

# Colossians & Philemon and Work

*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. (Colossians 3:17, 23-24)*

Why would the apostle Paul<sup>1</sup> insist that the Christians at Colossae live their daily lives under such a comprehensive mandate controlling every word and deed? In these two brief but rich letters, Paul explores in detail both the theological rationale behind these two overlapping commands and the implications of this lifestyle in all of the primary relationships of life – with our spouses, with our families, and with our colleagues, employees or bosses in the workplace.

## Background on Colossae and the Colossians

### The city of Colossae

Cities grow as they develop commercial centers that provide jobs for their residents. The ancient city of Colossae was built on a major trade route through the Lycus River Valley in the Roman province of Asia Minor (in the southwest corner of modern-day Turkey). There the Colossians manufactured a beautiful dark red wool cloth (*colossinum*) for which the city became famous. But Colossae's importance as a business center diminished significantly around 100 B.C. when the neighboring city of Laodicea was founded as an active and commercially aggressive competitor. The two towns, along with neighboring Hierapolis, were destroyed by earthquakes in 17 A.D. (in the reign of Tiberius) and again in 60 (in the reign of Nero). Rebuilt after each earthquake, Colossae never regained its early prominence and by 400 the city no longer existed.

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<sup>1</sup> The authorship of the letter to the Colossians has been questioned by a number of scholars, but because it is not the purpose of this commentary to address authorship, the letter's self-attribution to Paul will be accepted here. This debate has negligible effect on understanding the letter's application to the workplace.

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Lead Article approved by the Theology of Work Steering Committee January 11, 2010  
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## **The Colossian church**

The apostle Paul had spent two years<sup>2</sup> planting a church in Ephesus, and in Acts 19:10 we learn that, radiating from that center, “all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.” Whether Paul himself fanned out in missionary activity throughout the province or whether some of his converts did so, a church was planted in Colossae. It is likely that Epaphras founded the Colossian church (Col. 1:7), and from 1:21 we assume that the church was composed mainly of Gentiles.

Philemon was a citizen of Colossae and an upright leader in that church. He also was a slave holder whose slave Onesimus had escaped, had later encountered the apostle Paul and had responded to the gospel message about Jesus. In the letter to the Colossians, Paul addresses how our relationship to God through Jesus Christ affects us in the workplace. Specifically, he writes about how slaves are to do their work for their masters and how masters are to treat their slaves. The short personal letter to Philemon extends our understanding of Paul’s command in Col. 4:1.

## **The purpose of the letter**

The letters to the Colossians and to Philemon are two of the four so-called “prison epistles,” believed to have been written by Paul from prison in Rome<sup>3</sup> sometime circa 60-62. At that time, Nero was the cruel and insane emperor of the Roman Empire who could ignore the claims of Paul’s Roman citizenship.

From prison, Paul had heard that the Colossian Christians who had at one time been strong in their faith, were now vulnerable to deception about the faith (2:4, 8, 16, 18, 21-23). He wrote to refute each of the theological errors the Colossians were tempted to embrace. The letters, however, take readers far beyond these issues of deception. Paul cared deeply that all of his readers (today as well as the Colossians two thousand years ago) understood the context of their lives within God’s Story, and what that looks like in their relationships on the job.

## **God at work, Jesus at work**

The first half of Paul’s letter to the Colossians can be summarized in nine words:

Jesus made it all.  
Then Jesus paid it all.

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars suggest that Paul’s missionary work in Ephesus took place circa 50-52, a decade before these letters were written.

<sup>3</sup> While many scholars believed Paul was imprisoned in Rome, some have suggested that the letters were written earlier from Ephesus. The four prison epistles are letters addressed to the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians and to his friend Philemon.

## Jesus made it all

The Colossian letter assumes that the reader is familiar with the opening lines of the first book of the Bible, Genesis: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The second chapter of Genesis then states that “on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done” ( 2:2). The creation of all that exists was WORK, even for God.

Paul’s words to the Colossians about that work read this way: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Col. 1:15-17).<sup>4</sup>

## Jesus paid it all

Paul then goes on to make clear to his readers that Jesus not only was the agent who created all that exists, but he is also the agent of our salvation: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (1:19-20). Paul puts Christ’s work in *creation* side by side with his work in *redemption*, with themes of creation dominating the first part of the passage (1:15-17) and themes of redemption dominating the second half (1:18-20). The parallelism is especially striking between 1:16, “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created” and 1:20, “to reconcile to himself all things.” The pattern is easy to see: God created all things through Christ, and he is reconciling those same things to himself through Christ. In sum, Jesus made it all, then Jesus paid it all so that we can have a relationship with the living God.

