

A Christian Work-Ethic

Colossians 3:22 - 4:1 *Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye service, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. ²³ And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵ But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.*
Colossians 4:1 *Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.*

A book called *The Day America Told the Truth* revealed some of the work ethic of Americans. It found that only 1 out of 4 employees gave of his or her best on the job. One tenth said they were satisfied with their jobs. The average worker wastes about 20% of their time on the job, effectively meaning they are only at work four days a week. If that is America, a country that is still the economic leader of the world, what do you think the statistics would be in South Africa?

I think all of us know something of the epidemic of laziness, carelessness and indifference in the matter of work. But since our work occupies 8 to 10 of our sixteen waking hours, what we do when we work is what we do with most of our life. We work for the greater part of our lives. As Christians, God expects a work ethic completely different from that of the world. But sadly, when you take the polls and the surveys, the work ethic of those claiming to be born again isn't very different from those who make no such claim.

Many Christians regard their work as a curse. They think of it as part of the punishment for being human. But the Bible nowhere says that work is a curse. The only curse placed on work was that it would become exhausting, and at times, frustrating. But God had Adam working before he sinned. Our Lord Jesus worked strenuously when on the earth – first in Joseph's carpentry shop, and later as a teacher, healer and Saviour.

This passage is addressed to bond-slaves, because at the time of writing, the Roman Empire had hundreds of thousands of slaves, and many of the believers were slaves.

But you don't have to be a slave to make the application personal.

Slaves stand for all of us who work under authority. Masters stands for those who work as the authority. In other words, this passage speaks to all of us involved in some kind of work. Whether you are paid for your work (like professionals) or not (like housewives, grandparents and scholars) – God has commands for workers. This is a passage for all who work.

As we study this passage, we see at least four characteristics of a Christian work ethic.

1. Christian Workers Work Thoroughly

Paul says in verse 22, “Bond-slaves, obey in all things, your masters according to the flesh.” The word for obey is the same one used for children, ‘*obey your parents.*’ It means ‘*hear and obey*’ – listen under; listen for the instruction and carry it out.

How many of those instructions are you to carry out? ‘**In all things.**’ All of them.

What this means is that Christians perform all their responsibilities on the job. Whatever is included in your job description, whatever you are asked to do, whatever is part of your assigned tasks; as a Christian, you do it.

Christians are not selective workers. Christians are called to submit in all things. Another word for a selective worker is a *sluggard*.

We sometimes say about child training – selective obedience is disobedience. In the same way, selective diligence is really not diligence. It is the lazy man who only works when he wants to, on the things he wants to.

The book of Proverbs helps us identify the sluggard.

a) The lazy man procrastinates

Proverbs 20:4 *The lazy man will not plow because of winter; He will beg during harvest and have nothing.*

We usually put off the jobs we don't like. Too often the result is that they never get done. A simple rule of thumb is to learn to do the hardest things first. Do what you don't like to do, and you will always get to what you do like, do it the other way around, and you seldom will. In this way, you will perform all your responsibilities.

b) The lazy man makes excuses not to work.

Proverbs 22:13 *The lazy man says, "There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!"*

Proverbs 26:16 *The lazy man is wiser in his own eyes Than seven men who can answer sensibly.*

If we try hard enough we can always find reasons why we didn't hand in that report, or complete that assignment, or finish that homework, or get back to that client, or fill out that paperwork. And in the end, we believe ourselves.

But a Christian who is going to obey in all things, perform all the required tasks, must simply admit when he or she has failed. Don't make excuses for work not done. Just confess it and try to fix it.

c) The lazy man does not finish what he starts.

Proverbs 12:27 *The lazy man does not roast what he took in hunting, But diligence is man's precious possession.*

The sluggard sometimes makes a token effort to make it seem like he is submitting to the work, but in reality, he has no desire to do it, and so does not finish.

To submit in all things means doing the hardest thing first, making no excuses and seeing the job through to the end.

That means filing the paperwork you so hate. It means filling in the report. It means responding to the emails you don't want to. It means attending the meetings or the training that is part of your job, It means supervising the people you are supposed to. It means seeing a job through to the end.

Notice that Paul says, '*obey your masters according to the flesh*'. In other words 'your human masters'. Why does he add that qualification? Because throughout this passage, he is going to make it very clear who a Christian is really working for – a heavenly Master.

