

What difference does a relationship with Jesus make at work or at school or at home? It's simpler to think about Jesus when we're at church or with a small group of Christians studying the Bible. But are we aware of Jesus when we ride the bus, go to class, wash the dishes or attend a work meeting?

We can live like our lives have compartments. There's the work/school piece. There's a household chore section and homework. There's the relationships' part. There's looking after our kid's part. There's leisure time and social outings. There's the church/God/spiritual compartment. That may be the only time we think of Jesus.

Sometimes we act like very different people depending on context. I once had a friend who worked for someone from the same church. On Sunday, they would have kind interactions. On Monday, the employer would sometimes yell and belittle any friend on the construction site. It was like a switch flipped from church mode to work mode. I get that these are different environments. But should this result in a drastic change in our character or behavior?

Do we get to turn off our Jesus' connection when at work, school or home and just act however we want. Then we get to church we put on our best behavior. Any serious reader of the New Testament will discover this is not the way of Christ. Jesus did not come to be Lord over our Sunday mornings and then fade into the background for the rest of the week. To receive Christ Jesus as Lord means He's Lord over every area of our lives all the time.

We've seen this in the Colossian's study especially in chapter 3. Paul has addressed very personal areas of lifestyle and relationships. We've seen the commands to wives and husbands. Last week we looked at the relationship between children and parents.

Today we look at another one of these everyday relationships between workers and managers; employees and employers. I think we can extend this beyond working relationships

to teachers and students and to work in our households. Paul issues commands towards workers and those in charge about how to work and manage in light of their walk with Christ.

But there's an elephant in the room in this passage. The primary work relationship at that time was between slaves and masters. That creates another issue for us. We can apply these principles to our modern-day situation. But how could Paul just command slaves to obey their masters? Why wouldn't he condemn slavery as a corrupt and evil institution that needed to be dismantled? Why do we see Biblical characters own slaves? The Bible doesn't seem to directly address this. So, we need to deal with that. Then we will walk through the basic principles that apply to work, workers and managers. Then we will come to the Lord for His grace and strength to actually live this out. I pray you will see God's heart, compassion and justice throughout this passage. Our text is Colossians 3:22-4:1. It's on page 836 in the Bibles in front of you.

Colossians 3:22-4:1 (ESV)

22 Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

4 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Why doesn't Paul instruct masters to release their slaves? Why doesn't the Bible condemn slavery?

Well first, we need to identify our own picture of slavery. When you hear that word, what comes to mind? Many of us will think of slavery in the American south and Caribbean during the horrific slave trade of mostly Africans from the 17th to the 19th century. The accounts and records we have of that time paint a terrible picture. People were basically kidnapped in Africa. They were taken to the coast and sold to slaving ships. Then they would transport the slaves to Europe or the Americas. There, they would be sold again and treated as property.

There were some similarities between that slave trade and the time of Paul in the 1st century. He lived when Rome ruled much of the world. Much of the Roman Empire's economy was based on slave labor. The Romans did a lot of invading and fighting. They would capture people from villages. They also had prisoners of war when they won battles. They would bring these people back to Rome or the other cities in the empire. People would buy them.

Within this slave economy, there were different types of slavery. You could be a slave in the mines with a very short life expectancy. You could be sent to the galleys which were Roman ships of war. The galley slave would be kept below deck and have to pull the oars. Life expectancy was even shorter there. But perhaps most common were household slaves. They lived with their family. They slept in the house. They were responsible for whatever duties the father or master of the house required. It is the house of slaves or bondservants that Paul addresses here.

But still, the question remains, why doesn't Paul command masters to release their slaves? Why doesn't he command slaves to rise up and take their freedom? Well, those questions assume such actions would benefit the household slaves. They also assume a modern democracy where legal protest and courts existed everywhere.

Paul didn't live in a modern democracy. He lived in a dictatorship. The Romans didn't tolerate protests. They just killed the protesters. They brutally suppressed slave rebellions. Slaves had no legal rights or recourse. They could not go to court to claim mistreatment. And if a master released their slaves, they were still vulnerable. Without proper ID, they could be enslaved by any soldier on the street or the next cruel master down the road.

