



Catalog No. 1759

Colossians 4:1

25th Message

William Hyatt

August 5, 2012

“THE BOSS”

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH:

LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS

Good Morning and welcome to Peninsula Bible Church in Cupertino. I am very happy to be here this morning and to talk about a topic that has been on my mind for many years: “What does it mean to be a person of faith in the workplace?” More specifically, “What does today’s passage say to the person of faith who is “The Boss,” who bears responsibility for others or for results?”

I suspect that my 30 plus years of running Silicon Valley companies, and the scar tissue that I have accumulated along the way, are part of the reason I was asked here today.

First, I want to say how much I appreciate the ministry that you have here at PBCC, especially since we have moved away from this area. The teaching and fellowship here are very special and very rare. You are blessed here and I hope that you can recognize that.

You have been in a summer series that focuses on some of the important relationships in life and how they are to be lived out by a person whose identity is in Jesus Christ. Last week you heard John give an excellent message on “Work.” If you missed it be sure to get a copy, because it is very encouraging.

Today, we are going to continue this series by looking at just one verse,

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven (Col. 4:1).

As you might expect there is more here than meets the eye, but be assured that you can get a good understanding of Paul’s command here with just a plain reading. We will consider the following questions as we look at this verse in detail:

- Who is being addressed?
- Why is this instruction so concise?
- What reason does Paul give for obeying this command?
- What do justly and fairly really mean from a biblical perspective?
- Isn’t this nearly impossible to do in real life?

Then, with a good understanding of these questions, I will add my suggestion for an outcome, a biblically-based result that will help us answer two practical questions: “What will obeying this command end up looking like in real life?” and, “How can you know that you (or your boss) are following this command?”

Who is being addressed?

To whom is this verse addressed? Masters? Clearly, the “boss” in a work setting, but also to anyone with responsibility or oversight for people or results. You may not be the boss at work, but you might be a team leader or a project leader at various times. Even as a team member with the need to interact with others you may find this verse speaking to you. Certainly if you ever want to be “the Boss” you need to understand this command and to anticipate its implications.

You may be a mom at home with a couple of kids. You are wondering if this verse could apply to your situation. Ask them, especially teenagers, if they think the “master/slave” or “boss/servant” dynamic applies to their relationship with you. And this command certainly can apply when you are managing a home repair, a kitchen remodel or even just the lawn work. I believe this command has broad application.

Why is this instruction so concise?

For all the important issues that it raises, this verse seems to be too concise. After all, Paul just used the previous four verses to address slaves, but now just one verse is directed to the Masters. And as you may realize, this command is a radical departure from the master/slave relationship found throughout the Roman world.

To understand this, we need to remember that all throughout the Bible there are commands to the powerful and wealthy to respect the rights of slaves and others who were vulnerable or less powerful and to treat them fairly and justly. Some examples include:

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy ... You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets for he is poor and counts on it (Deut. 24:14-15).

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness ... who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages (Jeremiah 22:13).

Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts (James 5:4).

You may recall that James had earlier defined authentic religion in terms of proper treatment of widows and orphans. Even beyond calling for fair treatment from us, the Old Testament demonstrates that God personally cares for the most vulnerable in society.

For the Lord...executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing (Deut. 10:17-18).

The point is that while the command in Col. 4:1 might have sounded very radical to slave owners in the ancient world, Paul would expect his hearers (at least those with a Jewish background) to be very aware of the Biblical precedent for this command.

What reason does Paul give for obeying this command?

Paul takes the opportunity to remind the masters, the “Bosses”, the powerful in society, that they also have *a Master in Heaven* who is the Lord. They are accountable as well. Just as he previously told slaves that “**It is the Lord whom you serve,**” he now reminds masters of their Heavenly Master.

Recall that in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he used a similar image to remind all believers in Jesus that **"you are not your own, you are bought with a price,"** and Paul would have us understand that this applies to bosses and masters as well.

What do "justly" and "fairly" really mean from a biblical perspective?