2. Christian Workers Work with Integrity – God is the Audience

Now Paul is quick to jump on something here. Some people submit to their masters in all things – if they're watching. In other words, their submission is a legalistic submission. Only if it is written in black and white on my contract, will I do it. Only if my job description spelt it out will I do it. Only

if the boss is in his office next door will I do it. Only if there is a chance I might get a written warning, or lose my job, will I do it.

This is what Paul calls 'eye-service'. This person does his or her work not from anything internal motivating them – it is purely external. Only when you are watched, do you work. Only if you are monitored by a physical presence, or by camera, or by computer, or by performance reviews, or by reports and deadlines do you work. You have to be driven with the whip of consequences before you work.

This kind of work is *man-pleasing*. Pleasing a visible human being is as far as your accountability goes. In the end, who is the man you are really pleasing? Self.

This is not how Christians are to work.

How are we to work? *In sincerity of heart, fearing God.*

Sincerity of heart carries the idea of a pure heart - the heart of a person who does their work with no ulterior motives, no mercenary attitudes, and no cutthroat backstabbing egotism; a childlike, simple, generous heart that does good even if not asked.

A Christian is a worker who does not need carrots at the end of sticks to get him to work. He works hard because he fears God.

I was once told of a pastor who was struck by the sign in another pastor's office. The sign simply read, "*God is my audience*". You see, here was a pastor, who did not have to report to a manager. He had no reports he had to hand in. He had no performance reviews, and no one to check up on what he was doing in that office all day. But the sign in his office was another way of saying Colossians 3:22 – in sincerity of heart, fearing God – God is my audience.

God watches me. Integrity is what you do when no one is watching. Integrity is how hard you work when you are apparently free to do your own thing. It's truth in the inward parts.

Are you as a Christian worker working with integrity?

Working with integrity is not taking stationery from your work to your home and never returning it. Working with integrity is when you do not use the office photocopier or fax machine for personal copies and faxes without paying for it or without permission. Working with integrity is when you do not purposely go on lunch early and come back late. Working with integrity is when you do not come to work late on purpose, and leave early on purpose. It is when you do not waste your company's money and time by surfing the Internet for things unrelated to work. It's when you do not sit and secretly play computer games, or chat on the Internet, or sit on private telephone calls. Working with integrity is when you do not fudge your reports at work, and exaggerate the results to make them look better, or omit truths to hide what is bad. It's when you do not lie on your CV, or make bold claims that you know you cannot keep in a job interview.

Working with integrity is refusing to copy your schoolmate's homework, or another's assignment. Working with integrity is refusing to accept exam answer sheets illegally circulated before the exams – choosing to study and work honestly.

Titus 2:9 Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back, ¹⁰ not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.

3. Christian Workers Work Diligently – God is the Recipient & Judge

Not only are you and I to perform all our responsibilities, work with integrity, but we are told to do something else, so sadly lacking around us:

And whatever you do, do it heartily. We are to work with diligence. The words translated 'heartily' are literally 'work out of your soul'. This means, do everything from your innermost being. Involve your whole being in what you do. Don't be a slothful, apathetic, half-hearted person, who is only half interested in anything he does.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.*

The Bible goes on to tell us why we should work so heartily. Whatever you do, you are doing it *as to the Lord, and not to men.*

God is not only the audience of what you do, He is the *recipient* of what you do. He is not simply a passive observer. Do you realise that, in one sense, you have to hand in your work to God?

How do I know? Because the next phrases all speak of reward or punishment. ...*knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.* ²⁵ *But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality*

The Lord is the one who rewards faithful, unseen hard work. God is just. Because He sees all things, He sees the diligent work that no man ever sees. And He will reward it.

You say, "I thought He would only reward us for winning souls and praying and teaching the Bible." No. God does not have two categories to reward you. Rewards are for faithfulness – not only in matters to do with eternity, but also in the best use of the abilities and talents God has given you.

Do you remember the parable of the talents?

Matthew 25:14-28 *For the kingdom of heaven is like a man travelling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. ¹⁵And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. ¹⁶Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. ¹⁷And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. ¹⁸"But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. ¹⁹After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' ²¹His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' ²²He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' ²³His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' ²⁴"Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵'And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.' ²⁶"But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. ²⁷'So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. ²⁸'Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.*

What was the point? God sovereignly gives differing abilities. At the end of the day, He will hold you accountable for what you did with them. And the one thing He will not tolerate is slothfulness.

