

SERIES: The Ministry of the Market Place

SERMON: **Work Is Not a Four-Letter Word**

SCRIPTURE: Colossians 3:22-4:1; Ephesians 6:5-9; 1 Peter 2:13-23

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DATE: September 17, 2006

Introduction: Last Lord's Day we began a new series on *The Ministry of the Market Place*. We noted that work is a divinely established institution—one of four God set up to make our lives meaningful, purposeful, and happy—the others being marriage/family, government, and the church. We also learned that work should not be viewed as the "secular" part of our lives which must be endured so that the "sacred" might be enjoyed. Work actually preceded the Fall of Adam and Eve, and it will be a major part of our lives even in heaven. The fact is, we could not survive in any meaningful fashion (and chaos would reign) if it weren't for work; it is God-ordained, God-blessed, and God-regulated.

The tragedy is that so many today view work as a four-letter word. Instead of seeing that work is essentially good but that sin brought a curse on it (a curse that God is able and willing to redeem), they seem to see work *itself* as the curse. They work as little as possible, they sponge off society, they steal, they sell drugs, and do anything but productive work. I have always been amazed at the ingenuity of some criminals; if they put as much creativity and energy into legitimate enterprises as they do into ripping off innocent people, they could be CEO's of Fortune 500 companies!

Work is an essential part of a satisfying life. (Ex. 20:9; Prov. 6:6-11; 14:23; 19:15; 22:29; 2 Thes. 3:6-15)

Consider some key Scripture passages:

Exodus 20:9: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God." Isn't it curious how much attention the church has historically given to the commandment to observe one day as a sabbath and how little to the fact that we are to work six days. Modern man has gone to a five-day work week, and in some cases to a four-day week, and I don't think that is ultimately to our benefit, especially if the other days for used only for leisure.

Proverbs 6:10,11: "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man."

Proverbs 14:23: "All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty."

Proverbs 19:15: "Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry."

Proverbs 22:29: "Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men."

Now please turn in your Bibles to a more extended portion of Scripture that speaks about work, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 (we're going to look at several passages in 1 and 2 Thes, so I want you to have your Bible open:

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busy bodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers never tire of doing what is right. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

It should be clear from these passages that . . .

Work is not optional in God's economy; everyone should work. Obviously there must be at least one breadwinner in every family, and in nuclear families more often than not that is going to be the father. But housewives should also work. If they have young children at home, they have their hands full of plenty of work right there. If there are no children at home they can work outside the home, or do volunteer work, or support their husband in his work. College students and high school students should work—at least during the summer, but probably during the school year as well. There are very few students who don't actually do better in their studies if they carry a part-time job than if they just take classes. I also believe in child labor; any parent who does not give regular chores to a child is depriving that child of invaluable experience for his or her future.

Even retired people should work. There's nothing about retirement in the Bible—that's a product of the industrial revolution, and it has turned out to be both a bane and a blessing. The blessing is obvious. I don't begrudge anyone whose financial security allows him or her to retire from their career while their health is still good. But pity the person who uses that opportunity to vegetate in front of the TV or putter around with no clear purpose. I have known many people who have literally wasted the second half of their lives because they equated retirement with stopping work, and a good number have even died prematurely—I suspect because their body couldn't adjust to sudden work stoppage.

Please understand I'm not saying that a retired person has to start a new career, or work 60 hours a week, or even earn money. But if he knows what's good for him, he will find meaningful, steady work of some kind—hopefully kingdom work—and make the second half of his life really

count!

But what if you can't find a job? What about those who want to work but are unemployed or underemployed? I understand that there are circumstances in which a person finds himself without a decent job in his field. Also there have been times like the Great Depression when there was almost no work available for anyone.

I have both great sympathy and a word of exhortation for the unemployed. I sympathize because nothing is more damaging to a person's ego, especially a man's, than unemployment. My word of challenge, however, is that if unemployment continues over a lengthy period of time, get a job, *any* job. It may not be at the salary you are used to; it may not be something permanent; it may even seem demeaning; but it's almost always better to work at something than to go for an extended time without gainful employment. During the Depression some noble souls sold apples or pencils on the street corner, while others just sat on their porches waiting for times to get better because selling apples was beneath their dignity.

I have a friend in St. Louis who has had a tough work history. As far as I can tell it has been due to a series of unfortunate circumstances—layoffs, mergers, etc.—not poor work habits. After he lost his last job he found that his resume was a hindrance rather than a help because of the number of jobs he had in the past decade. The only thing he could find was a cashier's job at Sears at about one fourth of the salary he was used to. I was so proud of him for taking that job and for saying to himself, "I'm going to be the kind of worker that Sears can't help but promote." Literally within weeks he was promoted to be a manager over several Sears photo shops. He's still not where he would like to be, but he's a lot better off than the person who sits around waiting for companies to respond to bulk resumes.

