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Colossians 3:22-25

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THE OFFICE

*SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH
LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS #8*

My father was a butcher. He never went to college. When he came home from World War II he started working for Safeway Stores and worked for that company for over 40 years until he retired, first as a butcher and then as a meat merchandiser. I remember as a small boy going down to 16th and South Street in Lincoln Nebraska where my dad worked. That particular store was the first self-service meat department in Lincoln. My dad knew everyone in Lincoln and everyone knew him.

Needless to say, growing up my place of employment was Safeway, weekends during high school and summers during college. This work experience motivated my college studies, because I really did not want to work for Safeway all my life. Growing up I did not value my father's career. However, when I went to work after graduating from college and entering into the real world, my perspective changed. I remember writing my dad a letter telling him how much I appreciated what he did for a living, his faithfulness to provide for his family, and what it meant for him to hand down his work ethic to me.

My dad got up every morning and worked hard, all day, every day. When we went on vacations we were always stopping at Safeway Stores, checking out the meat department. My dad loved his job. He loved the people he worked with and they became his best friends, his hunting and golfing buddies. Like many people of his generation who went through the depression he was happy and content as long as he had a roof over his head and food on the table. As Solomon suggests: he ate and drank and found satisfaction in his toil. (Eccl. 3:13) He epitomized Paul's word to the Colossians, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart." (3:23) How would you characterize your life at the office? What is your perspective towards your job?

We continue our summer series focusing on living resurrection in relationships. After spending five weeks on marriage and connected themes we turn now to the topic of the work relationship for the final two weeks of our summer series. Today we will focus on employees in the context of Paul's word to slaves. Next week our former elder, Bill Hyatt, will talk on employers in the context of Paul's word to masters. Bill has tremendous experience in the business world and I am very much looking forward to what he has to offer us.

We all know that work is a very important relationship in our lives. Work is an essential part of God's created order, something that is good. When God created man he placed him in a garden and instructed him "to work and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). Work is necessary to provide food and shelter, and consumes a great amount of our time. We may well spend more hours at work than we do at home. We also attach great significance to our careers, seeking fulfillment and identity in our occupation, our

title, and our place of employment. When we meet someone for the first time, the first question is usually: "What do you do for a living?" We tend to immediately size people up depending on their response.

We also know that there are frustrations and struggles associated with work. In the current economy many suffer unemployment, layoffs, and trying to make ends meet. While some find a career they absolutely love others have difficulty finding the type of career or job that really suits them. I always envied people who knew exactly what they wanted to do at age ten. We can struggle with the company management or with the people we work with. If we are unhappy for any reason it is common to look for a job change. Living in Silicon Valley offers particular challenges that might be different than many other places – pressure to work long hours, cost of living, and long commutes.

None of the difficulties of work should be surprising when we recall the consequence of sin entering into the world. While work is good, the ground has been cursed, filled with thorns and thistles. Work will be toil and trouble and requires the sweat of our faces (Gen. 3:17-19). How do we deal with the difficulties at work and live as a new creation in Christ? We need God's word to give us direction and keep us centered on the right things. Here is our text for today, Paul's words to slaves:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism. (Col. 3:22-25)

In Paul's day the household was the basic unit and it included slaves as well as the family. The householder, usually a man, exercised authority over the household as a husband, father, and master. Certain household rules governed the home and this has been our focus this summer – husbands and wives, children and fathers, slaves and masters. Paul does not seek to change these rules of society but rather gives instructions as to how to relate as a new creation in Christ, as one raised with Christ and seeking the things above, doing what is fitting in the Lord.

The false teaching at Colossae may have led to a disregard for the ordinary duties of the household since the focus of that teaching was on spiritual experience, divine encounters, and rigid ascetic practices. Paul is saying that every area of our life is important to God and seeking the things above, and so Paul

says in 3:17: “whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” “The whole of life, both thought and conduct, is to be submitted to the Lord Jesus Christ. No area of life stands outside his control; so there is no final distinction between the sacred and secular.”¹ Everything we do is sacred, even the mundane and ordinary.