Old Testament Scholar Michael Heiser says this: "Why doesn't Paul advocate rebellion or protesting en masse like going down to the Roman senate and a bunch of Christians there with posters? The short answer is, he didn't want the slaves to be killed or taken away from their masters and sent to worse masters. They are the most vulnerable in the entire situation. They don't have rights. This is not a democracy. A lot of people living under Roman authority don't even

have Roman citizenship. You can't transfer our own culture back into the New Testament. If you have a bunch of Christians rising up against slavery, you're going to have a whole lot of people dead or moved to worse situations. Or you're going to have people who weren't slaves becoming slaves, because the Romans are just not going to tolerate it. They have no incentive or reason to tolerate it. This is a tyranny. Maybe like North Korea today.

And so we have to realize that Paul understands his own context better than we do, so we shouldn't be going around judging Paul. He doesn't support slavery. . . He gives commands in light of the reality of slavery. Paul doesn't want to make them more vulnerable.¹

So why doesn't Paul instruct masters to release their slaves? **Freeing slaves, in that context, would likely put them at greater risk.** It's also important to notice that Paul does in fact condemn enslavers in his letter to Timothy. In 1st Timothy 1, Paul talks about lawless and disobedient in the eyes of God. In his examples he lists "enslavers" in 1st Timothy 1:10. Enslavers take people captive in order to sell them into slavery. Paul names enslavers as lawless and disobedient. Including that in a letter could be risky. They lived under basically a police state. If you advocated rebellion against the Emperor or were accused of it, the Romans would kill you. So hopefully that helps us understand somewhat the context for that time.

Now considering all this, let's look at the Colossians passage. Paul spends four verses talking to bondservants or slaves. It's possible this indicates there were more slaves that joined the early church than those of the higher classes. Paul gives them clear instruction on how they must live considering their walk with Christ. Here we're going to try to translate into our time.

How can an employee honor Christ in their relationship with their manager? Verse 22 – "Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people pleasers but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord." **Employees need to work for their managers with sincerity of heart as if working for the Lord.** (Colossians 3:22)

¹ Michael Heiser, The Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 236, Colossians 3:18-25

There's four key pieces to this verse. First, Paul commands the slaves to obey their earthly masters in everything. This kind of command rubs against us 21st century people. We hardly use the word obedience today let alone apply it to the workplace. However, in this first century context, Paul wanted the best for Christian slaves. One way to increase the likelihood of their survival and well-being was obedience to their earthly masters as long as it didn't go against God's laws. This would reflect well on them and on their Lord.

Second, notice this obedience must happen even when the master is away. Employees must not work hard only when the manager is around. If that was the case, a lot of work might be left undone. Soon that worker will get known as one who cuts corners and never goes above and beyond.

Instead, third, they were to obey with sincerity of heart. This involves agreeing to obey the master in words and then following through with action. Such intention demonstrates sincerity. The manager gives the instructions. The employee carries it out.

But what if the manager is difficult or cruel or unfair? It's hard to have sincere motivation for such a person. But if the worker saw the Lord as their master, then they would gain strength to carry this out. That's the fourth piece of the verse – fearing the Lord.

Paul elaborates on this in verse 23 and 24. "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ." So slaves were to work heartily, giving their all as if they work for the perfect manager Jesus. When we go to our jobs or do our schoolwork or do work around the home, our relationship with Christ must permeate our work ethic. You know the difference between someone who works with all their heart compared to someone who gives a halfhearted effort. Yet even more motivation is given here. Paul reminds them they work for the Lord and not for men.

Then notice verse 24. "Knowing that from the Lord you will receive an inheritance as your reward." Think about how that would sound to a first century slave. They would get no earthly

inheritance. They were someone's property. They could get inherited to someone else. But here Paul says that a slave's God glorifying work would result in an inheritance from the Lord. This does not mean that they earned their salvation. Instead, it points to the Lord's awareness of their labors for His glory. Somehow, that would be rewarded in eternity.

