

“The Christian Family” (III)
Colossians 3:22-4:1 (NRSV)

Today we are fortunate to have elected, ordained and inducted **a new group of ruling elders to join the Session in leading our church**. It’s interesting to observe that unless you are staff, working in the church is largely a voluntary, unpaid calling. By the operation of God’s Spirit, God calls gifted, willing and able people, who may have other jobs or who may be retired, to serve him in the church in many different functions, including the eldership. And we’re glad that there always seem to be additional people who are ready to respond to God’s call. We don’t take that for granted. Not for a minute! Service in the church is an act of grace: God’s gracious gifting of his people and people’s gracious willingness to serve. One way of looking at things is to say that the job of **the minister or teaching elder** – who is, of course, a paid employee of the church -- is **to challenge his/her employers to become unpaid employees!** Another way of looking at things is to say that **we are all partners in the firm**, much like a lawyer’s or an accountant’s office. True some may be junior partners – still learning the ropes – but we are all responsible for fulfilling the particular purpose or mission of this particular organization, Calvin Presbyterian Church.

As we have explored the theme of fullness in the home, we have seen how Jesus Christ brings this fullness to the relationship of husband and wife (Col. 3:18-19), and to that between parents, especially fathers, and children (Col. 3:20-21). Now we see how Christ extends his fullness in the workplace, in **the relationship between master and slaves** (Col. 3:22-4:1). Today we would likely call that relationship as being **one between employers and employees**.

Let me hasten to say it, before you say it, that **some employers treat their employees like slaves** – which is true -- it is clear that **Paul’s teaching here was accompanied by a great amount of tension**, for several reasons. Primary was the amazingly vast extent of **slavery and its dehumanizing nature**. Ancient historians estimate that there were some 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, or about half the population. Because of this, work was considered below the dignity of the average slave-owning Roman freeman. Practically everything was done by slaves; even teachers and doctors were slaves. Though there were some felicitous relationships between masters and slaves, basically the lot of a slave wasn’t very happy.

Ancient tradition, dating back to Aristotle, classified slaves as things, living tools (William Barclay, p. 212-214). The situation of slaves in general wasn't good, and for some it was terrible.

Christianity's preaching of the gospel, with its explicit doctrine of equality, **raised the tension**. Consider, for example, Paul's sublime teaching in his letter to the **Galatians**:

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is [therefore] no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (3:26-28).

Or again, in a personal letter to **Philemon**, a slave-owning Christian in whose home a church frequently gathered, Paul actually "commands" he accept his slave, Onesimus – because he's turned to Christ -- "no longer as a slave, but **more than a slave, a beloved brother** ... both in the flesh, and in the Lord" (16). Therefore, we can be sure Paul's teaching in his letter to the Colossians 3:22-4:1 was attended to eagerly by both slaves and masters who either heard it read in worship "at church," or who might have been able to read it at home for themselves.

The advice that Paul gives here was ultimately revolutionary, because in time -- unfortunately, an unconscionably long time -- it brought down the entire institution of slavery. **But it was also immediately revolutionary** in that it brought fullness to individual Christians' lives right away-- as we see with Onesimus's and Philemon's lives -- whether slave or master. In the ancient world, this was a domestic fullness, because slavery was an intensely personal family matter. Today, the application is largely professional or, at least, institutional as we find that **we are either "masters" or we serve somebody else**.

Today, unless you work twelve-hour shifts, the average worker still divides five or six days of her/his week more or less into equal periods of eight hours work, eight hours sleep, and eight hours "free time." Work is so important that our society normally defines people by what they "do." In order for Christ to bring fullness to life, he must bring it to what we do for a living or for our volunteer/partnership activities.

1. A full life for employees/servants/volunteers & partners (3:22-25).

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while you are being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord, and not for your masters” (3:22-23).

Hearing these words without explanation, one could easily say, “Paul, whose side are you on?” Think of how these words must have sounded to **an exploited servant!** I’m pretty sure, the apostle wasn’t encouraging submission to immoral or hurtful commands, and yet “everything” is so encompassing. Slaves – like employees, servants, volunteers or partners in the church today – were and are often asked to do unpleasant things. It was a tough command, especially when linked with the next phrase: “not only while you are being watched and in order to please them....” The Greek is literally “**eye service**” – work that is only done when the boss is looking. We all know what that is like. In gym class, when the coach is watching there are perfect pushups. But when she looks away, ... well that’s another matter. Eye service results in half-done jobs. The room is swept, but the dirt is brushed under the carpet. Work breaks extend until the boss returns.

That’s not the way it’s supposed to be. Rather, **our service is to be done sincerely: “wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.”** This higher calling makes no distinction between pleasant and unpleasant task, dull or challenging, menial or interesting. It simply states that everything must be done energetically, from the heart, whether the supervisor is there or not.

If this higher calling stood alone, it might be supremely impossible. But it is accompanied by an enabling rationale: **it is for the Lord.** “Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord, not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ” (3:23-24). It is this reality that inspired the work of **Mother Theresa** in Calcutta, India. Taking Matthew 25 seriously, she believed that when she and her Sisters of Charity were (and who still are) touching the sick and the dying and cleansing their sores, they were doing it for Christ. The most basic tasks – washing floors, scrubbing pots and pans, attending another meeting, visiting others – what have you – are all for the Lord.