Here is the negative side. The Bible says – *the evildoer will receive his own evil.* The one who thought no one was watching, the one who thought it didn't matter, will find God's justice catching up. The thief will end up robbed, the sluggard will end up working like never before to catch up, the

grumbler will find others complaining about him, the cheater will be cheated by someone else. If the evildoer does not come short now, he will come short later – because with God, there is no partiality. In the original, it has the idea of one who looks on the face or the appearance. God is not an appearance judge, who swoons at someone's beauty or wealth, or intelligence. He knows the very heart, and will not be tricked, bribed, charmed into giving you a good deal. The one who has lived a charmed life, skipping from job to job, charming and tricking and manipulating to have his own way will hit a dead end with God.

Believer or unbeliever – you will be judged for your work – how you did it, and for whom.

Sometimes I hear people say, 'If only I could do the Lord's work, then I would be motivated to give my all.' The Bible says, you are already doing the Lord's work. You can sell that car, land that plane, take that phone call, design that website, mix those chemicals, manage those finances, make that sale, shoot that commercial, apply that diagnosis, arbitrate that dispute, edit that video, do that account, write that software, write that exam, clean that diaper, plan the lesson, cook the meal, clean the garden for the Lord! The Lord is the recipient of what you do. There is no sacred/secular distinction in the Christian life. We are priests, and our work is consecrated.

You serve the Lord Christ.

And that truth helps us to understand that God expects consistent, hard and detailed work from Christians even if your boss is difficult, incompetent, unfair, or generally mean - because he is not your ultimate goal.

1 Peter 2:18 *Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh.*

It is amazing what employers have to do to get an ounce of work out of people today. Exorbitant salaries, medical benefits, pensions, provident funds, car subsidies, petrol paid for, 3 weeks paid leave, flexi-time, 13th cheque, yearly 8 to 10% increase, regular promotion. If not, they down tools, strike, hop to another job, or become generally unproductive.

Why should Christians work heartily? We should work heartily because we aren't doing it for this or that boss, or for this or that company. We aren't even doing it for money, career advancement. We are to present our lives to God, which includes the work we do.

Unsaved employers and managers should be puzzled by the work ethic of Christians. They should be provoked to question – why do you work so consistently, so diligently, without grumbling, even when there's nothing in it for you? And our answer can be – but there is something in it for me – the smile of my Lord.

4. Christian Managers give what is Right and Fair – God is the Ultimate Authority

The Bible adds one more characteristic to the work ethic of believers. In God's sovereign arrangement, some believers are going to be masters. That is, they are going to be managers, supervisors, owners, directors, leaders, employers. And while in this position you should still work thoroughly, diligently and with integrity, there is an added responsibility – the people under you.

So the command here is quite simple – give them what is just and fair. Give them what is right and equitable.

Leviticus 19:13 *You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning.*

You would be surprised to see how many times the Old Testament commanded the Israelites to not oppress their fellow-men, to not exploit them, charge them interest, withhold wages or otherwise hold people hostage economically.

Just like integrity was based upon God as the audience, and diligence was based on God as the recipient, so fair and equitable management is based on God as the Authority. Paul says, 'Don't lose sight, manager – that you have a Manager.' Don't be blinded by power – you are under a greater Authority, to whom you must and will answer. So don't do anything to your workers that you wouldn't want done to you. For by that simple standard you will be judged before the great Master – where there is no partiality.

Christians work thoroughly, with integrity, diligently and, when in authority, equitably. Now I said earlier that there is no distinction between sacred and secular. It is all one – the offering of our lives. So let me close on this note. What is your work ethic towards seeking God? Do you procrastinate? Do you make excuses? Do you never finish? If we ought to do all our tasks thoroughly, diligently, and with integrity, then what of our seeking God? What is our work ethic like in the things of God?

You have something that the unbeliever does not have. You are aware of an ever-present audience to fill you with integrity. You are aware of a loving Saviour to whom your work serves as an offering; and this awareness fills you with diligence and causes you to be thorough. You have the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to do all things in the name of Jesus. And you know that you will stand before Him, not to be judged as a sinner, but to be evaluated as a steward. Don't let over 60% of your life turn out to be wood, hay and stubble on that day. Let's embrace the Christ-sufficient work ethic.