Slaves were basically the property of the householder. They did not have rights and were often treated harshly. Paul did not seek to abolish slavery but sought to give a believing slave a vision for how to relate in his relationship to the master. We might note that there is more attention given to a slave than any of the other five people mentioned in the household rules. In the Greek text, the slave is given 56 words compared to 60 words total for all the others. Also, there are four other passages that deal with slaves in the New Testament (Eph. 6, 1 Tim. 6, Titus 2, 1 Peter 2). The New Testament contains more instruction to slaves than on the subject of marriage. Obviously, Paul considers this to be a vital issue.

The Exhortation – Obey Earthly Masters

The exhortation that Paul gives to slaves is to obey their earthly master, literally their master or lord according to the flesh, meaning the temporary world order. This is the same exhortation given to children in their relationship to their earthly parents. Paul gives the same command to slaves in Ephesians, while in Titus and 1 Peter the command is to “be subject” or “to submit.” In 1 Timothy, Paul tells slaves “to regard their own masters as worthy of all honor” (1 Tim. 6:1). Notice that this applies to “everything” and “whatever you do.” In other words a slave didn’t get to pick and choose.

Imagine the situation in the early church. The believing slave was now free in Christ and was a brother in Christian community in the same way that Jew and Gentile were brothers and wives and husbands were equal heirs in the grace of life. However, the same slave was under the authority of his or her master. This dichotomy might have been why Paul gives more attention to slaves, since he or she would have to distinguish between their earthly and heavenly status. If the master was a believer then the slave and master were brothers in Christ but would relate differently at home and church.

The world we live in today, especially in Silicon Valley, is much different than Paul’s world. We are not slaves without rights, but nonetheless, what Paul says to slaves is directly applicable for how we conduct ourselves at work. In our world today we all live under authorities. We live under the authority of government and most of us live under the authority of bosses and managers, CEO’s and CFO’s. These are our earthly masters, even if they are also believers. We cannot do as we please or avoid the things we don’t feel like doing. We do what we are asked to do, as long as it isn’t something immoral and unethical. We work hard and respect those who are over us in everything, not just some of the time. This is fitting in the Lord.

The Internal Attitude of Obedience

The external action required is obedience but the deeper issue is the internal attitude. Paul says: **do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart**

and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters...

Paul is saying that the real issue is a heart issue. As we have talked about parenting and marriage in past weeks we seem to keep repeating this same theme. In fact the NIV translation has the word “heart” in two places, although in the second occurrence the Greek word is “soul,” but this also refers to the inner being. Paul talks about our inner attitude both negatively and positively, reminiscent of putting off and putting on that was discussed earlier in the chapter.

Negatively we do not obey in eye-service as men-pleasers. We don’t just work hard when someone is watching us and then do the minimum when no one is looking. We don’t just show up to be seen by the right people. We don’t work to be a people-pleaser, to win the favor and gain the approval of our bosses only.

Positively we obey from the heart with sincerity and a fear of the Lord attitude. Notice that Paul says this twice for emphasis. “Work at it with all your heart” is equivalent to “do it ... with sincerity of heart.” “Working for the Lord, not for human masters,” repeats the idea of not being a people-pleaser but fearing the Lord. As we go about our work the real boss we are obeying is the Lord Jesus Christ and we are ultimately serving him. This is what Paul says in verse 24 – “serve the Lord Jesus.” The idea of Jesus being our boss is emphasized by the four occurrences of the word “Lord,” referring to Jesus, compared to the single occurrence of lord referring to masters.