Of course, caring for others, showing hospitality, visioning and planning for some great cause is **noble work**. But some people may feel their work is “**nothing**” work; they may feel they are **stuck in a meaningless job**. Some shuffle meaningless mounds of paper. Some dig holes and fill them up, time and time again. Some see nothing noble in the tasks they perform. Yet, they should be encouraged. They are, nevertheless, serving God as they work. This truth transformed the lot of the Christian slave in the ancient world. His/her “nothing” tasks were actually various callings from God; their tasks were noble because they were done for Christ. Ironically, because of this, Christian slaves invariably brought higher prices in the slave market (William MacDonald, Ephesians... 1968, p. 229).

At the end of verse 22, the apostle adds that our work is to be done “fearing” or translated better as **in “reverence for the Lord”** (NIV). The pagan slave served his/her master because he/she was bound by fear; the Christian slave served his/her master better because he/she feared or revered God. Working hard and effectively at our tasks brings glory to God.

In verses 24 and 25, the writer further enlarged the rationale for a believers’ work ethic by adding that **the God we serve will reward us**: “since you know that from the Lord you will receive [an] inheritance as your reward” (3:24). Further, “the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality” (3:25). We ought to pay careful attention to how we do our “jobs,” for surely God is the judge who will ultimately hold us accountable (2 Cor. 5:10). This can, of course, be good or bad news, depending upon how we live our Christian lives. But to the first-century Christian slave this was largely good news, because under Roman law, a slave could inherit nothing (Peter T. O’Brien, 1982, p. 225). Yet here he/she could receive an “inheritance,” a “reward.”

God rewards faithful workers. This ought to be an encouragement to us, whatever our lot in life, whether we are still working for a living, or whether we are living to make life easier for others by volunteering in the community or serving in the church. God pays us so well that perhaps, when we get to heaven, we will wish we had served him even more!

I will say that if we follow this work ethic **it does not mean things will always go well**; further, **we may not always receive** our boss’s, employers’ or supervisors’ **approval**. There are some superiors who will never be happy, and who will never be very good at praise.

Nor does it mean that we should overwork. The ironic evil of self-exploitation in obsessive work habits can kill us.

But it does mean that **Christians ought to be the best workers they can be.** Christians ought to have **the best attitude**; they ought to be **the best in dependability**, and have **the best integrity** as they do their work. Christians will be excellent workers.

For there is **intrinsic nobility in work offered to God.** A dutiful priest, who was also one of the nineteenth and early twentieth century's best, yet unnoticed, unheralded, English poets, **Gerard Manley Hopkins**, put it this way in his notebook:

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. To go to Communion worthily gives God great glory, but to take food in thankfulness and temperance gives him glory too. [God] is so great that all things give him glory if you mean they should. So then ... live.

2. **A full life for masters/employers/supervisors & senior partners (4:1).**

“Masters, treat your slaves justly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven” (4:1). **Fullness is found in treating those who serve fairly.** Remember, that under Roman law, slaves had no rights at all. So these words had a strange ring to non-Christians, and to the newly believing master. Also, given the social conditions of the times, 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 right and fair” (NIV), what is justice, ran a deep risk of ostracism from his fellow slave owners, not unlike what some Christians experienced as they tried to treat blacks fairly during the years of apartheid in South Africa.

The guiding reality for the master/employer/supervisor is that both he or she and his or her servant/employee/volunteer have **the same boss.** In fact, they will know that **God is the Chief Supervisor.** Some have thought this is too general a caution, too vague an admonition, for those who supervise us. But, as commentator **Alexander Maclaren** said, “If we try to live [up to] that commandment for twenty-four hours, it will probably not be its vagueness of which we complain” (The Expositor's Bible, 1903, p. 352).

If those who supervise us truly realize that **it is to God whom they must report** for the way they conduct themselves with their servants, employees or volunteers, **they will care about how they listen and speak to them, or handle and direct them.** They will care about what happens to them. They will be concerned that, if they are paid, they are paid properly, and that if they are volunteers, there will be other forms of appreciation shown or reward given. They will be concerned about their training and their education, their time off and their holidays, their illnesses and their families. Along with being concerned about these and other things, they will have more problems. In fact this kind of caring attitude assures that this will be so. But they will have the fullness and richness of Christ.

Masters/slaves – employers/employees, supervisors/volunteers, even partners working together– know one thing is for sure: disregard the apostle’s advice and you will never know fullness in your domestic/professional/business/institutional/church or other place of service life, no matter how well you may succeed. Disregard his advice and something will always be missing.

Jesus, who is the fullness of the universe, wants us to be “full” in our relationships: family, professional or voluntary. Moreover, he desires that this fullness overflows into our communities, into the whole world.

Justin Martyr wrote this about what Christians accomplished:

Our Lord urged us on 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 into contact with us, who were overcome and changed from violent and tyrannical characters, either from having watched the constancy of their Christian neighbours, or from having observed the wonderful patience of Christian travellers when overcharged, or from doing business with Christians

(R. E. O. White, In Him the Fullness, 1973, p. 127).

As people “do business” with us, may our fullness and richness in Christ become their fullness and richness too.

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg,
Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC
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