



Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church

Building a Healthy Church

Vocation as a Gift

Colossians 3:22-24

02/10/2019

Main Point

God calls us to approach the work He has given us with a desire to please Him and bless others.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is the worst job you have ever had? What made it so bad?

Looking back, do you see value in that experience despite your pain and frustration?

No matter how frustrating or unfulfilling our work may seem to us, it is not so to God. God designed us for work and blesses all work that is done out of a desire to honor Him. Every

occupation, except for those that require their employees to sin, is a gift from God for our good. It is only when we see work as a gift that we will find fulfillment in our jobs and approach them in a way that advances Christ's kingdom.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ GENESIS 2:15-17 AND GENESIS 3:17-19.

For what purpose did God place man in the garden? What does this tell us about God?

Why is it important that work was part of God's design prior to the fall? What does that tell us about the value of work? How might this realization change the way you approach your job?

God placed Adam in the garden to "work and keep it." This shows us God is good, as He graciously provided the garden as a home for Adam and entrusted to him the sacred task of tending and preserving it. Though God is king over all creation, He willingly shared His creation with man and gave him dominion over it (Gen. 1:26-28). When we go to work, we are living out God's design and exercising our God given task of subduing the earth.

What provisions did God make for Adam? What do these provisions reveal about God?

What restriction did God make for Adam? What did this restriction require of Adam?

What does your job require of you? How might trusting God with your current work change the way you approach it?

God graciously provided man all that he needed. Adam was simply called to work and keep God's good garden and obey God's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In other words, all that was demanded of Adam was that he trust God. It is only when we trust God to provide for us that we can approach our jobs faithfully and confidently.

What changed about work for Adam after he disobeyed God and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:17-19)?

Despite how unfulfilling and frustrating our jobs can be sometimes, why is it important we continue to work faithfully and diligently?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ COLOSSIANS 3:22-24.

Paul's instructions in Colossians 3:22-25 originally applied to Christian slaves and masters, but the principles they contain are valid for all believers and are applicable to modern-day work relationships.

What timeless principle in verse 22 relates to being an employee in today's workplace?

How would you contrast "external service" and work that is done with "sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord"?

How might understanding that work is a gift with which we are called to glorify God change the way you approach daily tasks?

Working with "sincerity of heart" means that we do our best no matter who's watching, not just when the boss is present. Often it is easy to get by with minimum effort. However, Christians in the workplace should be motivated by their relationship with Christ to render the best service they can.

Why do you work? What motivates you to do excellent work? What motivation does Paul mention in verse 23?

We should examine our own motivations for excellence in work. Do we do it to please people? To get ahead? To make money? The highest and most meaningful motivation for our work is service to the Lord.

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How might considering the work Christ accomplished for us on the cross change your perspective on your work?

What step might you take this week to begin approaching your work with a gospel-centered perspective?

What changes are needed in your own work habits and relationships in order for you to point people to Christ in the way that you work?

Pray

Thank God for the gift of work and for faithfully providing for us. Ask God to help your group members focus their hearts on Christ and on His glory as they go to work each day. Pray that our love for Christ would transform the way we work and that God would use the members of your group where they work to further His kingdom.

Commentary

GENESIS 2:15-17

2:15. God provided a garden for His special creation that included vegetation pleasant to the eye and to the tongue. God made human senses and planted a garden that appealed to them. God even provided work as a way to keep in touch with the bounty of creation. For some, work is a curse, for others a blessing. Our attitude toward work is colored by experience, the sort of work we do, and what we gain from our labor. Whatever your attitude about work, you may be sure God intended work to provide support and meaning for life, not as a way of killing time or joy.

2:16. Work involves rewards. God provided food for His human creation. Apparently the man was free to take and eat as he desired. The extent of God's provision in Eden is a reminder of the extent of His bounty available today. That bounty is still present. Though many people today are malnourished or starving, experts tell us the earth can support the billions of people alive. God's provision in creation is not miserly. He has given enough for all.

