

Work story shows it's hard for us to keep a good perspective on work

Good morning friends. Let's pray for God's help as we come looking for a word about work...

Once upon a time, before serving here at Northwest, and before studying in seminary and tutoring college students, I worked at a big accounting firm. I was an external auditor: part of a team that went out to businesses to examine their financial statements and create a report about their financials. We need auditors, they help our economy have trust and keep companies out of trouble, so God bless anyone here who loves auditing. But I did not particularly enjoy examining company records, or creating auditing workpapers, or being viewed as the bad guy as I checked people's work for errors while giving them extra tasks.

So one day on the job, as I'm spreading all kinds of joy and cheer auditing others, I check my email and see an update from a missionary friend overseas. As I read about her team's exploits leading college students to Christ and discipling them, I became bummed out. For in comparison, my little Excel auditing workpaper felt unimportant, and I didn't even like creating it. In those times, it's hard to keep a good perspective on work.

Relevance: our struggle to keep a good perspective on work makes things harder

I bet I'm not the only one here who's struggled with that. Maybe, like this auditor, you have attitude struggles as you do work you dislike. Or maybe, like this auditor, you struggle with thinking your work doesn't matter, perhaps even wondering if that means you don't really matter.

Or maybe you struggle to keep a good perspective because your boss just gave you the worst schedule ever, or your job is outdoors and you're done with this Texas summer, or you don't make as much as you think you should, or you're tired of company policies that lack common sense, or rude customers or coworkers, or the stupid political games you have to play.

Or maybe you're struggling because getting that promotion or hitting that revenue goal didn't bring the satisfaction and meaning you thought it would.

Or maybe you're in no mood to hear anyone else's complaints about their jobs, especially not from the guy struggling about his promotion, because you can't find a job.

Genesis chapters 1 and 2 show that God designed work to be an important blessing in our lives. There God is described as a worker and work was even part of paradise in the Garden of Eden. As I've heard Pastor Dave say, "Work is a good four letter word."

However, as Genesis chapter 3 shows, sin has brought great brokenness to our work. The ground is now cursed, and we'll only eat food from it through painful toil.

Work is hard, and when we add a bad perspective, it only makes things worse. That bad perspective impacts us a lot. Researchers estimate that on average we spend 90,000 hours at work in our lifetime.¹ That's a lot of time to be thinking wrongly about something.

And a bad perspective not only harms us over all those hours, it also negatively impacts our coworkers and customers. Even our relationships with loved ones are harmed if we bring our negative work perspective home with us. A bad work perspective can even hinder our intimacy level with God. He's not just the God of Sunday mornings, He wants to meet you in your work as well.

Orienting to God's Word

So I think we could use some help with our perspective on work. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the New Testament book of Colossians. If not, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers, and we're in chapter 3 of Colossians.

Context & Slavery Caveat – As you're opening to Colossians 3, two things. First, we're talking about all work that contributes to the common good this morning, paid and unpaid. So you can take what we're talking about today and apply it to jobs and chores and schoolwork and caring for family members and volunteering and so on.

Second, Colossians 3 includes instructions to slaves, which causes some to mistakenly think the Bible endorses slavery. So let me speak to that. When the author Paul wrote Colossians to the very early church, Christians were a tiny minority group with no political power living in the vast Roman empire, which had millions and millions of slaves.²

¹ According to research from the *Happiness at Work* - see <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/thrive/201102/finding-happiness-work>, accessed 8/13/19.

² Wiersbe, W, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 2) notes some scholars estimate there were 60 million slaves, about twice the current population of Texas.

So the tiny number of early Christians had no means to push for any reform for slaves. And the slaves needed much help navigating their difficult lives now. So Colossians and other New Testament books encouraged slaves by sharing about their great dignity, as people made in God's image and freed by Jesus, and invited slaves to find meaning in their work as they represented Jesus and to secure their freedom if they could.

