



## Christianity in the Workplace

**By Alan Smith**

New life in Christ should make a difference in how we work and our credibility.

### A sermon based on Colossians 3:22-4:1

#### Introduction

In the passage... from the book of Colossians, Paul's teaching was accompanied by a great deal of tension. It's hard for us to even imagine today the vast extent of slavery in the first century and just how cruel it was. Ancient historians estimate that there were about 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, which was about one-third to one-half the population. Because of this, work was considered beneath the dignity of the slave-owning free man. Practically everything was done by slaves. They worked in the household, they worked in the factories, and they worked in the fields. Some slaves were even doctors and teachers.

Though there was occasionally a good relationship between the master and slave, basically the life of a slave was a miserable one. In both Greek and Roman cultures, most slaves had no legal rights and were treated as pieces of property. A Roman by the name of Varro once wrote that a slave is no better than a beast of the field who just happens to talk. Ancient tradition classified slaves as things, living tools... The situation of slaves in general wasn't good, and for some of them it was terrible.

With that kind of attitude prevalent in the ancient world, it's not hard to imagine how slaves felt about their masters. It doesn't come as a surprise that slave revolts were common, sometimes involving tens of thousands of slaves at a time.

So right in the midst of this tension between masters and slaves, Paul has some very clear and practical instructions for Christians on both sides of the issue.

Thank God, slavery is no longer a part of our own culture. And there might be a tendency to think that Paul's words really don't mean much anymore. But I would suggest... that Paul's teaching does have an application today as we consider our relationship not as masters and slaves, but as employers and employees.

That's not to say that the relationships are exactly the same, not at all. But the application of Paul's teaching does relate to the situations we find ourselves in. We live in an age where there's still a lot of struggle that goes on between labor and management, between the employer and the employees.

Conflicts go on all the time, with each side accusing the other of selfishness and unreasonableness. Employees want smaller workloads, fewer hours, more vacation, and more pay and benefits. Employers want more productivity and more profits. What's the solution, from God's point of view? How should a Christian conduct himself on the job? How should he handle the problems that will inevitably come up?

I think it's significant that we have a Christian responsibility in the workplace just as surely as we have a responsibility in our times of worship together. Following Christ is not a part-time job. You don't leave your Christianity on the front doorstep of the church building when you leave. You take it with you into your home and into your workplace. So when problems come up at work, it's just like when problems come up in the home—the solution has to begin with God.

In every aspect of human life God's plan is one of authority and submission, and those two pillars form the bedrock of relations, not only in the home, but at work as well. To avoid chaos, somebody has to lead, and others have to follow. In that regard, Paul's instructions to masters and slaves are very similar to his instructions for husbands and wives, and parents and children...

...You may sit on the pew right next to your supervisor here on Sunday mornings, and you stand before God as equals. "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" (Galatians 3:28). But when you go to work on Monday morning, your relationship with that man changes. It's all a matter of authority and submission.

Paul has something to say to both sides of the matter, and we'll make application to both sides of our situation today. First, Paul tells the slaves what their responsibility is.

## **I. Responsibility of Employees**

### **A. Obedience**

First and foremost, there is the requirement of obedience. "*Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh.*" (Colossians 3:22a). The Greek word translated "obey" is actually a combination of the Greek words for "listen" and "under". It means to "get under the authority of your master, and listen to what he tells you to do." Considering the working conditions of slaves in those days, that was a strong statement...

I would suggest to you... that the first obligation a Christian has is to please his Lord and to be a faithful testimony to him. One way to do this, Paul says, is to give willing obedience to those under whom you work, regardless of who they are or what their character is like.

Christians are not to obey simply when they feel like it or when their employers are fair and reasonable. They are to obey in everything and at all times, the only exception, of course, being when they're instructed to do something opposed to God's word.

We're not free to pick and choose only those things that please us. We may not agree with them. We may not always like what they ask. We may reach a point where we think the situation is intolerable, and we need to quit and look for something else. But as long as we're employed, we should do what we're told and work to the best of our ability.

You may say, "But you don't know my boss!" If you think you have problems, imagine being a slave in the first century. Think about the cruel masters those Christian slaves had to serve. And yet Paul still said, "Obey in everything." No restrictions were applied to this obedience, no fine print. He didn't say, "Do what you have been assigned if it makes sense to you or if gives you a sense of satisfaction." What he said was, "Do what you're told."

Peter was even more straightforward about it. He said, "*Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh.*" (1 Peter 2:18). I think the application for us today is that we are to be obedient, hard-working employees, even if our employer is at times unreasonable.

I think it's interesting that Paul was also concerned about the opposite situation. What if your boss is a Christian? Paul was afraid that Christians might reason that if they worked for a fellow Christian, then they didn't need to be as cautious and responsible in their conduct. Maybe they felt like they should receive preferential treatment in that situation. But listen to what Paul says, "*And those who have believing masters, let them not despise them because they are brethren, but rather serve them because those who are benefited are believers and beloved.*" (1 Timothy 6:2).