But that gets us ahead of the story. Back up (as Paul does) to God’s work at creation and to what that means for us as workers today.

## God worked in creation, making humans workers in his image (1:1-14)

In Colossians 1:6, by allusion Paul takes us back to Genesis 1:26-28: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’”

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<sup>4</sup> While we cannot develop a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity in Genesis 1, it is noteworthy that “God” is plural in Gen 1:26: “Let *us* make humankind in our image.” In Genesis 1:1, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” Throughout the chapter, it is the Word spoken by God that brought all that is into being. In Colossians 1:15-17, Paul attributes all of creation to Jesus, a theme developed by John in his gospel, 1:1-4.

Here is God the creator at work, and the apex of his activity is the creation of humanity in the divine image and likeness. To the newly minted man and woman, he gives two tasks (the tasks are given to both the male and the female): they are to be fruitful and to multiply, filling the earth they are then to subdue or govern. Paul picks up the language of Genesis 1 in Colossians 1:6, giving thanks to God that the gospel is progressing in their midst, “bearing fruit and growing” as it goes out into the entire world. He then repeats this in 1:10: the Colossians are to bear fruit and grow in their understanding of God and in their work on his behalf. Whether the tasks are the work of parenting, the multi-faceted work of subduing the earth and governing it, or the work of ministry, in our work they and we are image-bearers of God who works.<sup>5</sup> We were created as workers in the beginning, and Christ redeems us as workers, as we will see in Paul’s instructions to slaves and masters in 3:18-4:1.

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<sup>5</sup> Someone might read Paul’s words in Colossians 1:6 and conclude that preaching the gospel effectively replaces the mandate to fill the earth and literally subdue it. Has what God ordained on the physical plane at creation now shifted to the spiritual plane? Has literal procreation been transformed into spiritual multiplication? Is the management of the wild elements now replaced by the management of wayward souls? This line of reasoning has prevailed in many sectors of the Church, both past and present, and it almost invariably leads to downplaying work. When Paul alludes to Genesis 1:26-28 here in Colossians 1:6, it is an intimation of what comes later in the chapter: God is at work in the world reconciling all things to himself (1:20). Paul puts Christ’s work in *creation* (1:15-17) side by side with his work in *redemption* (1:18-20). The parallel is clear: God created all things through Jesus Christ, and he is reconciling those same things to himself through Christ. Christ is God’s agent in creating *everything*: angels, human beings, sticks and stones—from the cosmic dust in the Sombrero galaxy down to the hydrothermal vent animals at the bottom of the sea. Likewise, Christ is God’s agent to bring this whole cosmos back to the way God wants it to be. Christ’s salvation is not limited to saving souls; its goal is the restoration of all things to serve the purposes God had for them in the beginning.

James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 104. Dunn writes, “What is being claimed is quite simply and profoundly that the divine purpose in the act of reconciliation and peacemaking was to restore the harmony of the original creation...resolving the disharmonies of nature and the inhumanities of humankind, that the character of God’s creation and God’s concern for the universe in its fullest expression could be so caught and encapsulated for them in the cross of Christ.”

The Bible describes the care and effort that God put into creating the world (e.g., Genesis 1 and 2; John 1). Given this, it would not make sense for God to create all things and then settle for saving invisible souls while allowing the rest of his creation go to hell. Yet many Christians see the gospel in this way. Colossians 1:15-20 is possibly the clearest scriptural refutation of this common theological error. In the light of this text, we cannot replace the Genesis 1 mandate merely with evangelism. We were created as workers, and Christ redeems us as workers, as we will see again in Paul’s instructions to slaves and masters in 3:18-4:1.

At the same time, Paul is under no delusion that Christ’s appearing has suddenly brought all humanity back to the Garden of Eden. Evangelism is a priority for Paul because it is the gospel that holds the seed of the new creation, a seed that first sprouts in human hearts.

## **Jesus, the image of the invisible God (1:15-29)**

What difference does it make that we are bearers of the divine image in our work? One implication of this is that in our work we will reflect God's work patterns and values. But how do we know God so that we know what those patterns and values are? In Colossians 1:15, Paul reminds us that Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God." Again, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily," (2:9). It is "in the face of Jesus Christ" that we can know God (2 Corinthians 4:6). During Jesus' earthly ministry, Philip asked him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus responded, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father'?" (John 14:8-9).