And the New Testament also subverted slavery by elevating slaves, teaching the counter-cultural idea that slaves are equal to masters in Christ's church and that masters should treat slaves as brothers and sisters. The New Testament's writing entering into an unhealthy culture and correcting and improving things in that generation while also laying the groundwork for slavery's eventual demise by this teaching.

Looking to later generations, when Christians had more influence in society, I'm thankful for those who understood the New Testament's teaching and helped end legal slavery in this country and elsewhere. And I'm grieved that others in the history of the church owned slaves, failing to see, or ignoring, the implications of the New Testament's teaching.

With that said on slavery, I'll read from Colossians chapter 3, starting in verse 22, as we get help with our perspective on work.

²²Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. ²³Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, ²⁴since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. ²⁵Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

Brief teaching on how to work (With all your heart) – 3:22-23

This passage is addressed to slaves, so we can't apply all the particulars directly to us. Don't worry, your boss is not your earthly master. However, there's a principle for us on how to work in verses 22 and 23, to work hard.

In modern terms, verse 22 says to work hard not only when our supervisor or teacher is watching, but in everything. As verse 23 says it, work with all your heart. And these verses were addressed to slaves, so clearly it's not saying work hard only if you like your job

description, boss, and pay. It's not saying to be diligent in your studies only if you like your teacher and subject.

Generally speaking, it's fine to seek better employment or change schools if you think that's wise, but as long as you're working or studying somewhere, work, as verse 23 says, "with all your heart."

But there's a problem for us here. We don't have the willpower to work with all our heart for all those 90,000 hours, especially when things get bad at work, not to mention all our additional hours doing unpaid work.

Main teaching on perspective for work (You're working for Jesus) – 3:22-25

So thankfully, these four verses pack perspective that helps us work well. The perspective that flows throughout is that you're working for Jesus. It's why verse 22 says to work with reverence for the Lord, verse 23 says you work as for the Lord, and verse 24 says it is the Lord Christ you are serving in your work.

Working for Jesus brings amazing perspective, and we're going to examine this idea from multiple angles, like a multifaceted diamond.

Dignity (working for Him) – First, working for Jesus means He dignifies your work. Many slaves did what we consider to be very unglamorous, unimportant work, in harsh conditions, and yet these slaves are said to be working for the Lord in verses 22 and 23 and 24. It's almost like working for Jesus is an important idea here.

It's encouraging those slaves to see that things are not as they seem. It's like Paul is saying to them, "It appears that you're working for an earthly master, but in truth, you're really working for your heavenly Lord." That's the true perspective for slaves in their work, and for us.

So if you, or society, feels like your work isn't important, things are not as they seem. You're working for Jesus Himself, which gives all your work, paid and unpaid, incredible dignity.

Work story shows the difference dignity makes – When I was an auditor and got that email from my missionary friend about leading students to Christ, I was thinking unbiblically when I thought my auditing didn't matter.

On the surface, it may have looked like I was merely typing some words and moving some numbers around on an Excel spreadsheet, but these verses show the true perspective. My auditing was a ministry, a sacred calling. Why? I was doing work for Jesus Himself.

And the same is true for people in the ministry of remodeling, like Kimberly from the video.³ Or in the ministry of tentmaking, like the apostle Paul sometimes did. Given Paul's perspective on work here in Colossians 3, I bet when Paul made someone a tent, he honored Jesus by working hard to make his customer a quality tent.

It's not like Paul thought, "When I'm sharing the gospel and helping the poor I work hard because that's important, but when I'm making a tent I cut corners because that doesn't matter." No, Paul knows that all our work is holy, because it's all working for Jesus.

There's not this distinction between "sacred" work that's important and "secular" work that's not really connected to God and doesn't matter. No, it's all holy because it's all working for Jesus. So you can either treat your work as holy in how you work, or you can profane it by working poorly, but you can't make it "secular". No, it's all for Jesus, all kinds of good work are His.

So if you're in medicine, retail, hospitality, a first responder, if you're caregiving, parenting, volunteering, studying, it all has incredible dignity because you're serving our infinitely valuable Savior.