2:17. God's command to the first man included both permission and prohibition. Some have said putting this prohibited tree in the garden was like putting a snake in a nursery. Why would a loving parent (Creator) do that? Yet, some of the reasons for the tree's presence seem clear. Not eating of that particular tree would be a way to show recognition of God's authority. The man could show he knew how to obey God and how to maintain the fellowship God wanted with His created one. God's created person could show he wanted fellowship with God. Respect, recognition of God's superior wisdom, and a desire to please God are additional motives for obedience.

God made the consequences clear. Eating would produce death. We know the rest of the story. The man and the woman did eat, and they died. No, they didn't die on the very day they ate, but they died. Some Bible interpreters understand the phrase in "the day that you eat" to mean the first couple died spiritually in their disobedience at the very time they ate. Other Bible students believe "day" might have a broader meaning in this passage. God simply was connecting in the strongest possible way disobedience and death. The fact of death is more important than the time of death.

2:15 God placed the man in the garden for the stated purpose of supervising it. Verse 15 continues the thought of v. 8 but with a subtle difference in the language. “Put” in v. 15 translates the causative form of the verb *nûa*, “rest,” and so could be rendered literally “caused to rest.” In v. 8, however, the term is *îm* (“put, place”). Here the language of v. 15 is essentially equivalent to v. 8 in context, but “rest” bears a special significance for depicting deliverance from Noah’s waters (see 5:29 discussion) in Genesis 1–11 and for speaking of the safety that Israel would experience as found in the Pentateuch. God promised to give Israel safety (“rest”) in the land from its enemies (e.g., Deut 3:20; 12:10; 25:19). This is illustrated by Lot and his family; visiting angels “led them safely [“gave rest”] out of the city” (19:16). It also is used of dedicating something before the presence of the Lord. God prepares the garden for man’s safety, where he can enjoy the divine presence.⁹³

In the garden God gives the man a purposeful existence that includes overseeing his environment. Work is a God-given assignment and not a cursed condition. It was sin that spoiled the pristine relationship between the man and his environment, making work a toilsome chore that became a requirement for mere existence (3:17–19, 23). Mesopotamian accounts of human creation typically show how human beings were created for the purpose of work, but there human beings work to supply food for the selfish, lazy gods. Divine travail over their incessant labors is relieved by the creation of a human workforce. In contrast the biblical account portrays God as Provider for man’s needs, a part of which is the honorable, meaningful labor of tilling the soil. “Life without work would not be worthy of human beings.”

The man’s principal commission is to “work” and “take care” of his pristine garden home (v. 15). The word translated “work” (*bad*) is the common one for tilling the soil (e.g., 3:23; 4:2, 12) or for other labor (e.g., Isa 19:9); it also speaks of “service” to another (e.g., 29:15; 31:6) and is often used of worship (e.g., Exod 3:12). The verb and its noun derivative “service” (*bdâ*) frequently describe Levitical duties in tabernacle and temple worship. It also speaks of the completed “work” on the tabernacle (Exod 39:32, 42). “Take care” (*šmar*) probably specifies the nature of Adam’s labor. It describes the occupation of Abel (4:9), attending property and flocks (e.g., 30:31), protecting persons (28:15, 20), and frequently of “observing” covenant stipulations. For priestly duties it describes the faithful carrying out of God’s instructions (e.g., Lev 8:35) and the caretaking of the tabernacle (e.g., Num 1:53; 18:5). Both terms occur together to describe the charge of the Levites for the tabernacle (Num 3:7–8; 18:7), thus again suggesting a relationship between Eden and tabernacle.

We have commented that “work” and “guard” in our passage anticipate 3:23–24, where the man and woman are expelled from the garden. Here there is a play on the word *šmar* in the narrative: because the man fails through sin to “take care” (*šmar*) in the garden, he is expelled, and God’s cherubim “guarded” (*šmar*) its access (3:24). Thus the man’s assignment was fulfilled in an unexpected way by angels, and, ironically, Adam himself was prohibited from entry.