The word sincerity means “singleness,” meaning that we are not double-hearted seeking the approval of men and also trying to serve Christ. We are not to be half-hearted in our devotion to Christ. We work single-mindedly to please our Lord. The word also has the sense of generosity, i.e. we work with “all” of our heart. We work as diligently and faithfully when no one is looking as when the boss’s eyes are on us. This doesn’t mean that we are to be workaholics, live an imbalanced life, or never take vacations. We simply remember that we are always under the watchful gaze of the one we ultimately serve. We are Christ-centered not self-centered in our work.

While getting checked out at the grocery store this week I asked the clerk if she was working hard. She responded by saying she was hardly working, just pretending to be working hard. Now she was kidding when she said this, but all too often we can fall into this kind of attitude at work. I can also recall a familiar phrase I heard often when I worked for a defense contractor: “It is good enough for government work.” “Good enough” implies we are just getting by without working with all of our heart.

When we are at “the office,” wherever that might be, our attitude means everything because our attitude reveals the character that is in us and it is our character that has influence in the world for Christ, not our title. It doesn’t matter whether we are a butcher or a baker, a ditch-digger or a doctor, a CEO or a stay-at-home parent. Even if we are not particularly excited about our job we are still to have a fear of the Lord attitude and a heart to serve.

When I first got married I was unsure as to which direction to head in my career. Liz told me to do whatever I wanted to do. She

didn't care if I became a garbage collector but she wanted me to be the best garbage collector ever.

Now you might be saying: "you don't know my boss; you don't know my work situation; you have to be kidding me." Consider what Peter writes:

Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. (For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it?) But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. (1Pet. 2:18-21)

The reason that our heart attitude is so important is because of our Christian witness. When we go to work the name of Jesus is at stake. We are representatives of Jesus and our attitude and character will either attract to or repel people from the gospel. In chapter 4 Paul will say: Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity (Col. 4:5).

To Titus Paul says:

Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive. (Titus 2:9-10)

To Timothy Paul writes:

Slaves are to regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and *our* doctrine will not be spoken against. (1Tim. 6:1)

Whether we realize it or not the office is a place for ministry. We get paid to work alongside other people. And because we spend so much time with these people they cannot help but notice how we go about our work, how we respond to pressure, and how we relate to people. Living a resurrection life at work is a tremendous witness to the person and character of Jesus. How would someone be drawn to Christ if they saw an angry, disgruntled, bitter employee who laughed at all the crude jokes, bad-mouthed management, and worked hard only when someone was watching? But when people see our true self, our raised-with-Christ self, clothed with "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (3:12) even under pressure, they will see Jesus even if they choose not to believe in him.

Added Motivation for Obedience

Now if we need extra motivation, look closely at the last couple of verses:

.... you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

The slave living in Paul's day had no rights and according to Roman law was exempt for inheriting anything. However, Paul says that that does not justify doing wrong. Rather he tells slaves to look to the long-term gain. A slave could rest assured that he or she would receive an inheritance in the future from the Lord. Paul said in chapter 1 that God has qualified us (including slaves) "to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light" through the work of Christ.

On the other hand a slave would be sobered by Paul's word that he or she would be accountable to the Lord and receive the wrong they have done to a master. Slaves would not be granted any special consideration or favoritism for being a slave, even if treated harshly. Slaves "must not suppose that wicked actions have no significance before God because they are slaves or that indulgence would be granted because of extenuating circumstances."² This is consistent with Paul's teaching that all must stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). Salvation is by grace but judgment is according to works. One day Jesus will give us all a "performance review."

How we live in the present is important. We need to realize that there are long-term consequences. Being a Christian does not excuse poor or half-hearted work. We do not work merely to gain for the temporal world. Our character and reputation is much more important than the size of our paycheck. We do our work for the Lord and as Paul infers in Ephesians, the Lord will take care of the finances. As Paul said earlier in chapter 3, we seek the things above and not the things of the earth. Our time in eternity will make our time on earth seem like a second.

Well, that was Paul's reflection on house rules, now here is mine.

