

Sermon Given by

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At the 10:30am and 6pm Services on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2010

### “Life in the lions’ den”

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There is a respected book on a Christian view of work which has observed that the average person spends anywhere from 40-75% of their life in work or work related tasks... They spend another 30% or 35% on family and personal interests. Then maybe they will spend as much as 5% or 10% on church or religious activities.

The joint authors then comment how most Christian teaching addresses those three sections of our lives in precisely the opposite proportions: a very heavy emphasis on religious matters, some help in regard to marriage and family, but little that speaks directly to the workplace. The end result of that emphasis, say Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, is that ‘every day millions go to work without seeing the slightest connection between what they do all day and what they think God wants done in the world’. And it is partly to redress that imbalance that we are having a series in June looking at what the Bible has to say on this topic.

To recap the ground that we have covered so far, a fortnight ago we went back to the beginning and considered what light the first three chapters of Genesis shed on the topic.

We saw that before the fall, God himself worked... and he invited human beings to work in the world with him and under him – so we must not **despise** work, since it is a part of God’s created order. And yet... since the fall, work has been cursed: so we must not **idealise** work either – it is part of a **fallen** world order. That was the tension to hold on to. Don’t despise work; but don’t idealise it – and certainly don’t idolise it therefore.

Last week we sharpened the focus slightly by considering the Sabbath law from the Ten Commandments. We focussed on the two halves of the command: **Work hard** and **down tools: ‘six days shall you labour’** BUT the seventh **‘is a Sabbath to the Lord your God’**. And in both of those two areas Christians will stand out from the workplace practice of many.

That is a brief revision of the ground we have so far covered. But I want to convince you that the material we’re going to focus on today is more radical than anything we have seen so far. And my overall text is the verse we have chosen as our verse of the month in June: Colossians 3:17 ***17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.***

That verse of course doesn’t mention work specifically. But it manifestly **includes** work, because whatever I do, whether in word or deed, whether I am paid for my work or not; whether I’m thanked for my work or not, I am to do all in the name of the Lord Jesus. My work or my rest – everything.

Forgive me if you have seen these diagrams of Mr Pizza-man before, but I think they’re helpful in clarifying things. Imagine our life is divided up into



the various slices of a Pizza. God has a bit; there's a section for friends, for work, for sleep.

We tend to think that what is needed for me to grow in my spiritual life is this I must give God a bigger slice of my life, which necessarily squeezes the other bits more. When **we** do that, it sometimes feels demanding. In fact, however, it's rather convenient; because I pay God off with a bit, then I do what **I** want with what's left.



But that's not genuine Christianity; real Christianity is what we see in this acetate; it means to recognise Jesus as king by obeying his word in every slice of life.

Jesus' kingdom and rule must colour the whole of my life at home, at work, on holiday, as well as those moments when the Christian faith is more obviously centre stage: when I'm in Church or reading a Bible passage on my own and praying.



To change the analogy from Pizza, think of the way the Weekend Newspapers are divided into sections – News, reviews, money, motoring, homes, gardens, business, sport and so on. I think we instinctively think of our lives as divided up into sections like that – and we lapse into thinking that our Christian life is another of those sections – one of many, which, of course, many people just discard, in the way that some of us discard the Gardening section of Saturday's paper.

Whereas by contrast Christ claims all of our lives, every section of them. Col 3:<sup>17</sup> ***And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*** Necessarily, then my working life must be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, with his blessing, in his power and for his glory. Everything should be!

I like the story about the 18<sup>th</sup> century preacher William Romaine who one evening was invited to a friend's house and after tea the lady of the house asked him to play cards, to which he made no objection.

The cards were brought out and when everyone was ready to begin, Romaine said: 'Let's ask the blessing of God.' 'Ask the blessing of God!' said the lady with great surprise; I never heard of such a thing before a game of cards'. Romaine then inquired, 'Ought we to engage in anything on which we cannot ask God's blessing?'

Now – you might want to question whether he was in fact right that a game of cards was so wrong. But I think the instinct is right. If we can't pray about something, why are we doing it at all? If something is obviously sinful – it's morally wrong – then don't do it. If it's permissible, then do it in Jesus' name and with his blessing. By all means pray about it. There is no sacred/secular divide as if some bits of our lives are of no significance to him.

Applying that to work, Of course some work is morally contrary to Christ's standards – and as such it can't be done in Christ's name. I cannot justify being a bank-robber or a hit-man from Colossians 3:17. But otherwise Jesus Christ claims my work; I should do it in his name – and yes, it is absolutely right to make it a matter of prayer.

And I love that note of gratitude in Colossians 3:17 as well – as I work or do anything else, I am to give thanks to God the Father through Jesus Christ. It's supremely because Jesus has died on the cross for me that I have something to thank God for. I am to acknowledge all that he has done for me and to thank him for that – and that ensures that everything **I** do is the outflow of what **he** has done for me.

It's just as the early church leader, Augustine put it: 'a Christian should be a hallelujah from head to foot'. To put it another way, we should be hallelujahs from Monday to Friday, from 9-5 – not just on Sundays for an hour or two at church.

Now that verse should be the backdrop as we move on to the section a few verses later which are more obviously about work. Not least because in verses 22 and 23 there are clear verbal echoes of verse 17.

