



SESSION 4

LIFE AT WORK

▶ **The Point**

Your work is a reflection of your relationship with Christ.

▶ **The Passage**

Colossians 3:22–4:1

▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” It’s a question all of us were asked as kids. And we responded with things like: “I want to be an astronaut.” “I want to be a doctor.” “I want to be a ballerina.” It’s interesting to think about that question in more depth. When we ask it of others, we’re typically talking about the work someone wants to *do*—what career they want to pursue. Yet we phrase the question by asking what a person wants to *be*. Hear the difference?

It’s easy for our identity to get wrapped up in what we do—especially if we love our work. But what happens to our identity at the end of the workday, when we come to retirement, or if we lose our job? If we define our identity by our work, these transitions can become debilitating.

The good news is that we’re far more than what we do for a living. For Christians, our identity is defined not by who we are, but by whose we are. Our identity is wrapped up in Christ. And that identity makes all the difference in our work.

▶ **The Setting**

The apostle Paul wrote Colossians in the early A.D. 60s during his first Roman imprisonment (see 4:3,18). The people of Colossae first heard the gospel from a disciple named Epaphras, whom Paul mentioned in the letter (see 1:7; 4:12-13). Paul wrote Colossians to counter false teaching that included a mixture of Jewish teachings and Gentile philosophies. He also exalted Jesus as the preeminent Son of God, in whom the fullness of God’s nature dwells (see 1:15-17; 2:9).

What does the Bible say?

Slaves/Bondservants (v. 22)—This word was not rhetorical or allegorical; Paul was talking to actual slaves and their masters. Slavery was an established institution throughout the Roman Empire, which means Paul was offering counsel to those enmeshed inside that institution, not endorsing slavery as a positive system of work.

Colossians 3:22–4:1

^{3:22} **Slaves, obey your human masters in everything. Don't work only while being watched, as people-pleasers, but work wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.**

²³ **Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people,**

²⁴ **knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ.**

²⁵ **For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he has done, and there is no favoritism.**

^{4:1} **Masters, deal with your slaves justly and fairly, since you know that you too have a Master in heaven.**

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes



Notes

DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 105 of the PSG: **“What do you like best about the work you do?”**

Note: Group members should decide for themselves what kind of “work” they want to talk about. They are not limited to employment.

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Prior to the group meeting, print out several job applications for interesting and out-of-the-ordinary jobs: zookeeper, astronaut,

Hollywood stunt double, and so on. Encourage your group members to look through the applications as they discuss Question #1, above. Then ask volunteers to share which of those jobs they would be most interested in pursuing, and why.

Note: Instead of researching to find several interesting jobs before the group meeting, you could ask group members to each bring an interesting application to the gathering—or even to look up new applications on their smartphones during the gathering.

GUIDE: Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 106 of the PSG. Introduce the topic of living out our identity at work by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read on their own.

GUIDE: Call attention to “The Point” on page 106 of the PSG: **“Your work is a reflection of your relationship with Christ.”**

PRAY: Transition into the study by praising God for the work He has done, and continues to do, both throughout the universe and in our lives. Pray that you and your group members can explore what it means to live out your identity in Christ even as you work each day.

Dotted lines for taking notes.

Colossians 3:22 Commentary

Do your work with integrity and dependability.

[Verse 22] Slaves in the ancient world had few if any rights. Their purpose in life lay in completing the will of their **human masters**. Because of this, some interpreters have argued that many slaves in the ancient world were lazy, doing as little as possible. After all, slaves might reason that they had little to gain, since they were only serving those over them without expectation of any reward or personal advancement. However, Paul countered what may have been the prevailing mood by instructing slaves to **obey your human masters in everything**.

The word translated “masters” is literally the word “lords”—the same word used of the Lord Jesus Christ. The word carried the notion of authority, whether little or much. The jailer at Philippi recognized the power of God on Paul and Silas and addressed them with this term (see Acts 16:30, “sirs”). Paul also used it to describe the exalted rank of Jesus (see Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11). John took the image even farther, applying the title “Lord of lords” to Jesus at His second coming (see Rev. 19:16).

Paul encouraged slaves to completely follow their masters’ direction. Every aspect of their service should command a serious effort. The second part of verse 22 describes the nature of the slaves’ complete obedience to their masters. The command **don’t work only while being watched** provides an interesting word picture. The Greek literally means “with eye service,” which describes service performed only to attract attention. Paul used similar language in Ephesians 6:6 as he addressed slaves. The words **as people-pleasers** could be translated “in order to please men.” Both here and in Ephesians 6:6, the term designates one who tries to please people at the sacrifice of principle. Paul did not want slaves to serve only when people were watching in the hopes of receiving their praises. He wanted them to serve God first and foremost with their work.

With the words **work wholeheartedly**, Paul drew a strong contrast against the image of working only to be noticed. The expression literally means “with sincerity of heart.” Again, Paul used a similar expression in Ephesians 6:5. The heart was considered the center of one’s being; it encompassed the intellect, emotion, and will. In other words, Paul was instructing slaves to serve completely and faithfully, putting all they had into their work. Their effort was to be wholehearted, but so was their attitude. He would develop this concept more in verse 23.

