

## Complete: Navigating Earthly Responsibilities as Heavenly Citizens

### Colossians 3:18-4:1 (Part 3)

When Bethany and I were first married and living in South Carolina I had a job working long hours for a construction clean up company driving dump trucks and skid steer bobcats. A lot of time outside doing manual labor in the sun. I didn't mind the work, but the boss I had was probably the worst manager and leader I've ever worked for. He wasn't organized, didn't communicate well, and his incompetence led to a lot of extra work for us as employees.

Then we moved to Southern California and a friend of mine got me a job working for a new company in a warehouse for probably the best boss I've ever had. If you pictured a stereotypical southern California guy, he was it. Laid back, super cool and kind, very fun and interesting. He had a side gig as an actor in commercials and he surfed. He was organized, ambitious and eventually sold the company for 10's of millions of dollars. We loved working for him.

I'm sure most of you could tell stories of good bosses and bad bosses. Good work environments and bad. Enjoyable jobs and not so enjoyable. Often the same job will have smooth and easy seasons and difficult seasons. Work is not a result of sin. God designed us to work and to work hard. Listen to Genesis 2:15.

But in Genesis 3 things got much more challenging. Listen to Genesis 3:17-19 as God outlines the impact of sin on our work in the world. Work will sometimes be frustrating and fruitless. Bosses will be incompetent and harsh. And yet, God has made us to work, and our relationship with Christ must shape how we work.

It could be tempting to think that because we are now united to Christ and citizens of heaven that our earthly work doesn't matter all that much. But Paul argues that because we have been changed by Christ, we will work differently from those around us. Our motivation and perspective will reflect our new status in Christ.

Let's return to Colossians 3 and this morning we will look at the last set of relationships as Paul describes our earthly work and how we do it. These sets of relationships are now framed by the reality of Colossians 3:9-10. So, here's what

we have been discussing the past few weeks. **3 Areas of Earthly Responsibility Shaped by Our Heavenly Identity.**

1. Marriage (vv. 18-19)
2. Parenting (vv. 20-21)
3. Work (vv. 22-4:1)

Notice the first word of verse 22 and the first word of 4:1. Here are two sides to the work relationship. Now, why do I say this is about work because most of you are probably thinking, “I am not a bondservant”. And if you know anything about this word in Greek, it’s the word that can sometimes be translated “slave”. Let’s talk about this.

The reason the ESV translates this “bondservant” instead of “slave” is to try to help us recognize a difference between this system and American slavery. This doesn’t mean the Roman system was godly and awesome, but there are some significant differences. American slavery was race based and Roman slavery was often based on one’s economic situation. So, you could enter “slavery” or become a bondservant to pay your debts. Of course, the Roman system was abused and there’s still a strong element of one human having significant control over another. However, we apply Paul’s instructions here to modern work because it’s the closest parallel and because this was the job many held. You could go into servanthood and purchase your way out of it.

Paul doesn’t outright condemn this system here and go after it politically, but his instructions do set the groundwork for the undoing of all forms of slavery in the future because he treats each party as equal in Christ, which you will see as we go along.

So, for our understanding of this passage we are going to talk about work and directly apply it to our jobs today. So, what does Paul say? Interestingly, he has far more to say about work here than he did regarding marriage or parenting. I’m going to divide his instruction up into 5 parts.

- Work Ultimately for Christ (vv. 22-24)

If you had to boil all of this down to one message, this would be it. Your ultimate allegiance is now to the Lord Christ. But this ultimate allegiance doesn't erase your responsibility to earthly employers. In fact, it solidifies it. Look at verse 22.

You are obligated to obey your earthly master or boss. Notice the reason why at the end of verse 22. Because you fear the Lord. Fearing the Lord is a standard OT way of describing the way humans properly relate to God, but it's not absent from the NT. To fear God is to reverence Him. It's not to be afraid, but it is to respect His authority and Lordship. There's a genuine sense of awe that comes from God's character and position and this sense of awe combined with submission to Him is the fear of the Lord. Fearing God leads us to obey earthly authorities.

Verse 23 continues to describe our ultimate allegiance to Christ. Paul's not saying we don't work for men, but that they aren't the driving force in our work. Then in verse 24 he makes it explicit. You are serving the Lord Christ. Rightly ordered work at your job is an act of service and even worship to God.

Think about this change of focus and motivation for the Roman slave who has come to faith in Christ. There were certainly moments when his or her work was not enjoyable and easy. This is probably true for you as well. And yet, your new life in Christ leads you to look past your boss and the difficulty of your job and to Christ. Listen to 1 Peter 2:18. And so, you continue to do your job well because your ultimate allegiance is to Christ. In other words, you work hard.

- Work Hard (vv. 22-23)

A few years ago, a new term entered our cultural vocabulary regarding our jobs. How many of you remember the term "quiet quitting"? The gist is that you consciously disengage your heart from your work and only do the bare minimum required to keep your job. You don't quit, but you also don't do anything above and beyond. You exist, maintain, and just get done what you need to.

This mentality is the exact opposite of what Paul says is fitting for a believer who serves Christ at work. Notice the language of verse 22. The phrase "eye-service" gives a vivid picture. You work when the boss can see you or when you will get

noticed. You work only to make an impression and for the sake of appearance. But Paul says our motivation goes deeper than that. It comes from the heart.

So, what does Paul expect that our hearts will be driven by at work? Well, first of all he ends verse 22 by pointing to the Fear of the Lord. But second, the instructions in this entire section, including the commands regarding marriage and parenting have all been motivated by genuine love for others. Remember this quote from the first week in this text?