And Jesus dignifies our work even further by allowing us to represent Him in it.

Dignity (representing Him) – Imagine a slave who heard verses 22-25, and by faith, lived them out, carrying a dignity and hope and integrity as one working for Jesus, even in forced labor. What a witness that slave would be for Jesus. Our circumstances are different, but the same incredible opportunity is there for us, to work in a way that makes Jesus attractive as we represent Him.

In the New Testament book of Titus, Paul gives similar instructions to slaves as in our passage, but there he also notes that when you work in a godly way, it can make Jesus attractive. *Work story shows the difference dignity makes* – Back when I got that email from my missionary friend, she wasn't the only one surrounded by people who didn't yet know Jesus. And she wasn't the only one who represented Jesus in the way she worked and interacted with the people

³ <https://deidox.org/film/woman-integrates-faith-and-work> Accessed 8/9/19.

around her. I was literally being paid to be in a place where it was my job every day to interact with and serve co-workers and clients who didn't yet know Jesus. It's another way Jesus gave dignity to my auditing work, even if I failed to see it in that moment.

Kimberly talked about it in the video, her desire to do excellent work and treat people well as a reflection of her faith in God. In the past, the term "professional" was used to describe someone who did their work in a way that "professed" their Christian faith;⁴ that a "professional" "professes" Jesus, like Kimberly does. What a privileged opportunity.

And verse 24 mentions another opportunity that gives us more perspective to work with all our heart.

He rewards you –²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

The slaves receiving this letter from Paul had no inheritance, they didn't even have rights, their work was extremely broken. And Paul is not denying or minimizing the evils of their situation. Instead, Paul is helping them to add an eternal perspective, to see not only their hardships, but also their glorious future. To look forward to the day when those slaves will receive an inheritance, as verse 24 says.

When Jesus returns, He will fully redeem the brokenness of our work and lives. So there's hope if you're unemployed, or stuck in a dead end job, as hard as that is. And not only will Jesus return to right all wrongs and redeem everything, He also wants to reward our work for Him. As verse 24 says, you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.

If you struggle with the idea of God rewarding us for working well, check out last Sunday's sermon, where Pastor Dave showed that it's good to pursue the rewards that God wants to give us.

In the New Testament two themes about these rewards keep coming up: special intimacy with God and sharing in the glory of ruling with Jesus in His kingdom.

And so the perspective verse 24 brings is that what you do at work this week is so important that it will even impact your experience of eternity. That as we work well for Jesus,

⁴ See <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/do-executive-jobs-have-more-kingdom-value-than-dirty-jobs>. Accessed 8/19/2019.

He is shaping us into a more loving, powerful people that He will delight to generously reward in His kingdom. Grace upon grace.

Work story shows the difference rewards make – Back as an auditor, doing work I disliked, it was hard to consistently work hard. It was a daily temptation to jump on the internet for a while instead of working. Back then, Stephanie and I loved the TV show *Lost*, and there was a season when I got on the Lostpedia website way too often while auditing.

I think the perspective verse 24 brings could have helped me here. That our choices at work not only shape the kind of person you're becoming, but impact your level of intimacy with Jesus and your service and rewards in His coming kingdom, all of which are unimaginably more amazing than any enjoyment I got from Lostpedia.

Now let's look at verse 25, which gives more perspective on working for Jesus.

Gospel Worship

Jesus worked to remove our wrongs (3:25) – ²⁵ Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

Slaves suffered horrible injustices, so I think Paul wanted to comfort them in verse 25 with the knowledge that in the end, God will take care of it. Oppressive masters will be justly judged for their horrific wrongs. And unlike in the slaves' current situation, where everyone else was favored over them, verse 25 says in the end, there is no favoritism. For those slaves, and us, God will justly take care of any abuse we've received in our work.

This can be some comfort to us, but also raises a hard question for us. Because we've not only been mistreated by others, we've also done wrong in our work and the rest of our lives. We've had moments where we've deeply hurt people and dishonored God. Verse 25 warns that anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs. And so the question for all of us is, who is paying for your wrongs?