Mankind was made for work, and the person who works is almost always going to be healthier and happier than the one who does not

Work doesn't have to be *for pay* in order to be meaningful and productive.

Volunteer work is as noble as remunerated work, especially if a person is disciplined and regular at it. And work in the home is as noble (for some, more noble) than work out in the market place.

Now I want to say something that may seem harsh at first, but I will try to support it with Scripture:

Refusal to work is sinful, even if theologically motivated. Turn with me to 1 Thes 4:11 where Paul instructs the church, "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody." Work here has two primary values: it protects one's reputation and it keeps one from becoming dependent on others. (The reference to working with ones' hands is simply a reflection of the fact that most work in the first century was manual labor and is not intended to reflect negatively on various kinds of

intellectual labor. The point is simply that you should stay productively busy so that you don't have to sponge off others).

Later in the next chapter (5:14) Paul urges the church to "warn those who are idle." Then in 2 Thes. he really presses home the point with strong warnings against idleness. We read that passage a few moments ago. The first command Paul gives in 2 Thes 3:6ff is to stay away from idle Christians. If a person is lazy and always sponging off other people, he should be shunned by fellow believers. The measure of how seriously Paul views this matter can be seen in the fact that the only other individuals we are told to shun are the grossly immoral and the extremely divisive.

The only difference is that Paul tells us not to regard the lazy believer as an enemy but as a brother in the Lord, whereas the immoral person and the divisive person are to be treated as if they were pagan unbelievers. I think this means that while we should not fellowship with a lazy believer, we should pray for him and counsel him.

Paul then uses his own life as an example. He worked night and day (obviously a reference to his tent making profession), so that he could pay for any food he ate. It would have been quite legitimate for him to ask for financial support from the people to whom he ministered; in fact, Paul went to great lengths in several passages to vindicate this right. But in this church he chose to pay his own way so that he could set an example for those who were not working.

You see, there was a theological argument some of these Thessalonians were giving for their idleness. They weren't just lazy; they were looking for and anticipating the Second Coming. Stop and think about this for a moment: If we knew for sure Jesus were coming next week, I suppose a lot of us would be tempted to quit our jobs. We would want to put our spiritual houses in order repair broken relationships, and witness to loved ones who don't know Christ. And that only makes sense! However, *no one knows* when He will come, and so Paul denounces their reasoning. In other words, idleness is sinful even if you have a theological reason for it!

Paul then offers a categorical rule for Christians to follow: If a man will not work, he shall not eat. Notice, it doesn't say "if a man *cannot* work," but "if he *will* not work . . ." Apparently the church shouldn't even provide benevolence to the one who refuses to work! That doesn't sound like compassionate conservatism, and it certainly doesn't sound like the welfare state, but it's what the Bible teaches.

So far we have seen that work is an essential part of a satisfying life. But there's a problem—work is not what it once was in the Garden of Eden. Work is broken. Some of you know what I mean. Either because of the people you work with, or the difficulty of the work, or the lack of success you have experienced, your work is painful. I'd like to help you gain a different perspective on it, but my solution is a little different from Dilbert's, who offered this counsel: "Eat one live toad the first thing in the morning, and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day." Instead I would like to suggest that one thing we can do to make work more fulfilling, even enjoyable, is to pay careful attention to the guidelines given to us in the NT about our

responsibilities as workers or employers. You see, I am convinced that the reason some people hate their jobs is that they aren't seeing them through God's perspective or following His guidelines.

Work entails certain responsibilities, whether one is in labor or management.

You know, everyone here is part of the Labor/Management spectrum. The employee is labor, the employer is management. The student is labor, the teacher is management. The football player is labor; the coach is management (someone should tell that to Terrell Owens and a few dozen others!). The farmer is both labor and management. Please turn in your Bible to Colossians 3 and we will read from verse 22 to the first verse of chapter 4.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism.

Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

You undoubtedly notice that this Scripture is addressing slaves and masters, not employees and employers. These slaves were individuals who were owned and over whom their masters had virtually complete control. Such servitude is revolting to us today, and I think, quite likely, it was also revolting to Paul and to Peter. But you won't find here a single direct word spoken against the institution of slavery.

While Paul instructed Christian slaves to secure their freedom if they could (1 Cor. 7:21), he did not advocate rebellion or the overthrow of the existing order. I think one reason for this is that slavery was universal in the first century. In fact, it is estimated by historians that more than half of all the people in the Roman Empire were slaves. For Paul to divert his attention to attacking the institution of slavery would have been tantamount to abandoning his first love (the preaching of the Gospel), and it might have meant the death-knell of the Church. But an even more important reason is that he never considered our most basic problems to be economic or social or political, but rather spiritual in nature. Paul realized that the only way to permanently correct social ills is to change people. As one person said, "The heart of every problem is the problem of the heart."

