

INTRODUCTION

Today is Labor Day weekend and I want to ask you a question in that regard. Who are the best workers in the world? Who are the best nurses, teachers, waitresses, cashiers, mailmen, stockbrokers, and more? A law student I knew in Akron, a disciple of Jesus, applied for a law clerk position with a common pleas judge. The judge did give him the position but reluctantly so, only because the clerk he replaced persuaded him to. A year later, as they were talking one day, the judge told him that he hadn't really wanted to hire him. *"I knew you were a Christian,"* he said, *"And thought that you wouldn't work out very well because you were."* *"But,"* he quickly added, *"I'm glad I hired you because you're the best law clerk I've ever had."* Who are the best workers in the world? I'll tell you. It's disciples of Jesus.

You can see that in the three passages I read, Colossians 3:22-24; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-20, and in two passages I didn't read, Ephesians 6:5-8 and 1 Timothy 6:1-2. All of those passages are addressed to slaves. Paul and Peter write to Christian slaves in each one and instruct them how to regard and do their work. The reason I'm preaching from them is that they're timeless. They are, in fact, the Bible's classic statements on work. Those who learn and live out what they teach will be the best workers in the world. So, let's learn today what they teach. It's two things – why and how we should work.

WHY MOST PEOPLE WORK

First, they teach us why we should work. When I say "why", I'm referring to the basic motivation that directs how we work. That basic motivation should be the gain of Jesus.

Sadly, for most people, it isn't. We see that in Colossians 3:22. Paul 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. The first was that they

continue to feed, clothe, and shelter them. The second 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 beaten or killed. They worked, in other words, for their own personal gain.

And so do the vast majority of people today. That's why they work. That's the basic motivation that directs how they work. It's to get personal gain. That gain might be financial (making money to live), or psychological (being made happy or fulfilled), or social (getting status or praise). Whatever the personal gain is that they want, most people regard their work merely as a means of getting 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's still working is that he has to. He'd quit right now, he said, if he didn't need health insurance and could afford to. That man works for financial gain.

Then there's the mother of three children that sociologist Arlie Hochschild tells about in her book The Time Bind. That mother explained to her the main reason that 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. That woman works for psychological gain.

So that's why most people work. The basic motivation that directs how they work is personal gain.

WHY WE SHOULD WORK

But that isn't why we should work. Look at two phrases in Colossians 3. Verse 23 – *"as for the Lord rather than for men."* Work in order to please and delight Jesus and in a way that will. 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 isn't for our gain. It's for Jesus'.

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 as he struggled mightily to do it, 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."*

Do you realize what the issue is? Is what that Eskimo said to Foster just nice talk meant to encourage him or is it one of the most remarkable truths of our existence, that our work actually benefits Jesus? Those two phrases in Colossians 3 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 Colossians 3:22. 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. So that's the first way that our work can benefit Jesus. It can please Him.

The second way is that it can glorify Him. To glorify Jesus means to cause others to esteem Him. It means to cause others to hold him in higher regard. Well, how we work can do just that. Look at Titus 2:9-10. Paul commands that we should work in a way that *"will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect."* The word "adorn" there refers to clothing or apparel. So Paul is commanding us to work in a way that makes Jesus appear beautiful to people - to our bosses, co-workers, customers, and clients. Work in a way that causes those people to hold Him in higher regard.

Those then are the two ways that our work can benefit Jesus. It can please and glorify Him.

And that's why we should work. The basic motivation that directs how we work isn't our gain. It's His. Let's go back to Foster again. He writes: *"Beyond my Eskimo friend no human being every 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." Do you see what Foster did? He purposely, consciously, worked in order to benefit Jesus - and so should we.

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 Colossians 3:22 and the words "*with external service.*" The Greek word translated "external service" connotes "under the compulsion of inspection." It suggests that someone watching, our bosses, dictates how we work. All of us should ask and answer a question in that regard. Do I work differently when the boss is watching? The fact is that almost everyone does. They work differently, far better, when the boss is watching.

But we shouldn't. Colossians 3:22-23 tells 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. And in verse 23, it's also "*heartily.*" That word means "wholeheartedly", "committedly". That phrase and word show how we should do our work. We should always do it in sweat, intelligence, and the power of God. We should always do it the best we can and beyond that, be willing to routinely sacrifice our own desires and comfort for the quality of our work.

I met a man several years ago who was quite bitter about his work. He complained that he hadn't had a raise or even cost of living increase in four years and that his bosses took him for granted – never appreciated or complemented anything that he did. He then declared what he was going to do as a result. He was going to just "get by" at work, going to do as little as he could without getting fired.

But we shouldn't do that - because of why we work. Remember what our basic motivation is as disciples of Jesus. It's to please and glorify

Him. That motivation is a powerful and defining thing. It makes how much we're compensated or appreciated irrelevant to the way that we do our work. We may quit or change jobs if we're being compensated or treated unfairly. But we'll 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. By "people at work" I mean three groups: (1) co-workers; (2) employers or bosses; and (3) customers or clients. The issue is how we should relate and respond to those people.

I once talked to a young man who manages one of those gas stations on the turnpike. He told me that he likes his job but that the people drive him nuts and I'm quoting him. He then gave me an example of what he meant. He said that customers come into the store after pumping gas, stand there, and literally scream at him at the top of their lungs that the prices are so high. I thought he was kidding at first but he wasn't. Understand that he has absolutely nothing to do with the gas prices. But customers irrationally jump all over him anyway as if he does.

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 that I've heard in that context were about spouses first of all and people at work a close second of all. I've counseled countless workers 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 unreasonable and hard masters. Many of you can certainly relate to that. You have co-workers, employers, bosses, customers, and/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 numerous

detailed principles about human relationships that come into play at work. Here are 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 should learn and live out those principles. We shouldn't just wing it and 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 was one of our memory verses. 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 congregation told me that God convicted her about that verse. She's been grumbling about an irritating co-worker of hers for several years. But this verse commands us not to do that and so she stopped. She stopped grumbling about her and started praying for her and it's made a difference. She isn't nearly as irritated with her as she once was.

CONCLUSION

That then is why and how we should do our work. Why should we do it? We should do it to please and glorify Jesus. How should we do it? We should do the work itself wholeheartedly and sacrificially and relate to the people at work as the Bible says.

Let me ask you a question about that in closing. Who is the best worker at your place of employment? If it isn't you, it should and can be. Work for Jesus. Work in order to please and glorify Him and in a way that will – heartily and lovingly. Make that your aim and in the power of the Holy Spirit achieve it. You'll be one of the best workers in the world if you do.