. First, masters are to grant **“justice and fairness.”** This phrase commits the Christian businessman to Christian standards in business. The reason that this is so important is because these qualities are characteristics that God exudes. Masters are to treat their employees like they want God to treat them.

Are you even handed with your employees? Do you treat your employees partially? Do you offer an honest wage? Do you provide benefits, as you are able? Do you grant them fair working conditions? Do you treat your staff with love and respect? Do you know your employees names? Do you ask about their spouse and children? Do you take time out for them?

The employer will stand accountable before God. The reality of future judgment is a powerful incentive to ensure that we live in the present world with compassion and humility.²⁵ Your employees are looking to you for guidance and direction. Masters are likely more accountable than slaves. God has placed you in a position of leadership and authority. Are you a slave master or a slave mentor? Do you treat others like you would have them treat you?

This past week at our staff meeting, our staff contributed 45 minutes of insight to this sermon. I just sat and listened to them preach my sermon. Tom Jennings, our church custodian, had this to say, “When I am working at *Georgia Pacific* (making cardboard boxes) or cleaning at the church, I ask myself two questions: “Who am I? Why am I here?” I know how Tom would answer these questions. “Who am I?” “I am Tom Jennings, a saint of Jesus Christ.” “Why am I here?” “I am here to serve the Lord Christ and work as an expression of my love for Him.”

Remember, the question to ask is, “Who do I serve?”²⁶ If you can’t answer, “the Lord Christ,” I pray that you will change your boss, change your retirement, and change your mentality.

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Notes

¹ Preaching Today Citation: *USA Today* (5-10-01); submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky.

² Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul writes, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

³ “God has geared Christianity in such a way that it can work in any situation, under any government and in any culture.” See Dr. Grant C. Richison, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians* (self-published notes), 125.

⁴ William MacDonald, *Believers Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 2014.

⁵ For Paul’s usages of *hupakouo* (“obey”), see Rom 6:12, 16-17; 10:16; Eph 6:1, 5; Phil 2:12; Col 3:20, 22; 2 Thess 1:8; 3:14. See also Matt 8:27; Mark 1:27; 4:41; Luke 8:25; 17:6; Acts 6:7; 12:13; Heb 5:9; 11:8; 1 Pet 3:6.

⁶ God can use you to serve your master just as He used Joseph as Potiphar’s overseer and Pharaoh’s Prime Minister, Daniel as the king’s advisor, and Nehemiah as cupbearer to the king.

⁷ Gk. *ophthalmoudoulia*, cf. Eph 6:6 for only other NT usage. See BDAG Electronic Ed.

⁸ See David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians/Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 249.

⁹ One of the names of God in the OT is *El Roi*, “the God who sees” (e.g., Gen 16:13).

¹⁰ Gk. *haplotes*, see also Rom 12:8; 2 Cor 1:12; 8:2; 9:11, 13; 11:3; Eph 6:5. Paul is the only NT writer that uses this word.

¹¹ William Carr Peel and Walt Larimore, *Going Public with Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 43.

¹² Fear as a motive occurs six other times in the NT (Eph 5:33; 6:5; 1 Pet 2:17-18; 3:2, 6).

¹³ Preaching Today Citation: Source: *Sermonnotes.com*.

¹⁴ Jesus Himself said, “no servant can serve two masters” (Luke 16:13; Matt 6:24).

¹⁵ Cf. Colossians 3:17: “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”

¹⁶ The NRSV translates the phrase “do your work heartily” (*ek psuche ergazesthe*) as “put yourselves into it.” This accurately reflects the meaning of this phrase in contemporary lingo.

¹⁷ I like what Lutzer writes, “Blessed are those who change masters without changing jobs.” See Erwin W. Lutzer, *Your Eternal Reward* (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 94.

¹⁸ Hebrews 11:6 says, “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”

¹⁹ Gk. *antapodosin*: “that which is given to someone in exchange for what has been done, repaying, reward.” See BDAG Electronic Ed. This word is only used here in the NT. The verb *antapodidomi* is always used in the NT of a repayment due to an obligation (see Rom 11:35; 12:19; 1 Thess 3:9; 2 Thess 1:6; Heb 10:30).

²⁰ See Garland, *Colossians/Philemon*, 250.

²¹ See Derek J. Tidball, *The Reality is Christ* (Great Britain, Christian Focus, 1999), 211.

²² See also James D. G. Dunn, *The New International Greek New Testament Commentary: The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 258.

²³ Wall writes, “I doubt that this particular passage is relevant to the present discussion of negative judgment against believers at the *bema*. Instead, I believe that Paul is encouraging persecuted Christian slaves with the truth that any persecuting master will be judged by the Lord. The Lord, Paul says, is not impressed by the master’s status as slave owner, for Christ has no partiality in his dealings with men. Part of my reason for saying that Colossians 3:24-25 is not relevant to the *bema* judgment has to do with the context of the passage. In the context, Christian slaves and masters are always referred to in the second person (you), whereas verse 25 is in the third person (he), thus implying that Paul is promising that Christ will not only reward slaves who are obedient to their evil masters but will make sure that what their evil masters do will follow them all the way to their judgment. Other facts also leave the impression that Paul is referring to unbelieving masters: the phrase “without respect of persons” is used in the parallel passage in Ephesians 6 to refer to masters; the reference in the literal translation to “the one doing evil or unjustly” seems more likely to refer to an unbeliever (Acts 24:1-5; 1 Corinthians 6:1, 9; 1 Peter 3:18; and 2 Peter 2:9); and finally passages such as 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 teach that the persecuting unbeliever will be condemned at Christ’s coming, where as the coming of Christ means glory to Christ in the believer. Thus it is unlikely that Paul has any negative judgment of the Christian in mind in Colossians 3:24-25.” See Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold: Reward and Loss at the Judgment of Believers* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 114-115. See also Ralph P. Martin, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 123-124. Note: Wall strongly believes in the possibility of negative judgment for believers at the *bema*, but he does not see it in this passage.

²⁴ Gk. *parechesthe*: “to cause to experience something, grant, show,” cf. Luke 7:4 and Acts 19:24. See BDAG Electronic Ed.

²⁵ Tidball, *The Reality is Christ*, 214.

²⁶ You can put this question on your fridge, laptop, bathroom mirror, screensaver.