What Paul chooses to do instead is to apply biblical principles to the institution of slavery which, if practiced consistently, enabled both the slave and the master to live meaningful, productive lives that were pleasing to God. One of the unique things about Christianity is that it is a faith that can be practiced by people in all stations of life—rich and poor, educated and simple, black and white, male and female. And since Paul chooses to apply principles rather than speak to the specific issue of slavery, we can apply those same principles to our modern labor-management situation. The principles are universal, though the times are different. If a slave can please God

in *his* work, then you and I can certainly do the same under the far better conditions we enjoy.

Now Paul first mentions some practical responsibilities of employees.

The Practical Responsibilities of Labor

1. Recognize the extensive authority of management. (Col. 3:22; Eph. 6:5; I Peter 2:18) In verse 22 Paul states, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything." The universal principle I see here is that management has extensive, God-ordained authority over labor. If management chooses to incorporate labor into the decision-making process and even to delegate certain decisions to labor, that is good and wise, but the authority still lies with management.

Eph. 6:5 states the same truth: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." And 1 Peter 2:18 adds an important detail—this doesn't only apply to sensitive, kind, fair managers, but even to those who are harsh and unfair. Listen: "Submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, *not only* to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God."

Now I don't believe this should be interpreted as meaning that a Christian should never participate in a strike, or never appeal to the union steward to settle a grievance, or never use the courts to protect his rights. Those are tools the slave didn't have, so Paul doesn't discuss them. My own view is that Christians should be cautious about engaging in these activities, but that they are not categorically forbidden. Of course, Paul also does not discuss the option we all have of quitting and finding a different job, because slaves couldn't quit. But though workers today enjoy far greater freedom today, the underlying truth remains that the boss is the boss.

However, we cannot go so far as to suggest that management's authority over labor is *absolute*. It is not. In every relationship in life, submission is tempered by a higher priority, namely obedience to God. We must obey God rather than man. And if an employer asks a worker to lie or steal or cheat or sell an inferior product, or if the employer practices sexual harassment or racial discrimination, then the employee not only has the right, but perhaps even the obligation to object and refuse.

2. Show the boss your respect. (1 Peter 2:18, Eph. 6:5) Both 1 Peter 2 and Eph. 6 add to the expectation of obedience the requirement of respect. Just as in the case of children and their parents, one can obey without showing honor and respect, but God requires both obedience and respect.

3. Avoid loafing and bootlicking. (Col. 3:22) We must work "not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor." It's human nature to work harder when the boss is watching than when he's not; to get to work on time when he's in town and late when he's not; to concentrate when he's there but to waste time talking to fellow-workers when he's not. That's human nature, but it's not the Christian way. The Christian employee has no business being a clock watcher. Nor does he even have the right to use his employer's time to evangelize. He is not

paid to be an evangelist and using his employer's time that way is a form of theft. The end does not justify the means.

Now I'm not saying you can't witness. In fact, you can't help but witness. You are always either a positive or a negative witness. And the most positive witness an employee can give is to be the most industrious, honest, reliable, trustworthy employee the boss has. St. Francis of Assisi once said something like this: "Always preach the Gospel; if necessary, use words."

4. Do your best. (Col. 3:23) If work is worth doing at all, it's worth doing well. Look again at Colossians 3:23 which says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." Pour yourself into your work. Give it all you've got. You owe it to yourself, to your employer, and, most of all, to the Lord.

Something that might revolutionize the work habits for many of us is to actually imagine in our minds that we are working, not for our foreman or our manager or principal or coach, but rather for the Lord, for that is, in fact, the truth. The sentence at the end of verse 24 is one that could well be placed on any business man's desk, any housewife's ironing board, any professor's briefcase, or any truck driver's dash board: "It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

However, the apostle's teaching here is not a call to workaholism. Capitalism is easily perverted to the worship of work, in effect providing theological cover for addiction to wealth, power, and exploitation. That is not what is encouraged here. Yet Christians ought to be among the best workers, though even that can sometimes create problems. I heard Warren Wiersbe tell about a man who was fired from his job for working too hard. He was earning money to go to college, and he wanted to give the employer a good day's work each day. The trouble was, his zeal was showing up the laziness of some of the other employees—and one of them falsely accused him and he was fired. He lost his job but he kept his character.

Friends, we represent Jesus Christ to the world, not just by our speech and our moral conduct but also by our work. Jerry White writes that among the reasons to do excellent work are these:

- You will have a better witness.
- You will have more job security.
- You will be promoted or paid more.
- You will have more job satisfaction.ⁱ

I'm not talking about perfection here. We don't have to be a superhero at work, but we can and should work hard and well.

