

Introduction

I'd like to begin with a question. Who are the best workers in the world? Who are the best nurses, teachers, waitresses, welders, cashiers, mailmen, stockbrokers, and so on? A law student I knew in Akron, a disciple of Jesus, applied for a law clerk position with a common pleas judge, a secularist. The judge did give him the position but reluctantly so, only because the clerk he replaced persuaded him to. A year later, the judge explained why he was hesitant about hiring him. He knew he was a Christian and thought he wouldn't work out very well because he was. But, he quickly added, he was now glad he hired him. Why? It was because **"he's the best law clerk I've ever had."** Who are the best workers in the world? I'll tell you. They're disciples of Jesus.

And Colossians 3:22-24 explains why they are. This is a fascinating text. Paul writes it to slaves and instructs them about their work. The reason I'm preaching from it is that it's timeless. It is, in fact, the Bible's classic statement on work. It teaches us two things: why and how we should work. If we learn and live out what it teaches, there's no doubt about it, we'll be the best workers in the world.

Why Most People Work

Let's start with why we work. When I say **"why"**, I'm referring to the primary motivation that directs how we work.

In verse 22, Paul identifies what that primary motivation is for most people. He mentions slaves here who do their work **"as those who merely please men."** The word **"men"** refers to their masters. Slaves had two basic concerns when it came to their masters. One was that they continue to feed, clothe, and shelter them. The other was that they not beat or even kill them, which the law allowed them to do. So, most slaves worked merely to please their masters and thus be fed, clothed, and sheltered and not be beaten or killed. They worked, in other words, primarily for their own personal gain.

And so do most people today. That's why they work. That's the primary motivation that directs how they work. It's to get personal gain. The gain might be financial (making money), psychological (being fulfilled), and/or social (getting status or praise). Whatever the personal gain they want is, the primary reason most people work is to get it.

I once conversed with a mailman who told me that he was going to retire in four years. He went on to say that the only reason he was still working was that he had to. He'd quit right now, he said, if he didn't need health insurance and could afford to. He was **"just biding my time"** to quote him. He worked primarily for financial gain.

Then there's the mother of three children that sociologist Arlie Hochschild tells about in her book *The Time Bind*. She explained to Hochschild the main reason she works. It's **"to get away from the house."** It's an escape for her, in other words - from the pressures, challenges, and responsibilities of raising three children. She works primarily for psychological gain.

So that's why most people work. That's the primary motivation that directs how they work. It's personal gain.

Why We Should Work

But it isn't ours if we're disciples of Jesus. Look at two phrases in our text: verse 23 – **"as for the Lord rather than for men"** and verse 24 – **"It is the Lord Christ whom you serve."** Jesus, not our employer, manager, supervisor, or foreman, is the ultimate boss we serve. Those phrases reveal why we should work. It's secondarily for our gain (making money and being fulfilled). It's primarily for His gain.

When he was young man many years ago, Richard Foster went to Kotzebue to help build the first high school above the arctic circle. He had many jobs, one of which was digging a trench for a sewer line in the frozen tundra. It was backbreaking work and he struggled mightily to do it. As he did, an old Eskimo man came up to him, watched a few minutes, and then declared, **"You are digging a ditch to the glory of God."**

Grasp what the issue is here. Is what that Eskimo said just nice talk meant to encourage Foster or is it one of the most remarkable truths of our existence, that our work actually benefits Jesus? Those phrases in verses 23 and 24 tell us. It's the latter. Our work actually benefits Jesus or at least, it can – in two ways.

First, our work can please Him. We see that in verse 22. The words **“not . . . merely please men”** imply that we can also please Him and that's true, we can. My son Aaron got his first job, one summer, working for J&J Gardens. I'll tell you what I told him. The implication of how you work goes far beyond your employer - to Jesus Himself. When you're done each day, He'll be either delighted or disgusted by how you worked. Work, therefore, that He'll be delighted. That's the first way that our work can benefit Jesus. It can please Him.

The second way is that it can esteem Him. It can cause others to hold him in higher regard. In Titus 2:9-10, Paul commands us to work in a way that **“will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.”** The word **“adorn”** there refers to exquisite clothing or apparel. So Paul is commanding us to work in a way that makes Jesus appear beautiful to people – to our employers, bosses, co-workers, customers, patients, clients, and so on. Work in a way that causes those people to hold Him in higher regard.

That then is how our work can benefit Jesus. It can please Him and esteem Him.

And that's why we should work. The primary motivation that directs how we work is His gain. Let's go back to Foster again. He writes: **“Beyond my Eskimo friend no human being ever knew or cared whether I dug that ditch well or poorly. In time, it was to be covered up and forgotten. But because of my friend's words, I dug with all my might, for every shovel full of dirt was a prayer to God.”** He goes on to explain what he means by **“prayer to God.”** He dug each shovel full of dirt *for God* and *as God willed*. He worked consciously, in other words, to benefit Him. And so should we. We weld

each piece of metal, perform each surgery, grade each paper, arrest each criminal, write each legal brief, deliver each piece of mail, and so on *for Jesus* and *as Jesus wills*, which pleases and esteems Him.

