

“A Theology of Work”
Colossians 3:22-25
(Preached at Trinity, December 9, 2018)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Last week we began looking at Paul's instruction to slaves and masters. It seems out of place in a section of Scripture dealing with the family. And it seems foreign to us where slavery is an institution of long ago.
2. But as I pointed out last week, slavery was very much accepted in the 1st century. It was a normal part of life.
 - A. Slaves were considered necessary for an ordered society
There were an estimated 60 million in the Roman empire - they probably formed the whole of the work force. Roman citizens didn't labor.
 - B. In the Roman culture there were often domestic slaves who were given responsibility for the care and training of the children.
Paul alludes to this in Galatians
Galatians 3:24-26 NAU - "Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. ²⁶ For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."
The word translated "tutor" is the Greek word παιδαγωγός which literally refers to a pedagogue or one given authority to train up the children.
Galatians 4:1-2 NAU - "Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, ² but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father."
3. The NT doesn't place an emphasis upon this world's system
 - A. The primary focus of the Gospel is not with cultural or political change.
For example, in **Romans 13** Paul commands us to obey the civil authorities but gives no commentary regarding the wickedness of the Roman emperor
 - B. The NT neither condemns or justifies slavery. It simply recognizes its existence and then instructs slaves and masters how to live in light of the Gospel of Christ.
 1. Christianity doesn't focus upon outward circumstance but upon the condition of the heart. We are charged to live holy lives before Christ in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.
 2. The New Testament focuses more on the proper behavior of slaves and masters rather than on the ethical issues of slavery itself. Masters didn't free their slaves, but the treatment of their slaves was transformed. And the work ethic of their slaves was transformed.

- C. The primary focus of the church is to evangelize and bring people to a saving knowledge of Christ, not to reform the world. This doesn't mean we don't stand firmly in support of justice and righteousness. It simply means that the only way people can be delivered from the corruption of the human heart is through the Gospel.
4. As I stated at the close of last week's sermon, this passage has much to say beyond the work of slaves and masters in the first century. It has much to say to the laborer in the 21st century.
- A. Employees today may consider themselves free but are certain expectations upon us if we are to maintain our employment. We are told when we must arrive, when we may eat, and when we are free to return to our homes. Does the Gospel have anything to say to Christian employees?
- B. Paul's words to the Christian regarding his work remains unchanged.
Colossians 3:23 NAU - "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men,"
 The word for "heartily" comes from the word referring to the soul (ψυχή).
 Put your soul into it. Serve with the fullness of your being.
 Work with enthusiasm.
 "As to the Lord." We work with all our might as servants of Christ.
5. We live in an age when work is considered a bad thing. People want to do as little work as possible, finish it quickly, and move on to what we really want to do. The weekend is seen as the end of the terrible curse of work. Retirement is seen as the light at the end of the tunnel and people try to begin it as early as possible.
6. Perhaps these slaves were also looking at work as a curse. They despised their masters who forced them to toil long hours. This morning I want us to consider the subject of work. I title this sermon "A Theology of Work." Few people consider the theological elements of work. **Verse 23** states plainly, all work is for the Lord. **Verse 24** states it is the Lord Christ that we are serving in our work.
- I. What is work from a Biblical perspective?
- A. Work is a Creation Ordinance
1. Work is God's appointed activity for men upon the earth. It is essential to our being.
 - a. It was ordained at creation to be continued as long as man dwells upon the earth. Work is a divine mandate.
 - b. Adam was placed in the garden to work – he was its keeper
Genesis 2:15 NAU - "Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it."
 - The word for "cultivate" (עָבַד) is one of the Hebrew words for work or labor.
Exodus. 1:13 NAU - "The Egyptians compelled the sons of Israel to labor rigorously;"
Exodus. 20:8-9 NAU - "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ "Six days you shall labor and do all your work,"
 - The word for "keep" (שָׁמַר) implies preserving, maintaining
 We build and produce and then we keep and maintain.