So let me read verses 3:22-4:1 again. **<sup>22</sup>Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. <sup>23</sup>Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, <sup>24</sup>since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. <sup>25</sup>Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.**

I want simply to highlight two things there. Notice first in those verses our mindset. Admittedly, it's not easy for us to step back into the shoes of a 1<sup>st</sup> century slave. Arguably it was a better existence than we think of when we hear the word 'slave'. We think of the human cargoes on the slave ships or people in the sugar plantations of the West Indies or the cotton fields of the US. 1<sup>st</sup> century slavery most of the time was better than that. But it was still the ownership of another human being and a practice which ultimately Christianity would go along way to eradicating.

However, notice here that Paul is encouraging the slaves to cope with their slavery; it would be many centuries before it was abolished and they are to cope with that and even to make the most of it. He calls on the slaves - and their masters - to turn their eyes towards God. And I want to suggest that there are very apt lessons for our working life, albeit in a rather different social setting two millennia later.

So what is the mindset Paul commends here? ***Your slavery must become your worship.*** It must be done as the end of verse 22 puts it '***out of reverence for the Lord***'. So the Christian slave would show what he thought of Jesus ***by doing his slavery better.***

It's a radical approach to slavery: to turn it into worship. But that is what all our work is to be: our schoolwork; our college course, research, nursing, banking, waiting, labouring, exciting work, humdrum work.

That's radical – when you consider that our culture worships career: as Christians we turn that on its head and our working life is to be our worship. We show what we think of Jesus by how we do our work (or how we handle unemployment for that matter).

And if we find that hard – well think how hard it must have been for the slave with an unjust, harsh master.

So how do we think of ourselves on Monday morning? Ask yourself: Who am I working for? Am I just a tiny cog in a massive operation – just a number in a big, faceless organisation? I work for Ford. Are we a slave for the children we have to dress, feed and drive here, there and everywhere – or for the elderly relative we have to help out of bed; Or a junior to that rather domineering manager. No, none of those: I am to think of myself as a slave of Jesus Christ...

At a stroke that liberates us from focussing on pleasing our earthly superiors. Which is why we so easily slip into the wrong patterns he highlights here: only working hard when they are watching, slipping into insincerity because we are basically man-pleasers. No – whether or not anyone else notices, we do our work for Jesus – it is service of him.

The other wrong way we tend to think will be to say – ‘no I don’t work for anyone. I’m my own boss.’ That too is wrong. It’s so helpful that those in authority in the working relationship are reminded that they have a Master in heaven.

It is as if Jesus has given us **all** our job descriptions and he says to us: Here’s what I want you to get on with. And therefore how I work indicates what I think of him.

We must move on in a moment, but before I do I want to sharpen the application of this a little.

Assuming that my work is not in and of itself sinful, I am to do my work as best I can for Christ – yes. But even more specifically, that commits me to bringing a Christian slant to my work as best I can; to ask myself does a Christian worldview have something distinctive to contribute to the issues I am facing in my workplace. Have I applied the Gospel fully to my working life?

And I am not well placed to answer that about every different type of work. But I would expect it to be the case that if Jesus is Lord of all life then there will be areas of my working life into which the Christian world view speaks very clearly.

If I am a doctor, then to serve Christ in my work will probably mean I need to think through medical issues from the Bible’s perspective. If I am a farmer there may be environmental issues I must apply Christian standards to. If I am an actor by trade, there are sure to be conclusions that other Christian actors have come to about what are the specific pressure points for Christian actors. If I am an academic then modern views of truth and meaning will need to be brought into line with Truth with a capital T. And so on.

In all likelihood I will get more help from other Christians in my line of work than anyone else – which is why a group of Christians at work, if that’s possible will be such a help. Together you know what the issues are and can help each other address the Bible to them. It’s also why any Christian book which addresses your particular work’s issues should surely be snapped up and read.

It’s the mindset of reverencing Christ, who is Lord of all, who claims all of life as his and who must call the shots in our working life.

So much for our **mindset**; what about our **motivation**...

There is a motivation for **positive** work in verse 24: a reward in heaven.

That is striking when you consider that this is addressed to slaves. Because a slave had no rights and no possessions as such. They couldn't inherit, legally, anything from anyone. And Paul says, 'you've no need to worry. You have an inheritance in heaven. Let that be your positive motivation'.

Hopefully that can provide strong motivation for us too. If we feel like we are working in the lion's den, as it were, in a setting which is dissatisfying, frustrating and full of sinful people and sinful standards, I can set that on one side and take encouragement that I am headed for heaven where the whole environment will be different: where my work will be noticed and valued.

In verse 25 there is also motivation not to do wrong: <sup>25</sup> ***Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism.***

If I am a worker in a bad job, being badly treated, by a bad master, I will be tempted to think that I am justified in doing something wrong. But according to Paul I am not. I can't say: 'I'll fiddle my expenses, because it's a terrible company'. God is impartial and sin is always sin. So once again I must keep my perspective on pleasing him.

Whether I am the employee or the employer, He is the boss and woe betide me if I slice up my life into pizza slices and think that he has no interest in my working life; if he is not Lord of all, he isn't lord at all.

Let me conclude with a story about a conversation someone had with three workers in a medieval quarry. They asked the three workers what they were doing. The first said irritably, 'I'm cutting a stone'. The second one said: 'I'm earning my living'. But the third held his head up high: 'I'm building a cathedral', he said. He looked beyond his tools and his wages to the ultimate end he was serving.

I wonder if we can do likewise in our work. Don't settle for just a short term, functional view of your work, whatever it is. We are not just 'preparing accounts' or 'preparing a meal'. Keep the ultimate end in view – an inheritance in heaven; and keep the ultimate boss in view as well. We are worshipping while we work, glorifying our Lord as we do so.

***Col 3:<sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.***

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)