5. Keep the ultimate results in mind. (24,25) Remember, God rewards faithful service, even when people don't. There have been times in the lives of all of us (and some of you may be going through this right now), when you have worked very hard but have not been properly rewarded for it. You may have been cheated out of a raise you deserved, or summarily fired for something that was someone else's fault, or been edged out of a promotion by someone who played politics better than you did. Perhaps you are asking yourself, "Is it all worth it? What do

you get for breaking your neck for the company?" Some of you my age might remember Tennessee Ernie Ford and his pop song, "Sixteen Tons and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt."

Well, verse 24 tells you what you get: "You will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward." God doesn't promise you that you will be rewarded by your employer but He does promise you that you will be rewarded. I'm reminded of the plaque someone once gave me that said of the ministry: "The pay is not much, but the retirement plan is out of this world." The only problem is that some of us don't like to wait. We're like the Prodigal Son in that we want our inheritance now. Well, if you insist, God may allow you to have it now, but at the expense of later. Nothing goes unwitnessed by the Lord and nothing done well is ever done in vain.

But there's another side to this coin, too. Not only does God reward faithful service even when the boss fails to; He also judges impartially even when people don't. Look at verse 25: "Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism." We may think we've got the wool pulled over the boss's eyes. We may take advantage of the security that the union provides in not allowing us to be fired for merely wasting time on the job. We may believe that our padded expense accounts are so well hidden they will never be discovered. But God knows about all these things and "whatsoever a man sows, that will he also reap." Perhaps you've heard a lazy employee say in defense of his own loafing, "Oh well, it all pays the same." Believe me, it doesn't.ⁱⁱ

As we turn our attention briefly from the slave to the master, from the employee to the employer, we are reminded once again that the Scriptures are incredibly balanced: no word for the wives without a word also for the husbands; no demands for the children without demands also for the parents. And Paul doesn't put all the burden on labor either—he has something to say to management as well, but not as much. Why? Probably because there were more slaves than managers in the church at Colosse than managers.

The Practical Responsibilities of Management

1. Treat workers justly and fairly. (4:1) "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair." You know something? If employers would follow the principle of this one verse, there would be no need for unions or for strikes, or for the NLRB. Let me ask those of you who are in management, Do you pay your employees properly, as compared to yourself? Do your employees get enough vacation time, or just the bare minimum? Are you rewarding creativity and productivity? Are you paying female employees the same as male employees for comparable work, even if yours is a small business and exempt from federal scrutiny?

2. Avoid intimidating workers. (Eph. 6:9) Ephesians 6:9 calls upon management to "give up threatening." It's a natural human tendency to throw our weight around when we get into a position of authority. But threats and intimidation are rarely good motivators; pragmatically, they just don't work. People more often than not rebel when intimidated. It's far better to let an

employee know what's expected of him, give him time to learn how to do it, grant him mercy for a few failures, and then replace him if necessary, than to constantly badger him.

3. Treat your workers as you want to be treated. (Eph. 6:9) "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven." The implication is that since you want to be treated right and fair by the Lord, you should treat your employees the same way. In Eph. 6:9 this is made even more explicit: "Masters, treat your slaves in the same way (i.e. the same way you'd like to be treated). Do not threaten them, since you know that He who is both their Master and yours is in Heaven, and there is no favoritism with Him." In essence the message here is the same as the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" only with a slight modification: "Do unto others as you would have *the Lord* do unto you."

Conclusion: We've talked a lot about work today and its high status in God's economy. But there's one thing work can't do for you, no matter how diligent you may be. Do you know what that is? Work can't earn an eternal relationship with God. And yet without that relationship you're going to find yourself totally unable to carry out the principles that we have been talking about today.

A relationship with God must be established by faith, not works, at least not *our* work. Salvation is a gift which God freely gives to those who come to Him by faith in Jesus Christ. We must come acknowledging our sin and our total inability to save ourselves. We must accept the finished work of Christ on the cross.

i. Jerry and Mary White, *Your Job: Survival or Satisfaction?*, 26.

ii. Let me ask you to do a bit of figuring in your head. Assume for the sake of argument that your work contract, whether written or assumed, calls for 8 hours of work per day. Calculate the amount of money you actually received for your 2000 hours of work last year. Add to it any money your boss cheated you out of by various means, plus the hours you voluntarily worked but for which you were never paid. Now deduct all the pay which you received but for which you *didn't* work because of talking, extra long breaks, daydreaming, emailing (yes, emailing!), etc.

When all the figuring is done are you better off or worse off? Friend, you will be one or the other, because an impartial Judge is keeping those very records and will one day He will balance the books. I can't promise you that all of His rewards and deductions will be financial, but I can promise you they will be real. And what should you do now if you've been guilty? Friends, repentance, confession, and restitution is always God's way of dealing with sin.