

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 11, 2020**

**WHATEVER YOU DO:
IN THE WORKPLACE**

Colossians 3:22-4:1

Last Sunday we looked at the question of slavery and the Bible, and whether or not the Bible justifies, approves, supports, or condones the kind of racially-based slavery that took place in America for nearly 250 years. The answer is: No. Though many professing Christians and churches in the South tried to justify the “peculiar institution” of slavery on the basis of biblical teaching and practice, they were wrong. I hope there is no debate about that today. It – the practice of forcibly enslaving human beings made in the image of God on the basis of their skin color or nation of origin and treating them as less than human, as property to be bought and sold, separated from their families, and used and abused – was wrong. It has left a stain on our national soul, a wound that has not fully healed. It has left a stain on the church and its witness as well, whenever and wherever the church has lent its support to slavery, segregation, or racism in any form.

There is much more we could say about the Bible and slavery, especially about the fundamental incongruity of slavery and the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the great harm that slavery in America, based on views of racial superiority and inferiority, has done to the church and its witness to the gospel throughout American history.

But I want to talk about slaves and masters from another perspective today. Instead of slaves and masters, I want us to think in terms of employees and employers or managers. I’m confident that none of us are actual “slaves” who are subject to the demands or whims of “masters,” though there may be times when we feel like we are. But most of us, at some point in our lives, have been or will be in a workplace relationship as either an employer/manager or an employee under the supervision of a boss.

So, what does the Bible have to say to us about how to conduct ourselves in these workplace relationships? Paul speaks to both employers/bosses and employees here in Colossians as well as in the parallel passage in Ephesians 6:5-9.

The first thing – the main thing – Paul says to slaves (employees) in both Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6 is to “obey your earthly masters in everything” (Colossians 3:22); “with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ” (Ephesians 6:5). As with Paul’s instructions to children and parents, the imperative to obey is not absolute. Your highest allegiance in life is not to your employer. And must not be. Paul is speaking to Christians here – to Christian employees and their employers. So, the expectation is that if your boss is a Christian, he/she will not ask or try to compel you to do anything illegal, immoral, unethical, or in any way contrary to your faith in Jesus Christ. If your boss asks you to do something that compromises or contradicts your faith or allegiance to Christ, it is your duty as a Christian to refuse.

But, generally speaking, as a follower of Jesus, you are to obey your employer. You are to carry out the instructions and directives your boss gives you. You are to treat your boss with respect and honor. In some cases, this may be extremely difficult, because some employers, some bosses, some managers, are difficult, disreputable, dishonorable people who are impossible to please. You may have, or have had, a boss like that. What to do then? You are still to treat your boss with respect and honor, if for no other reason than for the position he/she holds. If you cannot respect the person, you can still respect the position the person holds, and treat your boss accordingly. This is what God’s Word requires. And the Holy Spirit is available to help you do what you cannot do on your own.

Paul addresses the importance of this respect in 1 Timothy 6:1-2, where he writes to Timothy: “All who are under the yoke of slavery” – *i.e.*, every one of you who has a boss – “should consider (your) masters” – bosses – “worthy of full respect, so that God’s name and (the teaching of the gospel) may not be slandered. Those who have believing masters” – Christian bosses – “are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers or sisters. Instead, (you) are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from (your) service are believers, and dear to (you).”

As Kent Hughes points out, there is no place in the life of a Christian employee for “subtle insubordination” toward your employer or for “cleverly-concealed contempt or sardonic humor” (Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, 206). The Bible is clear that these are unbecoming for anyone who professes to be a follower of Jesus.

In both Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6, Paul says that employees are to obey their bosses – to carry out their duties faithfully – “not only when their eye is on you

and to win their favor” (Colossians 3:22; cf. Ephesians 6:6). It is human nature, isn’t it, to be more conscientious when we know someone – particularly, someone in a position of authority – is watching us? God wants you to serve your boss well whether the boss is watching you or not.

The Wall Street Journal published an article a few years ago that confirms what we already thought we knew: that employees fake a positive attitude when the boss is around, and that all the fakery can be exhausting. The research, first reported in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, concluded that workers tended to put on smiles and fake happiness when higher-ups were in the room. Researchers discovered that when superiors were in the room during meetings, employees tended to hide their real feelings. In addition, they found that employees who feigned positive feelings actually felt less satisfied when a meeting ended. One of the researchers said: “Even if they act positive, those underlying negative feelings are still there. They feel inauthentic, which could result in lower (job) satisfaction or, eventually, burnout” (Rachel Emma Silverman, “The Boss Is In: Quick, Look Happy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 1/28/2015).

Sucking up to your boss to get on his/her good side or to get ahead may work sometimes, but it has downsides, too. And, most important, it is not what God wants you to do. God wants you to work hard. God wants you to do your job well. But God does not want you to be a phony. Of course, this doesn’t mean that you should tell your boss or superiors or employer everything you think. Unless you’re asked. And then, you need to be very careful how you say what you think, to speak with proper respect.