So whether his boss is kind or cruel, believing or pagan, a Christian is to be obedient to him because that's God's will. An employer is an employer, no matter who he is, and he deserves the best effort in whatever work we do for him.

William McDonald has written that Christian slaves brought a higher price in the slave market in the first century. I don't know if that's true or not, but I don't doubt that it is. I truly believe that being a Christian should always make a person a better, more productive worker.

If you're living the Christian life, it ought to manifest itself at the job. Your employer should be able to see in you an employee who follows instructions, a worker who does what he's told the first time. As Christians, we have a responsibility to obey our employers.

## B. Your attitude

But Paul doesn't stop with obedience. He qualifies our obedience with a couple of regulations. The first has to do with our attitude. Slaves (and, by application, employees) are to serve *"not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God."* (Colossians 4:22b). The idea here is that employees should do what they're supposed to be doing all the time, not just when the boss is watching. Neither should you attempt to get by with as little as possible on the job. Your attitude should be one of sincerity; you should desire to give your employer the best hour's work you can for an hour's wage.

We all know what eyeservice is like. Do you remember in gym class in high school, going outside and doing calisthenics to start off the period? I would imagine that your exercises went something like ours. If the teacher was standing there watching, everyone did pretty much his best. But if the teacher had his back turned or for some reason he wasn't outside, those were the sloppiest exercises you've ever seen in your life. I mean, why bother? Why do ten perfect pushups if the teacher wasn't even there to see it?

Unfortunately, for some people that attitude carries over into their workplace. If the boss is around, you do your best, but he's out of the room, who cares? Everybody take a break, don't work so hard, take it easy.

Paul says that's not the attitude for a Christian to have. A faithful Christian doesn't just do the minimum his job requires, much less work only when his supervisor is watching. In fact, he shouldn't need to be checked up on at all, because he always does the work to the best of his ability, whether or not anyone is around. And he works just as hard when he's passed over for a raise or promotion as when he's being considered for them. He does his work with "sincerity of heart", with all his heart.

In Ephesians, Paul said for servants to serve *"with good will"* (Ephesians 6:7). In other words, don't spend your time complaining under your breath the whole time you're working.

He expands it even more in Titus 2:9. A person should obey his employer *"not answering back"*. Some other translations say, "not being argumentative". Again, that's just to say he's to do what he's told and do it with the proper attitude.

## C. Your real boss

Paul goes on to say, *"Whatever you do, do it heartily."* (Colossians 3:23). That is, give it everything you've got. Then he gives us the reason why: *"as [working] to the Lord and not to men."*

Paul says you need to go to work every day as eagerly as you would if Jesus were your personal supervisor. Go about that work as if you were typing that letter for Jesus to sign, programming that computer for Jesus to run, building that house for Jesus to live in.

There's no doubt at all that if Jesus really were your boss, you'd be willing to obey without argument and without delay. You would try to give your best all day long. Paul says that's how a Christian should serve his superior.

Gerald Hopkins has written... "Smiting an anvil, sawing a beam, white-washing a wall, driving horses, sweeping, scouring, everything gives God some glory if being in his grace you do it as your duty."

That's what Paul is saying here. Do your job as if you were doing it all for Christ.

## D. Why serve this way?

Why should we have this kind of attitude and enthusiasm about our work? Well, to answer that question, we need to turn to what Paul wrote to Titus. He said, *"Exhort servants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back, not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things."* (Titus 2:9-10).

I want you to be reminded that how a Christian works in his job reflects on Jesus Christ, regardless of who your earthly master or employer may be. People are not going to be inclined to listen to the testimony of a Christian who does shoddy, careless work or who is constantly complaining.

If you are a lazy or disobedient employee, if you pilfer office supplies for personal use at home, what do you suppose is going to happen when you start trying to talk to people about the gospel? You know as well as I do that it will destroy your influence. How can you ever hope to share your faith with your boss, your supervisor, or even another employee if that's the kind of worker you are? You can't! The only way for you to effectively open the door for evangelism is for you to adorn the doctrine of God by working in such a way that it shows you're different from other employees.

Incidentally, that's why you're there. You don't work at the university or the ski mountain or that restaurant primarily to make money. That's a fringe benefit! Your primary responsibility is to make the gospel attractive to the unsaved. You are God's representative in that office, in that classroom, on that assembly line. You may be His only representative in your workplace. Therefore it's crucial that you work in such a way that will bring glory to God.

### **E. The rewards of obedience**

*"Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ."* (Colossians 3:24).