So think about how this might apply today. Say you are an employee or worker. How would it impact your manager if you did exactly what they asked with sincerity of heart? You didn't argue, you didn't excuse – you didn't. How do you think that might affect them if they saw the results of your diligent work even when they weren't watching you? Decent managers would likely recognize this and appreciate it. But more than that, such an attitude pleases the Lord.

Even if you don't have a manager and do work at home, you can still do your work to the glory of God. You can still work heartily as for the Lord. Such work and even home chores can turn into an act of worship. Whatever you do, whatever your job is- complicated surgery; washing dishes; handling millions of dollars; cleaning raising children; building a building; work heartily for the Lord.

Notice also in verse 25 that there is a warning and a comfort. If someone just wants to ignore this command, Paul warns them. "For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality." Slack work and ignoring supervisors' reasonable commands is wrong in the eyes of the Lord. We need to take this to heart. But we also can take comfort in the fact that the Lord will confront those who only work when the manager shows up. Judgment day applies not only to our salvation but our lives. Our attitude and actions at work will be judged. And so will those of others who slacked off at work while we worked hard.

In my life, I have to apply this work heartily whenever I am alone in the office. I have a little sticky by my desk that helps keep me accountable. It says "God sees everything all the time. God is at work for my good." It also means I don't get to check out from my walk with God for a few hours or days. This doesn't mean that we need to pretend that everything is okay and always be on my best behavior. We can be real with God. That's what the Psalms are all about. But it

also means we don't get a pass to act like a jerk at work or when we're driving or whom we are at home.

Then Paul speaks to masters in chapter 4, verse 1. **How can managers and employers honor Christ in their relationship with their employees?** "Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven." This verse again speaks to the stronger in defense of the weaker. We've seen such concern in the command for Husbands to love your wives and do not be harsh with them." Or last week we saw the command "Fathers, (parents) do not provoke your children lest they become discouraged."

Masters must treat their bondservants justly and fairly. That means no cruelty or abuse; no taking advantage of them; no overworking. Paul connects the motivation for just and fair management to the Lord. The bondservant needed to act out of respect for the Lord. The master needed to recognize the Lord was master over them. They also would be held accountable for how they treated their slaves or bondservants. **Managers and Employers need to treat their employees justly and fairly since they also have a master in heaven. (Colossians 3:25-4:1)** A manager's Christian faith should impact how they do their work. It should affect our decisions. Compassionate concern for employees must be included in our decision making along with accountability.

Now though these commands are easy to understand, they're hard to live out. To work, manage or carry on with a God-focused and effort requires the Spirit's empowering. We need to call out for God's help to work and live like this. Yet it can give us a deeper purpose. And ultimately hearty work actually fulfills our calling from God. Work was part of life in the Garden of Eden. When done to God's glory, it can transform something we think is mundane and meaningless into something purposeful and glorious.

Your work matters to God. God sees and honors stay at home parents who work in caring for children all their waking hours; caregivers who care for loved ones. Washing dishes; doing laundry; fixing broken things all matters to God. Even if your employer, manager or boss doesn't

notice or fairly reward your work, the Lord will. The Lord sees and you will receive an inheritance as a reward.

Such a God immersed-life is possible when we invite Jesus into the deepest parts of our soul. Christians, we need to do that regularly during our God-focused compartments of life. Then when life squeezes us at work, school or at home, Jesus words and comfort will more naturally fill us and spill out of us. We consider and remember the ways of Christ when we work.

If you don't know Christ, giving your life to Him, this can sound a little culty for some who may not be used to such language. Yet Jesus is not a cult leader who tries to control, manipulate and use people. He invites. He loves in pure and wholesome ways. He wants the best for us. He was willing to give Himself up for us.

So when we come to Him, we begin the journey of having our lives transformed from the inside out. As He changes our hearts. We stop bad mouthing our manager or fellow employees. We look for ways to treat all our staff fairly and stop showing favoritism. We do work that no one else sees to the glory of God. It all starts with coming to Christ and trusting Him and His word. Receiving from Him His power.