I want to drill down on these two words, but first I want to tell you how I came to learn that the people who work for and alongside you are "real people." I know what the Human Resources Department says, that you should only care about on-the-job performance and whatever happens outside of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. is irrelevant. I used to think that also – until one day.

A larger company had acquired our smaller company and I had some new responsibilities. One man who had been my right arm when it came to purchasing and manufacturing still reported to me. At a staff meeting I noticed that he seemed to be very distracted. After the meeting I asked him why. He told me that the day before, his new wife had emptied their apartment and she had left him. I quickly realized that the reality of his life outside the workplace would greatly affect his work at the job.

Consider a woman who just received a message that her daughter is in the assistant principal's office for disciplinary reasons and that she needs to come and get her. Will she be 100% focused on her job? How about the man who just received a message from his doctor explaining, "You have a golf ball sized tumor on your kidney." How effective do you think that he will be on his next sales call?

Real People with Real Lives!

In the modern workplace, real people with real lives' surround us. They are not just boxes in an organizational chart. Dealing with people's personal lives at work can be very inconvenient and very time-consuming, but it is a reality! The real issue is, how do we respond?

If our identity is in our job title or our stock options or our bonus, and these are threatened, we will react one way.

But, if our identity is in Jesus Christ and we are willing to let God transform ordinary life into opportunities to minister to those around us - we will react another way.

As a matter of fact, in the previous chapter of Colossians Paul described how someone with faith in Jesus should react. He says that if our identity is in Christ we should enter our workplace clothed, as it were, with "... compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Col. 3:12).

Now that would be a radical change from how most bosses deal with "situations"!

Now back to these two words, justly and fairly.

1) **Justly:** The Greek word that gets translated here as 'justly' (or 'just') is used more than 75 times in the New Testament. It has the underlying sense of "in a straight way," "right conduct." More than 50 times it is translated 'righteous' or 'righteous person.'

In the Hebrew Old Testament the idea of righteousness is a big-time concept and a description of God's character.

The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works (Psalms 145:17 ESV).

This characteristic ("righteousness") is also applied to some people in the Old Testament. When that takes place scholars have observed that the person

... who is righteous tries to preserve the peace and prosperity of the community by fulfilling the commands of God in regard to others.¹

Looking closely at this quote and assuming that the community is your workplace, we see that when the boss is managing justly or righteously his or her focus will be "with regard to others." That sounds like a good summary of Paul's command in Col. 4:1, and it is a very high standard indeed.

2) **Fairly:** The second word "fairly" is otherwise translated in the New Testament as "equality" (i.e., "that which is equal"). It comes from a root word that means "same" or "consistent." Note that the King James Version uses "equal" here. That suggests to me that a Biblical understanding of this word will set a more rigorous standard for our behavior than does our common use of it.

"Fair" can be defined somewhat loosely. Just listen to any parent's answer when their child complains, "That's not fair!" Our modern understanding of "fair" is very subjective. If you attempt to be "fair" at work you will be taking a risk! You might expect to be praised for your gracious treatment of one person, only to be then accused of not being "fair" to someone else – that is, of not being precisely consistent.

How about the recent decision of the president of Lenovo to share his \$3 million bonus among all the hourly workers at Lenovo? Perhaps, there were even some there who complained that this was not fair. (After all this was just his supplemental bonus. He apparently did not share his \$10 million primary bonus).

This is where a biblical understanding of a word can be so helpful. The biblical standard of "equal" or "same" are much more precise than our typical understanding of "fair." Let me encourage managers and team leaders to aim for "equal" and "same" – that is, to be "fair" in the biblical sense of the word. It is well worth it.

Fairness is a major aspect of hiring and firing decisions. Letting someone go can be the hardest thing a boss faces, especially when that person is an excellent performer. Small companies do run out of money and sometimes very tough decisions must be made. Once you have had to let someone go you will never view hiring decisions the same way.

The good news is that the results of fair treatment (even just your poor attempts at finding a fair approach) will ripple throughout the organization. Others will realize that is part of your business culture. Customers and clients will benefit as well.