Here's a remarkable promise. Keep in mind that in the first century, slaves didn't own anything. They didn't have any property they could call their own. They couldn't inherit anything. And yet Paul promises to slaves the greatest inheritance that any man could ever want.

What's Paul saying to these slaves (and to us)? He's saying, "You may not be getting your due now. Your boss may underpay you and overwork you. But someday your Savior will balance the scales. The paycheck you get on Fridays is not all your salary. Someday Jesus is going to give you the reward of the inheritance because it's really Him that you're serving there on the job."

You see, Christian workers have a bonus that other people don't have. We not only receive the paycheck and the "perks" that go with the job, we also receive an inheritance from the Lord. A sobering thought is that our inheritance is tied to the manner and quality of our work or how we do our job.

Paul put it this way in the Ephesian letter: *"knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free."* (Ephesians 6:8). An employer may not appreciate or even be aware of the good work you're doing, perhaps because he's not paying attention or maybe because somebody else is taking the credit for what you're doing. But God knows and God rewards. Nothing good done in His name and for His glory will pass His notice or fail to receive His blessing.

## **II. Responsibility of Employers**

But what about the other side of the coin? What responsibilities does the Christian master have, or in our situation, the employer, the management, the supervisor? How should they behave on the job?

### **A. Treat your employees right**

Paul's instruction to those in situations where they have oversight is this: *"Masters, give your servants what is just and fair."* (Colossians 4:1).

Remember that in the first century masters had complete rights over their slaves, even the power of life and death. But Paul was informing his readers that a Christian master should treat his slaves with fairness; he should treat them in a way that was just and equitable.

Given the social conditions of this time, this command may have been more difficult to carry out than what was asked of the slaves. The master who attempted to provide his slaves "with what is fair and right" ran a deep risk of being ridiculed by his fellow slave owners.

A Christian supervisor should have the same motivation and the same goals that a Christian worker has. That is, the first and foremost thing in his mind should be his desire to obey and please the Lord. A Christian employer's first responsibility is to do God's will and to manifest Christlikeness in everything he does. He makes business decisions based on God's standard of righteousness, truth and honesty. He deals with his employees on the basis of their own welfare and best interests as well as those of his business. He deals with them fairly because that's the Lord's will.

He treats them with respect because to do so is to respect and honor the Lord.

Paul says that, in particular, employers are to be fair with their employees. If you haven't noticed, that's a common expectation that God has toward anyone in a position of authority, whether you are a husband dealing with a wife, a parent dealing with a child, or an employer dealing with an employee...

And isn't that just an application of the Golden Rule? Jesus wants managers and supervisors to treat their employees the way they would want to be treated if the roles were reversed. To expect your employees to do their best, Christian employers should do their best for them. That's your responsibility to them.

That means that an employer should give an employee an honest day's pay for an honest day's work. It means that an employer should be just as free with his praise as he is with his criticism.

And it means that an employer should consider his employees when he sets policies for the company. I heard of a Christian businessman who explained his philosophy by saying, "I may not always be right, but I will always be the boss." He then proceeded to conduct his business in whatever manner he pleased without consideration as to how it would affect his employees.

In Ephesians, Paul says the master should "*give up threatening*" (Ephesians 6:9). That means he uses his authority and power as little as possible and doesn't throw his weight around or lord it over those under him. He's never abusive or inconsiderate.

## **B. The reason**

Notice the reason Paul gives for managing people under you in this way: "*knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.*" You see, everything has a flip side. And we need to realize that the way you treat your employees will determine the way God treats you.

Perhaps the best word to sum up an employer's responsibility is the word "accountability". To be effective as an employer, you have to live out your Christian life on the job remembering that you have the same Master in heaven that your employee does, and that one day you'll have to give account of the way you ran your office or workplace.

It's a lot like the passages that say if you want to be forgiven, you have to forgive. If you want mercy, you have to show mercy. And if you want to be treated rightly by your Master in heaven, be sure to treat those under you in a just and right way.

## **Conclusion**

We don't preach a "social gospel," but we do preach a gospel with social implications. If you have been raised with Christ to walk in newness of life, it can't help but make a difference in the way you work. Christianity isn't just for the pew. It's for the workplace as well. And if you allow Christ to be seen in your life from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, then the people you work for and work with won't have such a hard time accepting what you claim to believe on Sunday!

Justin Martyr wrote in the second century, "Our Lord urged us by patience and meekness to lead all from shame and the lusts of evil, and this we have to show in the case of many who have come in contact with us, who were overcome and changed from violent and tyrannical characters, either from having watched the constancy of their Christian neighbors, or having observed the wonderful patience of Christian travelers when overcharged, or from doing business with Christians." What he's saying is that many people became Christians in the second century as a direct result of seeing how Christians operated in their place of business.

As people "do business" with us, may they indeed be impressed with the evidence of Christ in our lives.