How We Should Work – the Work Itself

Now that we know why we should work, let's examine how we should work. How we should work has two aspects.

The first is the work itself. Look at verse 22 and the phrase "**with external service.**" The Greek word translated "**external service**" connotes "**under the compulsion of inspection.**" It suggests that someone watching, the boss, affects how we work. All of us should ask and answer a question in that regard. Do I work differently when my boss is watching? The fact is that almost everyone does. They work differently, better, when he or she is watching.

But we shouldn't. Verses 22 and 23 tell us how we should work instead. In verse 22, it's with "**with sincerity of heart.**" That phrase refers to a heart that bears up under God's scrutiny. In verse 23, it's also "**heartily,**" a word that means "**wholeheartedly**" or "**committedly**". That phrase and word show how we should do our work – in sweat, intelligence, and the power of God. We should always do it the best we can, whether the boss is watching or not, and beyond that, be willing to sacrifice our own desires and comfort for the quality of our work.

A man I knew years ago was disillusioned at work. He complained that he hadn't had a raise in four years and that his bosses took him for granted. They never complemented a thing he did. He then declared what he was going to do as a result. He was going to just "**get by**" at work. He was going to do as little as he could get away with doing.

Disciples of Jesus don't do that, because of why we work. Remember what our primary motivation is. It's to please and esteem Him. That is a powerful and defining motivation. It makes how much we're compensated and appreciated irrelevant to how we do our work.

There's no link between the two in our thoughts and actions. We may quit or change jobs if we're being compensated or treated unfairly. But we'll work wholeheartedly and sacrificially until we do.

How We Should Work – the People at Work

How we should work has a second aspect. The first is the work itself. The second is the people at work, who are comprised of three groups: (1) employers or bosses; (2) co-workers; and (3) customers or clients. The issue is how we should relate and respond to those people.

Two weeks ago, I went to a Dollar Tree store to buy a twelve ounce bag of pretzels they sell for a dollar. It's a great deal. Anyway, while I was there, I overheard the two cashiers complaining to each other about how the manager was scheduling their hours.

I once talked with a nurse at an Akron hospital who complained about the nurses on the previous shift. She was upset because they routinely leave work they should do for the nurses on her shift to do.

The people at work are a challenge aren't they? I've counseled a lot of individuals over the years. The two biggest and most frequent complaints I've heard were about spouses first of all and people at work a close second of all. I've counseled numerous individuals who liked their jobs but couldn't stand the people at them.

It was the same way in the first century world of Peter and Paul. In 1 Peter 2:18-20, for instance, Peter addressed slaves who had hard and unreasonable masters. Many of you can certainly relate to that. You have employers, bosses, co-workers, and/or customers or clients who are just like those masters were. Well, the same principles that Peter applied to those masters apply to those people at your work as well. Learn and live out those principles. You'll be far better off if you do.

1 Peter 2:18-20 illustrates something. The Bible gives us detailed instructions about how to think, feel, and act in our human relationships, almost all of which come into play at work. Here is a sampling of those: Proverbs 25:21-22; Matthew 5:39; Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:28; Romans

12:18; Ephesians 4:31-32; Philippians 2:3-4; Philippians 2:14; Colossians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 3:9; and many more. Things happen all the time with people at work to which those verses and the principles that they teach apply.

We need to learn and live out those principles. We shouldn't just wing it or shoot from the hip when it comes to relationships at work. We should prayerfully and carefully learn what the Bible says about them instead. We should then, in the power of the Holy Spirit, live out what we learn. We should do that consistently and committedly.

Philippians 2:14 is one of the verses I mentioned. Paul commands, **"Do all things without grumbling or disputing."** As the context shows, that refers specifically to not grumbling about people. A person in our church told me that God convicted her through this verse. She had been grumbling about an irritating co-worker of hers for several years. But this verse prohibits that and so she stopped. She stopped grumbling about her and started praying for her and it made a difference. She's far less irritated with her now than she once was.

Conclusion

That then is why and how we should work. Why should we work? It's primarily to benefit Jesus – to please Him and glorify Him. How should we work? We should do the work itself wholeheartedly and sacrificially and relate to the people at work as the Bible says.

I've been to several restaurants that have a plaque on the wall, one that displays the picture and name of the employee of the month. I assume that means the one who worked the best that month. That raises a question I'd ask you in closing. Who is the best worker at your place of employment? Live out what I've preached today. Work as disciples of Jesus work. You will be the best worker at your place of employment – and one of the best workers in the world – if you do.