Isn't this nearly impossible to do in real life?

Hopefully, by now you are getting the idea this verse, Col. 4:1 is a very challenging command to obey. Good! Trying to live this out at work (or at home) is not easy and maybe, not even possible on your own power. I believe that you will need the presence of God's Spirit in your life to empower you to have the wisdom, and to make the choices, needed to obey this.

Rob Barrett, whom some of you will remember, called this process "*redemptive incarnation*," that is, bringing the redeeming life of Jesus into our workplace by just showing up and trusting God. Amazingly, God wants to use you to bring His Righteousness to ordinary people in ordinary situations, and thereby transform them.

“THE BOSS”

I have already suggested one necessary step here and that is to turn these situations over to the Lord. Ask God to live His life through you at work.

When a boss faces a difficult and irreversible business decision, an important first step is to take it to the Lord in prayer. Ask that you are seeing the situation correctly and ask that the Lord go before you “into the lion’s den,” so to speak.

As the president of small companies, I often had to make decisions about which projects to continue to fund and which to terminate. In one small company, we had a world-renowned scientist who had developed our core technology. After a meeting where it was decided to cancel one of his pet projects, he asked me to meet with him. I was concerned that he might resign, but he told me that he was pleased that I (“The Boss”) was willing to make this difficult decision. I realized then that the people on your team do know when there are problems – and more often than not wonder why the Boss doesn’t do something about them! In this case, the Lord had clearly been there ahead of me.

A second step would be to find one or two people who know your work world with whom you can be mutually accountable. I know that this was God’s plan for me to be a better boss, and I am convinced that the Lord can use others to help you be the type of boss or worker that you desire to be. Many of those people are here this morning.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking, “This all sounds good, but my company is paying me to get a job done, to produce results. Isn’t there a conflict with what you are saying?” Actually, no!

As J. I. Packer explains in his *Concise Theology*, we are not being called to make a break with the work-world’s activities (after all, that is how God has arranged to provide us a living).

- If you are an engineer, design the best products that you can.
- If you are a financial manager get correct data published in a timely manner.
- If you are in sales be diligent about your time and effort.
- It is not the activity that is in question (assuming it is ethical and legal).

But, Packer continues to say that we are called to make a “clean break with the world’s value-systems.” It is the value-system that you bring to work situations that is in view here. Ask yourself, “What is your personal value-system?”

What will this look and feel like at my workplace?

The book of 2nd Samuel records King David’s words on this topic, and David certainly qualifies as a Leader, Manager, King (“Master”).

The God of Israel spoke, the Rock of Israel said to me:

When one rules over men in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God, he is like the light of morning at sunrise on a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain that brings the grass from the earth. (2 Samuel 23:3-4 NIV)

Eugene Peterson has helped us with a paraphrase:

The God of Israel said, “Whoever governs fairly and well, who rules in the Fear-of-God, is like first light at daybreak without a cloud in the sky, like green grass carpeting earth, glistening under fresh rain.” (THE MESSAGE)

How might we paraphrase this image? Mine is “It is like a sunny morning with dew on the grass.” What characteristic does this description suggest to you?

To me it suggests a very **refreshing** setting. So now we have a test that we can apply: Are our employees, coworkers, or others refreshed by our presence in the workplace? It seems to me that that is who we want to be as followers of Jesus – at work, and in our home and in our neighborhood – people who bring a calm, refreshing presence and God’s perspective into real life situations.

This suggests a very high standard – it is. But, be assured that God is willing to live out his life through you to achieve that result. If you let him, this outcome can be expected and your coworkers will be able to tell you if it is present. Something will be different.

So now, Bosses, Managers, Masters, my final word to you is to remind you that you have a very unique ministry. You really can affect the tone, character and value-system in your workplace. This is a high calling but, it comes with the need to recognize that real people work for you – and the need to be real yourself.

It is the Lord you are obeying – and ultimately serving!

1. Harold G. Stigers, in *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).