2:16 As God had given the natural world and all life-forms boundaries, human life too is instructed to live within prescribed boundaries. The verb “commanded” (v. 16) occurs twenty-five times in Genesis, but this first occurrence is the only place in Genesis where the narrative introduces a divine command by this formula: “And the LORD God commanded” (cp. 3:11, 17). Elsewhere in Genesis the formula, introducing direct discourse, always has a human subject (e.g., 12:20; 26:11; 28:1). “Commanded” (*wâ*) is common in the Old Testament and is often found in pentateuchal laws (particularly Deuteronomy) where Israel, “commanded” by God through Moses, received the “commandments” (*miwôt*) of the Lord for their way of life. The companion expression found in the Pentateuch, “[all] which the LORD commanded [Moses],” with its slight variations, is especially frequent in the narrative of the tabernacle’s construction (chaps. 39–40). At the ark in the tent of meeting, God met with Moses where he gave all “which [the LORD] commanded [Moses] for the Israelites” (Exod 25:22; cf. also 34:32). This same expression for faithful obedience commends Noah’s construction of the ark (6:22; 7:5, 9, 16) and Abraham’s circumcision of Isaac (21:4). Unhappily, in the ensuing garden story the same cannot be said for Adam and Eve.

The man is addressed personally as an individual “Thou.” Unlike all other created life, the human being is endowed with special significance as a “person” in the eyes of his Creator, enjoying a privileged depth of divine-human communion. This is likewise evidenced in the creation narrative, where God spoke to mankind, unlike the creatures, when bestowing his blessing of procreation (1:28). All human life merits respect and protection by virtue of the esteemed position to which God has exalted it. The prohibition against eating the fruit of the “tree of knowledge” gave Adam opportunity to worship God through loyal devotion. Luther likened the tree to “Adam’s church, altar, and pulpit. Here he was to yield to God the obedience he owed, give recognition to the Word and will of God, give thanks to God, and call upon God for aid against temptation.”

The instruction of the Lord is given as a positive expression of God’s goodness rather than a harsh restriction (v. 16b). The Hebrew clause is headed by “from any/every tree [*mikkl*] of the garden,” evidencing God’s broad provision. This generosity is heightened by the following

Hebrew construction translated “you are free to eat,” which could also be translated “you may eat freely” (cf. NRSV).¹⁰² This strong affirmation indicates that the provision of God for the first couple is plentiful and to be enjoyed liberally by them.

2:17 But freedom has no meaning without prohibition; the boundary for Adam is but one tree. This prohibition, however, is stated in the strongest terms, as was the provision. The adversative beginning the clause (“but”) establishes the contrast between provision and prohibition. The NIV’s rendering reflects the nuance of strong prohibition by “you must not eat.” The form of the prohibition is the style of command prominent in the Ten Commandments and occurring often in the laws of Moses. The causal clause (“for,” *kî*) that follows explains the severity of the prohibition; the consequence of such an action is stated emphatically: “you will surely die.” This construction is the same kind as in v. 16, where the emphasis is on the liberality of God’s provision. Here its emphatic nuance underscores the forewarning of the Lord. Commonly the expression “you shall surely die” decrees death for a culprit either by God (Gen 20:7; Ezek 33:8, 14) or a king. It occurs repeatedly in the legal collections of the Pentateuch, condemning criminals to death (e.g., Exod 21:12; Lev 20:2; Num 35:16–18).