The phrase **fearing the Lord** provided a reason for their service. Reverence and respect for God encouraged them to serve their masters wholeheartedly. After all, their heavenly Master saw everything they did!

We probably have all worked alongside people who only worked hard when supervisors were watching. We know what discouragement this can bring to a team. However, this is not the attitude Paul would have wanted us to display. Neither should we strive to please people at the expense of principle. Instead, our fear of the Lord should motivate us to apply ourselves diligently to all we do. Working hard honors Him.

Colossians 3:23-25 Commentary

Do your work enthusiastically for Christ.

[Verse 23] The words **whatever you do** apply to any tasks you might be assigned. A slave's service might involve menial tasks, important tasks, or a mixture of both. Regardless, Paul wanted slaves to invest themselves fully in their tasks. The command **do it from the heart** literally means "do it from the soul." Indeed, the concept carries with it a complementary sense of working wholeheartedly (see Col. 3:22). Today, we often challenge people to be "all in" to a cause. If Paul could challenge slaves to be "all in" with respect to their service, how much more for us! The Lord deserves our full commitment to the work we've received.

Paul further highlighted the focus and ultimate intent of our work with the expression **as something done for the Lord and not for people**. He intended his instructions to give slaves a proper perspective. Slaves might reason that they had no purpose, their tasks unimportant or insignificant, but Paul said that was not the case. Paul desired them to look past their earthly masters and look to the Lord Jesus Christ. First and foremost, they were to serve Him through their work, and perhaps their masters would become more sympathetic to the claims of Christ as they observed their servants' faithful service.

[Verse 24] The word **knowing** links back to the command "do it from the heart." It could be rendered "because you know." Workers could serve those over them faithfully because of the truth they knew. Paul's promise **you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord** provided their ultimate motivation. Rewards God would give mattered more than earthly rewards. Slaves should work hard to please their masters, and God would reward them for their work.

The words **you serve the Lord Christ** are rich in meaning. The verb possibly could be translated as an imperative: "serve the Lord Christ." Either way, the statement summarizes what Paul had instructed slaves beginning in verse 22. Ultimately, all the slaves did should reflect their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. They were to do their work as if they were serving Him rather than their earthly masters.

[Verse 25] Paul warned the **wrongdoer** who might serve from inappropriate motives or perhaps not consistently give the best work. Some might give less than their best effort, while some might give a dishonest effort. Probably Paul intended to include both of these groups in his warning. Paul warned they would **be paid back**. Just as faithful work brought good compensation, likewise poorly done work would bring compensation, but in a bad sense. In such a case, even if **whatever wrong he has done** was not noticed by the master, God nevertheless would take note.

The word translated **favoritism** literally means "to receive a face." Favoritism occurs when we serve people better or worse depending on what we perceive we will get in return from them. Again, Paul's warning to workers here implies that God sees and is taking note of everything. He will judge all our actions impartially.

Colossians 4:1 Commentary

Do what is right and just as Christ does with you.

[Verse 1] Paul next turned his attention to the **masters**. They had a responsibility to **deal with** their slaves with all they needed to do their jobs well. Paul's admonition implies a certain respect and care for those slaves who worked for their masters. The parallel between the first-century setting and today's setting is obvious. Workers have a responsibility to work hard and to do their work with integrity that comes from the heart. Employers likewise have a responsibility to provide for their workers what they need to do their jobs well. They should not use their positions of authority to lord it over those who report to them. Rather, they need to do **justly and fairly** by their employees. The words imply taking care of one's workers in a respectable and righteous way, and treating each one equitably without favoritism.

The Greek word translated **since you know** is the same Greek word translated "knowing" in verse 24. Also in verse 24, the spiritual truth slaves knew was to motivate them to do a good job. Here, it describes the spiritual truth masters should know. The truth that earthly masters **have a Master in heaven** whom they serve should motivate them to be good masters or supervisors in all their dealings.

Your work is a reflection of your relationship with Christ. Do you consistently put in an honest day's work? Are you willing to work hard even when others do not notice or do not appear to appreciate what you do? Can you learn to be content with the approval of the Lord Jesus Christ whom you ultimately serve?

The Bible tells us that God is writing an amazing story and that He has included us in that story. The Bible also says that the Lord Jesus died and rose on our behalf so that now we might no longer live for ourselves, but for Him (see 2 Cor. 5:14-15). Such truth motivates us to be driven people for the sake of His kingdom. God does not call us to be workaholics, but He does tell us that our work is a reflection of our relationship with Him. What do others learn about your relationship with God by the work they observe you doing?

As you reflect on this week's passage, ask the Lord to guide you. Are there areas of your work life you could more completely surrender to Him? How can your work bring glory and honor to the Lord and be a testimony to those with whom you work? As you fulfill your God-given calling to do your work wholeheartedly, others will take notice. Some will follow your example; more importantly, others may be drawn to Jesus.

Note: Previous Biblical Illustrator articles "The Husband's Role in the First-Century Family" (Winter 2011-2012), "A Slave's Status in the First Century" (Fall 2008), "Paul's Ethical Absolutes" (Fall 2003), and "Christology in Colossians" (Summer 2000) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at Lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator.