Jesus reveals God to us. He shows us how we as God's image-bearers are to carry out our work. If we need help in grasping this, Paul spells it out: first, by describing Jesus' infinite power in creation (Col. 1:15-17), but then the apostle immediately ties that to Jesus' willingness to set that power aside, to incarnate God on earth in word and deed, and then to die for our sins.<sup>6</sup> We look at Jesus. We listen to Jesus to understand how we are called to image God in our work.

How, then, can God's patterns and values apply in our work? We start by looking specifically at Jesus' work as our example.

### **Forgiveness**

We see, first, that God "has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son," (1:13). Because Jesus has done that, Paul can appeal to us to "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (3:13). It was on this basis that Paul could ask Philemon, the slave master, to forgive and receive Onesimus as a brother, no longer as a slave. We are doing our work in the name of the Lord Jesus when we bring that attitude to our relationships in the workplace: we make allowances for others' faults and we forgive those who offend us.

### **Self-sacrifice for the benefit of others**

Second, we see Jesus with infinite power creating all that is: "things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers" (1:16). Yet we also see him setting aside that power for our sake, "making peace through the blood of his cross" (1:20) so that we might have a relationship with God. There are times when we may be called on to set aside authority or power we have in the workplace to benefit someone who may be undeserving. If Philemon is willing to set aside his slave-owner authority over Onesimus (who does not deserve his mercy) and take him back in a new relationship, in this way Philemon images the invisible God in his workplace.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul makes this explicit in the prison epistle to the Philippians, 2:5-9: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

## **Freedom from cultural accommodation**

Third, we see Jesus living a new reality that he offers to us: “If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (3:1-3). We are no longer bound by cultural mores that stand in contrast to the life of God within us. We are in the world but we are not of the world. We can march to a different drumbeat. The culture of the workplace can work against our life in Christ, but Jesus calls us to set our hearts and our minds on what God desires for us and in us. This calls for a major reorientation of our attitudes and values.

Paul called Philemon to this reorientation. First-century Roman culture gave slave-owners complete power over the bodies and lives of their slaves. Everything in the culture gave Philemon full permission to treat Onesimus harshly, even to have him killed. But Paul was clear:

As a follower of Jesus Christ, Philemon had died and his new life was now in Christ (3:3). That meant rethinking his responsibility not only to Onesimus, but to Paul, to the Colossian church, and to God his judge.

### **“I’m doing all right by myself” (2:1-23)**

Paul warns the Colossians against falling back into the old orientation towards self-help. “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (2:8). In “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” Flannery O’Connor ironically put those words—“I’m doing all right by myself”—in the mouth of a serial killer proclaiming that he doesn’t need Jesus. This is an apt summary of the ethos of the false teachers plaguing the saints at Colossae. In their “self-imposed piety,” (2:23) spiritual progress could be attained by rough treatment of the body, mystical visions (2:18), and by observing special days and food laws (2:16, likely derived from the Old Testament). These teachers believed that by marshalling the resources at their disposal, they could overcome sin on their own.

This important point forms the foundation for Paul’s exhortations to workers later in the letter. Genuine progress in the faith – including progress in the way we glorify God in our workplace – can spring only out of our trust in God’s work in us through Christ.

[NOTE: case needed to show the need for Christ’s grace, rather than self-help, to make us better workers]

### **Heavenly living for earthly good: the shape of our reorientation (3:1-16)**

This call to reorientation means that we reshape our lives to think and do according to Jesus’ ethics in situations he never encountered. We cannot re-live Jesus’ life. We must live our own lives for Jesus. We have to respond to questions in life for which Jesus does not give specific answers. For example, when Paul writes, “Set your minds on things above, not on the things that are on earth,” (3:2) does this mean that prayer is preferable to painting a house? Does Christian progress consist of thinking less and less about our work and more and more about harps and angels and clouds?

Paul does not abandon us to raw speculation about these things. In 3:1-17, he makes clear that “to set your minds on things that are above” (3:2) means expressing the priorities of God’s kingdom *precisely in the midst of everyday earthly activities*. In contrast, to set your mind on earthly things is to live by the values of the world-system that sets itself up in opposition to God and his ways.

What does this putting to death “whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (3:5) look like in concrete daily life? It does not mean wearing a hair shirt or taking ice cold baths for spiritual discipline. Paul has just said that “severe treatment of the body” does no good in stopping sin (2:23).

First, it does mean putting to death “fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)” (3:5). We are called to turn aside from sexual immorality (as if degraded sex could bring you an upgraded life) and greed (as if more stuff could bring more life).<sup>7</sup> The assumption, of course, is that there is, in fact, a proper place for gratification of sexual desire (marriage between a man and a woman) and a proper degree for the gratification of material desire (that which results from trust in God, diligent labor, generosity toward neighbors, and thankfulness for God’s provision).