The preemptive warning is necessary because, unlike the other members of the created order, mankind alone has the potential for crossing moral boundaries. Out of God’s goodness and mercy he informs the man that the consequence of disobedience is death; what is at stake is whether he will choose to trust God’s words. There is no suggestion from the passage, as is assumed by some, that Adam was created immortal but subsequently forfeited immortality by his sin. There is a difference between man’s creation, in which he receives life by the divine inbreathing (2:7), and the perpetuation of that life gained by appropriating the tree of life (cf. 3:22). Immortality is the trait of deity alone (1 Tim 6:16). Calvin rightly noted that without sin Adam’s “earthly life truly would have been temporal; yet he would have passed into heaven without death, and without injury,” thereby receiving eternal life. Perpetuating or renewing earthly life was possible through the “tree of life” (v. 9), but once sin was committed, the sanction of disobedience necessarily meant the man and woman’s expulsion from the garden and its tree of life (3:22–24).

K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, vol. 1A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 208–212.

3:22. The Christian slaves were to serve genuinely. They were to recognize that their primary task was not to please their earthly masters, not to serve only when they were being watched. "External service" literally means "eye service," a word that seems to have been coined by Paul. From the Greek words ophthalmos (eye) and douleia (service), this term indicates someone who needs watching. The tendency for all slaves was to work when the master watched, thereby easing their situations and, perhaps, qualifying them for favors. Paul spoke against that. The slave was to do his work for the lord, not for his earthly master. The all-seeing eye of the heavenly Master searched the motivations of the heart. This is the first reference to the heavenly Master as the object of all the slave's work.

3:23. Paul continued the command to genuine service by urging slaves to "work heartily, as for the lord rather than for men." This was an amazing and transforming command for the Christian slave, he was to do his work under the lordship of Christ.

3:24. Paul's sensitivity to the plight of the slave is seen in verse 24. Paul knew that most slaves' lives were hard and were lived on the edge of subsistence. They were on their society's lowest social and economic level. As slaves, they could look forward to little on this earth. Perhaps some rewards were given for good work, but there was no inheritance.

In speaking of rewards, Paul challenged them to consider the fact that their rewards were spiritual. By Roman law, slaves had no right to inherit anything. However, their reward for doing their jobs in the right spirit was an inheritance from the Lord himself. As Christian workers, we must remember that our ultimate inheritance comes from the lord, and it is a heavenly reward. Real riches may be found in the midst of earthly poverty.

A second motivation for genuine service was the sovereignty of the lord: "it is the lord Christ whom you serve." The rather unusual combination of "lord" and "Christ" without the term "Jesus," points to two titles which were applied to the risen Jesus. "Christ" (Christos) referred to his messianic work; "Lord" (kyrios), to his sovereignty. Perhaps the combination served to remind the slaves of two truths. The first was that they were to be conscious of their salvation, which came from the same one who was

their Master. If he cared enough to save, he could care for all their needs. The second was that the combination stresses two aspects of the lord's work which apply especially to slaves. His work of salvation was a total redemption. They knew that they served a redeemer who is sovereign. He could deliver them in time, and he would deliver them in eternity. If, therefore, he allowed them to remain in slavery, he had some other plan for their lives. His plan temporarily overrode his deliverance. The slaves were reminded that the Christian slave really serves the lord.

Slavery was an established institution in Paul's day. There were 60 million of them, and many of them were well-educated people who carried great responsibilities in the homes of the wealthy. In many homes, the slaves helped to educate and discipline the children.

Why didn't the church of that day openly oppose slavery and seek to destroy it? For one thing, the church was a minority group that had no political power to change an institution that was built into the social order. Paul was careful to instruct Christian slaves to secure their freedom if they could (1 Cor. 7:21); but he did not advocate rebellion or the overthrow of the existing order.

Something should be noted: the purpose of the early church was to spread the Gospel and win souls, not to get involved in social action. Had the first Christians been branded as an antigovernment sect, they would have been greatly hindered in their soul-winning and their church expansion. While it is good and right for Christians to get involved in the promotion of honesty and morality in government and society, this concern must never replace the mandate to go into all the world and preach the Gospel (Mark 16:15).