In addition to respect, Paul says that we are to conduct ourselves in the workplace “with sincerity of heart” (Colossians 3:22; Ephesians 6:5). The English word “sincere” comes from the Latin, *sine cera*, which literally means “without wax.” It seems that potters or sculptor would sometimes use wax to cover up cracks or other defects in their pottery or sculptures. So, the word “sincere” came to mean genuine, pure, or unadulterated, with singleness of heart. Applied to the workplace, it means that we are to obey our bosses and do our jobs with an undivided mind, without ulterior motives or hypocrisy. Wholeheartedly is the word Paul uses in Ephesians 6:7.

In another of his letters – 1 Corinthians – Paul writes that when Jesus returns, He will bring out into the open the motives of our hearts (4:5). He already sees and knows the motives of your heart and mine. David speaks to this in Psalm 139. I

encourage you to read and reflect on it this week. Hebrews 4:13 also reminds us that “nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” That sounds pretty scary, doesn’t it? It *is* scary, unless you are trusting in Jesus and covered with His blood.

What Paul wants us to understand is that the motives of your heart are not hidden from God. God knows not only what you do, but why you do it. You may be motivated by any number of things. Maybe the motive of your heart, regarding your job, is simply to provide sufficiently for yourself and your family. Maybe what drives you is the desire to impress people (including your boss), to win praise from others, or even just to be liked and respected. Maybe what drives you to do what you do is the desire to be happy. You just want to do what makes you happy. Happiness is not a bad thing. But if it becomes your *raison d’être* – your reason for living – it will most likely disappoint you. Happiness is more often experienced as a by-product rather than a goal.

Maybe the ultimate motive of your heart is to get ahead and succeed financially, professionally, socially, politically, or all of the above. Maybe what drives you is the desire to prove to yourself or to someone else your worth as a person. Or maybe the motive of your heart is to use your blessings to bless others, to give as generously as you can to help others in the name of Jesus. Maybe what ultimately drives you is a passionate desire to love, serve, and glorify God.

Do you know the motive(s) of your heart? God knows. What drives you in the secret places of your heart may be hidden from other people, but God sees into the secret places. He wants you to live your life with sincerity, with singleness of heart, and without the wax of hypocrisy or duplicity. In the workplace. And everywhere.

The highest point of the Colossians passage is 3:23-24, where Paul says: “Whatever you do” – which tells us that this has relevance not just for the workplace but for every nook and cranny of life – “work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.... It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” Likewise, in Ephesians 6:7, we read: “Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men” – because you are. *Because you are.*

“Whatever you do,” you are to “do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Colossians 3:17).

“... Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Whatever you do. In the workplace and everywhere.

Tim Keller warns against the danger of making work your god. He says: “When you make your work your identity ... if you’re successful, it destroys you because it goes to your head. If you’re not successful, it destroys you because it goes to your heart – it destroys your self-worth. [Faith in Christ] gives you an identity that’s not in work or accomplishment, and that gives you insulation against the weather changes. If you’re successful, you (can) stay humble. If you’re not successful, you have some ballast. Work is a great thing when it is a servant instead of a lord” (Joseph Sunde, “Timothy Keller on Work as Service vs. Idolatry,” Acton Institute Blog, 12/12/2012).

Whatever you do. Wherever you work. Or volunteer. Wherever you serve. Whatever your role. Don’t let your work or position or title define you. You are defined not by your position or paycheck. You are defined by your relationship with God. You are defined by your saving faith in Jesus. You are defined by your place as a beloved child in His family and a citizen of His kingdom. So, let Him have your life, your labor, your love, because, as someone said, He can do more with your life than you can.

We can’t end without taking notice of what Paul says to masters (to employers, bosses, and managers). If one of those titles fits you, you are to “provide your (employees) with what is right [just] and fair” (Colossians 4:1). No threats (Ephesians 6:9). No abuse. No mistreatment. In fact, like your employees, you are to do the will of God from your heart (6:6). You are to treat your employees with the same respect, the same sincerity, and the same devotion to the Lord Jesus as your employees are to treat you. It’s a two-way street. And, as it says in *The Message*: “Don’t forget for a minute that you, too, serve a Master” (with the capital “M”) – “God in heaven” (Colossians 4:1, *MSG*).

We all serve a Master with a capital “M”. Whatever our position in society, whatever our role in the workplace or the community, the family, or the church, we are all equal in the kingdom of God. We are all equally loved in *His* family. We are all equally valuable in His sight. And He is uniquely worthy of our love, our trust, our allegiance, our devotion, our service.

Every dimension of your life belongs to Him. Every dimension of your life is under His sovereign and gracious rule. Every relationship in your life belongs to

Him. Every duty or responsibility, including every aspect of your life in the workplace, is to be done as to the Lord, for it is the Lord Christ you are serving (Colossians 3:24).

You may be an employer or boss with people working for you. You may be an employee who works for a boss. You may be retired. Your full-time job may be raising children. You may be too young to be part of the workforce ... but your day will come. Whatever the case, “whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.”

As Jesus once said to His disciples: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17).

Lord, let it be so in us all. Amen.