Second, Paul states, “You must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (3:8-10).<sup>8</sup> The words “to one another” indicate that Paul is speaking to the church, that is, to those who are believers in Christ. Does this mean it is permissible to continue to lie to others outside the church? No, for Paul is not talking about a change in behavior alone, but a change in heart and mind. It is difficult to imagine that having taken on a “new self,” you could somehow put back on the old self when dealing with non-believers. Once you “get rid of all such things,” they are not meant to be brought back.

Of these vices, three are particularly relevant to the workplace<sup>9</sup>: greed, anger, and lying. These three vices can appear within what would otherwise be legitimate business pursuits.

- Greed is the unbridled pursuit of wealth. It is proper and necessary for a business to make a profit, or for a non-profit organization to create added value. But if the desire for profit becomes boundless, compulsive, excessive, and narrowed to the quest for personal gain, then sin has taken hold.

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<sup>7</sup> Because other words in the list (“uncleanness,” “passion,” and “evil desires”) can refer to sexual sins, some scholars believe “greed” here likewise refers to sexual greed. It seems more likely that Paul is using greed in its familiar sense of an inordinate desire for more money or goods. He includes it here because the same desire for more that drives people to fill the void in their lives with sex, also drives them to fill that void with money or things.

<sup>8</sup> Paul observes that the Colossians used to “live in” these sins (3:7). This seems to be a very pointed choice of words, especially because he has just said that Christ is now their life (3:4). He asks, “Were you really *living* when you were in disobedience to God?”

<sup>9</sup> The assumption here is that instructions given for relationships among believers have some application for relationships between believers and the wider world: “Do not lie *to one another*” (3:9). This topic is covered in depth in Theology of Work Project Key Topic #9, *Relationships at Work* at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org)

- Anger can appear in conflict. It is necessary for conflict to be expressed, explored and resolved in any workplace. But if conflict is not dealt with openly and fairly, it degenerates into unresolved anger, rage, and malicious intent, and sin has taken hold.
- Lying can result from promoting the company's prospects or the product's benefits inaccurately. It is proper for every enterprise to have a vision for its products, services, and its organization that goes beyond what is presently in place. A sales brochure ought to describe the product in its highest, best use, along with warnings about the product's limitations. A stock prospectus ought to describe what the company hopes to accomplish if it is successful, and also the risks the company may encounter along the way. If the desire to portray a product, service, company or person in a visionary light crosses the line into deception (an unbalanced portrayal of risks vs. rewards, misdirection, or a plain fabrication and lies), then sin once again reigns.

Paul does not attempt to give universal criteria to diagnose when the proper virtues have degenerated into vices, but he makes clear that Christians must learn to do so in their particular situations.

When Christians “put to death” (3:5) the person they used to be, they are then to put on the person God wants them to be, the person God is recreating in the image of Christ (3:10).<sup>10</sup> This does not consist in hiding one's self away for constant prayer and worship (though we are all called to pray and worship, and some may be called to do that as a full-time vocation). Rather, it means reflecting God's own virtues of “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience” (3:12) in whatever we do.

An encouraging word comes from Paul's exhortation to “put up with one another,” (3:13, as it may be translated). Most translations read “bear with one another,” but this does not fully capture Paul's point. He seems to be saying that there are all kinds of people in the church (and we can readily apply this to the workplace as well) with whom we won't naturally get along. Our interests and personalities are so different there can be no instinctive bonding. But we put up with them anyway. We seek their good, we forgive their sins, and we endure their irritating idiosyncrasies. Many of the character traits Paul extols in his letters can be summarized in the phrase “he/she works well with others.” Being a “team-player” is not simply a resume-enhancing cliché. It is a foundational Christian virtue.<sup>11</sup>

**[NOTE: case needed about accomplishing Christ's will at work by “putting up with one another”]**

Both putting to death the old and putting on the new are immensely relevant to daily work. Christians are meant to show the new life of Christ in the midst of a dying world, and the workplace is perhaps the main forum where that type of display can take place.

- Christians may be tempted, for example, to fit in at work by participating in the gossip and the complaining that permeates many workplaces. It is likely that every workplace has people whose on- and off-hours actions make for juicy stories. It is not lying, is it, to repeat the stories?

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<sup>10</sup> The word translated “put on” seems to use the imagery of clothing: you take off your old self and clothe yourself with the new self.