Reflections on Work

God guides us through the authorities in our lives. I truly believe that God puts us under bosses and managers at work in order to direct our lives. He is sovereign in these choices and we can trust in his provision, even with bosses that lack character. I have worked ten years as an engineer and now almost thirty as a pastor. For me there is no difference being under the authority of bosses and managers and being under a board of elders. I know our elders and I know they are not perfect. But I believe that God speaks through them into my life. If I didn't believe this I would live with a very shaky foundation in my life wondering if God was really in control. If I am not willing to submit to human authority then I will not submit to God's authority.

Work is formational. We have talked a lot about transformation, formation into Christ during our studies in Colossians. This is the goal Paul stated in chapter 1, to present everyone complete in Christ (Col. 1:28). If we think that formation takes place only at church we are way off the mark. Work provides a crucible where we are forced to grow through adversity, struggles, and dealing with difficult people. Our character is formed through these experiences when we learn to be patient and kind and compassionate. We will never find the perfect job but God will ensure that we are in the perfect place for what he wants to do in our lives.

Our work is service to the Lord. There are actually three exhortations in the passage – obey, work, and serve. These three exhortations appear to be a package deal. Work is service to the Lord that requires obedience. The word “serve” is the same root word as “slave.” We are all, like Paul, slaves of Christ in every area of our life. We are servants of God. And this applies not just at church but also at Apple, HP, or wherever you work.

One of the words for work in the Old Testament also means “worship.” Our work is worship to God. When we seek to find our identity and fulfillment in our work or occupation, work becomes the idol we serve. But when we lose our life to serve God and others, including our managers, customers, and colleagues, then work becomes a life-giving venture, a fragrant aroma to God. The Benedictines have a guiding principle: “work and pray.” In other words, work is a spiritual activity.

Dorothy Sayers writes: “Let the church remember this: that every maker and worker is called to serve God in his profession or trade – not outside it.”³

Work is a place of ministry. I often hear people say they wish they could be in full-time ministry and serve the Lord. Well, the truth is that all of us have a full-time ministry right where we are planted. God has us where we are for a reason. I learned three things about this during my years in the marketplace. First, this ministry takes time to unfold. It takes time to build relationships and really get to know others. It takes time for people to see our hearts and our character. In my job as an engineer for ten years I discovered that this timeframe was about three years. Every three years something changed to bring me into new relationships.

Second, I saw that my perspective changed when I became publicly known as a Christian. That fact dramatically changed the way I went to work everyday. Everyday I walked through the door I knew that the name of Jesus was at stake. When coworkers knew that I was a follower of Jesus, work became an exciting place. Third, I learned that the greatest opportunity for ministry to others was during crisis, when things ran amuck at work or when someone was facing a crisis in their personal life. If I stayed calm while everyone else was in a panic, my influence increased. If people were suffering I could listen and even have an opportunity to pray for them.

Changing jobs or relocating requires wisdom. Unlike slaves we have the opportunity to seek employment elsewhere and this isn't wrong. However, if we become fed up where we are at and think that change will give us the life we want we fall prey to an illusion. No matter where we go, we will take our inner self with us. A change in our surroundings does not equate to a change in character. When people ask me whether they should change jobs I ask them three questions. First, is God done with what he wants to do with your character in the current situation? Have you gone through something? Have you seen God change you? God will teach you the lessons he wants to either at company A or company B. Changing jobs might just delay the process. Second, have you learned to be content in the current circumstances? Have you been able to let go and turn your restless ambitions over to God? When I entered the work world after graduation from college, this process took seven years. And third, is God done with your current work relationships? Have you had a chance to share Christ with those to whom you have grown close? I know there are many considerations when changing jobs, but we should seek wisdom from God and others about these changes.

Paul's word to slaves is a challenging and convicting word to all of us. But we can take it because we have been raised with Christ and are being transformed into his likeness. We may think this process is impossible, but all things are possible for God.

1. Peter O'Brien, *WBC: Colossians and Philemon*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 233.
2. O'Brien, 231.
3. Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Mass., 2004, pg. 83.

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