2. After the fall work was affirmed and designated as a life-long activity. There is no indication in Scripture that there is a period in life in which work would end. It changes, but it does not end. We remain productive, producing and maintaining.
Genesis 3:19 NAU - "By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return."
3. Work involves the fulfillment of our Divine calling or vocation. We are often confused about the subject of our vocation. Many see their vocation as the occupation that brings them the greatest joy and meaning.
 - A. There is much discontentment because we may not feel like we are in the place where we are doing the job we feel called to do. You hear people cry out, "I hate my job." The place where you are IS your calling today. It IS the place where you are to serve God faithfully. It is the place where you need to find contentment laboring in service to Christ.
Verse 24 - "It is the Lord Christ whom you serve."
 - B. It would be easy for a slave to complain because he didn't see his slavery as his vocation or his divine calling. Paul is saying that our labors ARE our divine calling because they are directed to Christ.
 - C. Within God's divine mandate to work, He equips us to engage in labor for His glory. Through our labors we serve Christ as we serve one another. This is the nature of our good works. We serve one another with joy as we serve Christ. This is why Paul is telling the slaves to stop thinking of their labors in terms of their master. Instead they were to find joy as they directed their service to Christ.
- B. Work is the God-appointed means of providing for our personal needs and the needs of our family
2 Thessalonians 3:10 NAU - " For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either."
1 Thessalonians 4:11 NAU - "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you,"
 1. Work is the God-appointed means for acquiring wealth.
 2. This has many different dimensions
 - a. Inheritance should be the result of the work of our family
 - b. Work can include the management of the work of others
 - c. The principle of work does not prohibit investment or allowing our money to acquire wealth
 3. It *does* exclude all forms of dishonesty, unlawful or unjust gain. It excludes seeking wealth without labor – lottery, unjust lawsuits, using the stock market as a form of gambling (in contrast to investing in corporate growth and profit)

C. God has appointed that we find meaning in our work—we are to find enjoyment in work because it reflects our Creator.

Ecclesiastes 2:24 NAU - "There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God."

1. Without work we lose a part of our human existence – that for which we were created. In other words, we were created to work.
2. This is why our work largely defines us. It isn't long after we meet someone new that we ask, "What do you do?"
3. Bruce Ray describes the importance of work to human welfare – "We live in a world where people think that the less work you can do, the better off you are. But God, who made the world, says that the meaning of our existence is inseparable from the work we do. To deny the importance of work is to deny ourselves and eventually to destroy ourselves."¹

II. A right understanding of work will transform *how* we work.

A. Paul says that we must work with God as our audience and our object.

1. We have earthly masters and earthly superiors and we want to gain their favor, but Paul says our ultimate motivation for hard work and excellence is not because they are watching. It is not ultimately to gain their favor.
2. God is our audience.
Colossians 3:22 NAU - "obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who *merely* please men"
3. God has placed many forms of authority on this earth. Each are ordained by God to have an impact upon our behavior. Our duty is that of submission with a goal of honoring God.
4. We obey not only when the master is watching. We are serving Christ, our true Master. We guard against those things that would dishonor Him.
 - a. Arriving late or taking extended lunch breaks
 - b. Using company property as if it were our own
 - c. Doing the minimum amount of work - just enough to get by
 - d. Using our time on the job (or on the clock) as if it were our own.
It is not our time! - we must not use our employers time even to evangelize - We must give ourselves entirely to our employer

B. We must be able to govern ourselves

1. It is an unfaithful and unprofitable servant who has to be continually be watched.
2. We have to continually oversee a child. He is undisciplined and self-willed.
An adult should be able to govern himself and know how to deny himself.
3. Someone should not have to watch you in order for you do what is right
Colossians 3:23 NAU - "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men,"

¹ Ray, Bruce A., *Celebrating the Sabbath*, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 2000), Page 18.

4. The Christian is to be the best employee because he is serving Christ. Too often employees resent their earthly bosses. Christian employees sometimes expect preferential treatment from their Christian employers. Rather, the employer should treat all of his employees with justice and equity before Christ. The Christian employee owes him an honest day's work for an honest day's wages. He must labor with sincerity of heart as to Christ.
 5. The Christian employee labors with excellence because he is serving Christ.
The Christian painter pays attention even to those areas not normally seen. The Christian custodian doesn't sweep the dust under the rug. He labors with all his heart. There are no meaningless, dead-end jobs when we are serving Christ.
- C. Christians must live as models of God's transforming grace.
1. Jesus described it as shining forth as lights in the world. To live with the savory characteristics of salt.
 2. The lost world should look upon us and be amazed. The unbelieving master should stand amazed at his believing slaves causing him to look seriously at Christianity.
 3. Unbelieving husbands or wives should see God's grace at work in their mates.
1 Peter 3:1-2 NAU - "In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any *of them* are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, ² as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior."
 4. This is true of every earthly relationship.
1 Peter 2:12 NAU - "Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe *them*, glorify God in the day of visitation."

Conclusion:

1. Although we may not receive what we feel is our due in this life, Paul reminds us that our reward will be full. Our Master does not fail to observe our faithfulness.
Colossians 3:24 NAU - "knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve."
Slaves were not heirs, but the servants of Christ have an inheritance.
2. Wives may serve obstinate husbands. Husbands may have disagreeable wives. Children may have unreasonable parents. Slaves or employees may have difficult superiors. Christians must remember that we live our lives before Christ. Our service is to Christ.
3. Paul closes this chapter with a reminder that just as Christ observes our faithfulness, He also sees our unfaithfulness. Both slave and master have a duty to serve our true Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.
Ephesians 6:8 NAU - "knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free."