You will remember that the Book of Colossians was one of three letters that came from Paul's Roman imprisonment; the other two were Ephesians and Philemon. Read Paul's little letter to Philemon and see his attitude toward slavery. Paul did not advise Philemon to treat his runaway slave severely, but to receive him as a brother even though he was still a slave. In fact, Onesimus, the slave, was one of the men who carried this letter to Colossae! (Col. 4:9)

A Christian servant owed complete obedience to his master as a ministry to the Lord. If a Christian servant had a believing master, that servant was not to take advantage of his master because they were brothers in the Lord. If anything, the servant strived to do a better job because he was a Christian. He showed singleness of heart and gave his full devotion to his master. His work was done heartily, not grudgingly, and as to the Lord and not to men. "Ye serve the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:24).

Single hearts and sincere hearts were necessary for Christian servants to please God and serve their masters acceptably. These instructions emphasized the positive side of obedience. Servants were to obey to please God, not just to avoid punishment. Even if the master did not

commend them, they would have their reward from the Lord. In the same manner, if they disobeyed, the Lord would deal with them even if their master did not. God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; James 2:1, 9).

In our society we do not have slaves. But these principles apply to any kind of honest employment. A Christian worker ought to be the best worker on the job. He ought to obey orders and not argue. He ought to serve Christ and not the boss only, and he ought to work whether anybody is watching or not. If he follows these principles, he will receive his reward from Christ even if his earthly master (his boss) does not recognize him or reward him.

I have a friend who, years ago, 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 they started fighting back. One of them falsely accused my friend of something, and he was fired. He lost his job but he kept his character, and the Lord rewarded him.

In today's complex, competitive world, it is sometimes difficult for a Christian to obey God and hold his job, or get a promotion. But he must obey God just the same and trust Him for what he needs. Unsaved fellow employees may take advantage of the Christian worker, but perhaps this can be an opportunity for the Christian to witness and back up his witness with his life. It is far more important to win a lost soul than to make a few extra dollars.

Just as the husbands and wives and parents and children have mutual and reciprocal responsibilities, so do masters and servants. Paul admonished the Christian masters to treat their servants with fairness and honesty. This would be a new idea to Roman masters because they considered their slaves as "things," and not people. Masters had almost total control over their slaves and could do with them whatever they pleased. Few unsaved Roman masters ever thought of treating their slaves with fairness, for slaves deserved nothing.

The Gospel did not immediately destroy slavery, but it did gradually change the relationship between slave and master. Social standards and pressures disagreed with Christian ideals, but the Christian master was to practice those ideals just the same. He was to treat his slave like a person and like a brother in Christ (Gal. 3:28). He was not to mistreat him; he was to deal with his slave justly and fairly. After all, the Christian slave was a free man in the Lord, and the master was a slave to Christ (1 Cor. 7:22). In the same way, our social and physical relationships must always be governed by our spiritual relationships.

As we review this very practical section of Colossians, we see once again the preeminence of Jesus Christ in our lives as believers. Christ must be the Head of the home. This series of admonitions is actually a practical application of Colossians 3:17: "And whatsoever ye do in

word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” It is by His power and authority that we should live in our daily relationships. If He is the preeminent One in our lives, then we will love each other, submit to each other, obey, and treat one another fairly in the Lord.

It would be well for us to review Ephesians 5:18–6:9 and note the parallels between that passage and the one we have just studied. This section of Ephesians emphasizes being filled with the Spirit, while the Letter to the Colossians emphasizes being filled with the Word; but the evidences are the same: joyful, thankful, and submissive living. To be filled with the Spirit means to be controlled by the Word.

The fullness of the Spirit and the fullness of the Word are needed in the home. If family members are controlled by the Spirit of God and the Word of God, they will be joyful, thankful, and submissive—and they will have little trouble getting along with each other. Christian employers and employees will treat each other fairly if they are filled with the Spirit and the Word.

The heart of every problem is the problem of the heart, and only God’s Spirit and God’s Word can change and control the heart.

Can the people who live with you detect that you are filled with the Spirit and the Word?

Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 144–145.