*The Stoics (who provide some of the closest pagan parallels to these household lists) based their teaching on the law of nature: this is the way the world is, so this is how you must live in harmony with it. Paul bases his on the law of the new nature: Christ releases you to be truly human, and you must now learn to express your true self according to the divine pattern, not in self-assertion but in self-giving. – N.T. Wright*

Why work hard? Love for God and love for others. It's an act of genuine love and grace when you work hard, even for that boss that doesn't deserve it. Look at verse 23.

There's a reason there's such a thing as the "Protestant Work Ethic". Protestants broke down the stringent divide between the secular and the sacred and came to see all work as honorable in God's eyes. And because all work is honorable in God's eyes and a way of loving and serving others, we ought to work hard from the heart. Whether you are a pastor, a ditch digger, a stay at home mom, the president, a teacher, a mechanic, or an astronaut, all work has dignity and ought to be done with all of our might.

And we can work hard, even when the earthly payoff seems small because of what we read in verse 24.

- Work with an Eye on Future Reward (vv. 24)

If you find yourself saying something like, "Well, this is just an earthly job and it's not what really matters" then you have perhaps started to stray off course and are neglecting Paul's perspective here. Look at verse 24.

Imagine if you were a bondservant during Paul's day serving in a rough situation. Or imagine if you are working a job today where you are being underpaid, exploited, and taken advantage of. But then imagine that out of love for God and others you continue to work hard and do your best. Paul promises that God sees that work.

This word "inheritance" is unique in the Bible. In the OT the "inheritance" was the land promised to Israel. It was their hope and expectation based on the promise of God. But that promise has now expanded through Christ to believers. God's promises to us no longer are fixed on a strip of land in the middle east. They now include the entirety of creation on the new earth when the kingdom of God fully arrives with all the eternal benefits. We've already encountered inheritance language in Colossians, and it's aimed at this expansive expectation. 1:12.

What this means is that no matter our work situation on earth, we have an eternal inheritance in Christ that we look to and hope in, based on the promises of God in Christ. And this causes us to work with honesty and integrity as we represent Christ.

- Work with an Eye on Future Judgment (vv. 25)

In other words, as a follower of Christ, do not take advantage of your employer. I think what Paul is getting at here is the deep and abiding connection between our work habits and our faith. Those who consistently do wrong in this area show that they may not be truly followers of Christ. Work in the present with an eye toward the future.

So far, all of this has been aimed at the one working under an authority. Now, surprisingly for this time, Paul turns to address the one in charge. This comment in verse 1 is what puts bondservants on equal footing as masters before Christ. All are image bearers serving Christ, just with different responsibilities.

- Manage with Justice because You are Accountable Too (v. 1)

Bondservants are accountable to Christ for how they work and so are masters. Look at verse 1. Notice the motivation here. Also notice the call for justice and

fairness. This was completely countercultural for the Roman Empire. A master could do whatever he wanted to and treat the bondservant in any way he wanted. But that ends in Christ. Now masters serve Christ and represent Christ in how they treat those under them and Paul requires justice and fairness. Fairness in wages, work hours, treatment, and in every other way.

I'm often shocked at how often Christians seem to turn off the Christian switch when they enter the workplace. I've heard stories of Christian employers treating their Christian employees terribly. Paul isn't requiring Christian bosses to be pushovers, to pay everyone a 6-figure salary no matter what job they have, and to be buddy-buddy with every employee. But he is saying that your master above loves justice and fairness and if you love Him, you will treat others as He would treat them.

So, these last 3 weeks we have looked at specific areas, marriage, parenting, and work. The key message in all of this is that your new life in Christ shapes how you navigate earthly responsibilities. So let it. Lean into the grace of Christ and let His grace turn you outward in love toward others in all of these areas. Let's pray.

### Sermon Reflection Questions – 6/14/26 (Both Sides)

- What's the best work environment you have ever been a part of? What's the worst?
- Describe how you feel the impact of the fall on work — in your current job, your home, or wherever your main work happens.
- The sermon argued that Paul doesn't condemn the Roman system directly but still plants the seeds for its undoing. What is that argument, and does it satisfy you or does it leave you with questions?
- The sermon said Paul treats bondservants and masters as equals before Christ. How does that principle, even without an outright condemnation of slavery, lay the groundwork for abolition? Do you find that argument compelling?
- Describe a work situation that would change for you if you saw it as an opportunity to serve and worship Christ.
- The sermon described 'quiet quitting' as the exact opposite of what Paul calls us to. Have you ever been there or are you there now? What pulls you toward it, and what pulls you back?
- Talk about a time when you had to work hard for a difficult boss. What kept you going? What temptations were there? How would you help someone currently in this situation?

- The sermon said working hard even for a boss who doesn't deserve it is an act of love. Who specifically benefits when you do your job well, and is that something you actually think about at work or does it feel theoretical?
- Give an example of how you've seen a boss treat employees with justice and fairness. What's one way you could practice this now if you are in leadership over others at work?
- Paul says in verse 24 that God sees your work and will reward it eternally. Does that promise actually change how you approach your job day to day or does it feel too distant to be motivating? Be honest.

### **5 Instructions for Our Work as Heavenly Citizens**

1. Work Ultimately for Christ (vv. 22-24)
2. Work Hard (vv. 22-23)
3. Work with an Eye on Future Reward (v. 24)
4. Work with an Eye on Future Judgment (v. 25)
5. Manage with Justice because You are Accountable Too (v. 1)