The good news is that Jesus came and lived a perfect life, in your place, on your behalf, and then on the cross took the penalty for all your wrongs. And He invites to come to Him in faith, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead.

That before Jesus called us to work hard for Him, He did the ultimate hard work for us. Thanks to His work on the cross, you'll never be repaid for your wrongs. So Jesus is not only your ultimate boss, He's also your ultimate friend, laying down His life for you. Setting free

those slaves and us from our sins, what a Savior! A Savior Who doesn't want you to miss out on the eternal rewards He wants to give you for your good work.

This morning we've gotten perspective to help us work hard even when work is hard.

Next Steps

Big idea – The big idea is that you're working for Jesus, Who works so well for you. That's the perspective to take into your paid and unpaid work tomorrow. That you have a sacred calling working for Jesus, and so your work has great dignity, no matter what kind it is. And you represent Jesus to everyone you work around, what an opportunity. And, what you do at work impacts the person you're becoming and the ways that Jesus will generously reward you. And you're doing it all for the One Who worked on your behalf on the cross.

Application – To help us hold on to this amazing “working for Jesus” perspective, our next step is to read Colossians 3:22-25 every day this week. To make this easier, we've put the verses on the back of the sermon outline in your program this morning so you can place them somewhere you'll easily see them and read them before you start your work.

Impact of us all bringing this perspective to our work – I really hope we all follow through on our next step to read these verses every day this week. For this work perspective we've been talking about is countercultural, so we need the daily reminder that comes from reading the verses. And we also need each other's help to have this countercultural perspective.

Imagine if this church was a place where we really affirmed each other in the importance of all our work, paid and unpaid. Where the person who makes the most money here and the person who makes the least are both equally given the respect of those working for Jesus. Where a bummed out auditor could come in and be empathized with and then reminded that his ministry of auditing is a sacred calling, that he's working for and representing Lord Jesus in it, and that Jesus will reward his faithfulness there.

This blessing not only flowing between us, but spreading outside the walls of this church as well. I don't know how many people who don't yet know Jesus are in churches in San Antonio today. But I'm very confident that the number of people who don't know Jesus who will be rubbing shoulders with a Christ-follower tomorrow morning at work or school is way higher. Imagine if every Christian in this city brought this working for Jesus perspective into their work, what fruit God might bring from that.

So as we close, please stand with me. We're going to read out loud together a liturgy on our work. It comes from the book *Every Moment Holy*. The liturgy focuses on paid work, but as we read it, let's ask God to make us into these kinds of workers in all our work. The words are on the screen, please read along with me at my pace.

O Christ who supplies my every need,
I praise you for all provisions
and for the means by which they are provided.
For my current employment,
in this season of life, I give you thanks.
By it, may I meet my own needs,
and contribute to the needs of others.

Let me work and serve in this position
with mindfulness, creativity, and kindness,
loving you well by loving
all whom I encounter here.

Jesus, be everpresent as mediator
between me and my employer,
between me and my supervisors and co-workers,
and in all my dealings with others in this work,
reminding me that my treatment of them,
is the strongest evidence of my affection for you.

Grant me therefore the patience
to listen to others,
the humility to learn from them,
the compassion to consider their needs as my own,
and the grace to wear well in this place
the name of my Lord,

remembering that I arrive here each day
as an emissary of your kingdom.

Let me be an asset
to my employer and superiors,
working for their flourishing
without resentment.

Let me be a support to my peers,
contributing to their advancement
without jealousy.

Let me be an encouragement
to any I train or lead,
affirming and equipping them
without disdain.

May the days of my employment here be meaningful.
Use this chapter in my life
to accomplish your ends,
whatever they might be.⁵

Dismissal – Amen. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord in all your work.

⁵ *A Liturgy For One Who Is Employed*. From Douglas McKelvey's *Every Moment Holy*, 17-19.