<sup>11</sup> At the close of Paul's letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, he sends greetings from some of his fellow workers with him—Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and others. Paul worked with real people, with all the peril and promise people held then and now. We may think that life would be fine if we had ideal co-workers, but God's work has always been in and through people like you and me.

- It is likely that every workplace has unfair policies, bad bosses, non-functional processes, and poor channels of communication. It is not slander, is it, to complain about those grievances?

Paul's exhortation is to live differently even in fallen workplaces. Putting to death the earthly nature and putting on Christ means directly confronting people who have wronged us instead of gossiping about them behind their back (Matthew 18:15-17). It means working to correct inequities in the workplace and forgiving those that do occur.

Someone may ask, "Don't Christians run the risk of being rejected as cheerless, 'holier-than-thou' types if they don't speak the way others do?" This could be the case if such Christians disengage from others in an effort to show that they are better than other people. Co-workers will sniff that out in a second. But if, instead, Christians are genuinely clothing themselves with Christ, the vast majority of people will be happy to have them around. Some may even secretly or openly appreciate the fact that someone they know is at least trying to live a life of "compassion, kindness, humility and patience" (Col. 3:12). In the same way, Christian workers who refuse to employ deception (whether by rejecting misleading advertising copy or balking at glorified Ponzi schemes) may find themselves making some enemies as the price of their honesty. But it also is possible that some co-workers will develop a new openness to Jesus' way when the Securities and Exchange Commission knocks on the office door.

### **Doing our work as for the Lord (3:17 & 3:23)**

So what does it mean to do our work "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (3:17)? How do we do our work wholeheartedly, "as done for the Lord and not for your masters (3:23)? To do our work in the name of the Lord Jesus carries at least two ideas:

- We recognize that we represent Jesus in the workplace. If we are Christ-followers, how we treat others and how diligently and faithfully we do our work reflects on our Lord. How well do our actions fit with who he is?
- Working in "Jesus' name" also implies that we live recognizing that he is our master, our boss, the one to whom we are ultimately accountable. This leads into Paul's reminder that we work for the Lord and not for human masters. Yes, we most likely have horizontal accountabilities on the job, but the diligence we bring to our work comes from our recognition that, in the end, God is our judge.

When Paul writes, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him," (3:17) we can understand this verse in two ways: a shallow way and a deeper way. The shallow way is to incorporate some Christian signs and gestures into our workplace, like a Bible verse posted on our cubicle or a Christian bumper sticker on our truck. Gestures like this can be meaningful, but, in and of themselves, they do not constitute a Christ-centered work-life. A deeper way to understand Paul's challenge is to pray specifically for the work we are in the midst of doing: "God, please show me how to respect both the plaintiff and the defendant in the language I use in this brief."

An even deeper way would be to begin the day by imagining what our daily goals would be if God were the owner of our workplace. With this understanding of Paul's injunction, we would do all the day's work in pursuit of goals that honor God. The apostle's point is that in God's kingdom, our work and

prayer are integrated activities. We tend to see them as two separate activities that need to be balanced. But they are two aspects of the same activity, namely working to accomplish what God wants accomplished in fellowship with other people and with God.

## **Of slaves and masters, ancient and contemporary (3:18-4:1)**

At this point, Colossians moves on to what is called a Household Code, a set of specific instructions to wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. These codes were common in the ancient world. In the New Testament, they occur in one form or another six times—in Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 5:15-6:9, Colossians 3:15-4:1, 1 Timothy 5:1-22, 6:1-2, Titus 2:1-15, and 1 Peter 2:11-3:9. For our purposes here, we will explore only the section in Colossians having to do with the workplace (slaves and masters in 3:18-4:1).

If we are to appreciate fully the value of Paul’s words here for contemporary workers, we need to understand a bit about slavery in the ancient world.<sup>12</sup> It would be easy to object that most laborers today are not slaves, though they might sometimes describe themselves that way at the end of a bad day at the office. So what relevance does Colossians 3:18-4:1 have for workers today?

Slavery was a dominant form of labor in the Roman Empire, much as working for wages or a salary is today. Many slaves worked in jobs that we would recognize as occupations today, receiving food, shelter, and often a modicum of comforts in return. This is not to say that we would not be appalled by the slaves’ lack of rights. Slave-owners were in a position of absolute power over their slaves, similar in some respects to, but much more extreme than, the power that employers or managers have over workers today.<sup>13</sup> The general principles Paul puts forward concerning slaves and masters in this letter can be applied to modern employees and employers, provided we recognize the significant differences between our situation now and theirs then.

What are these general principles? First, and perhaps most important, Paul reminds slaves that their work is to be done in integrity in the presence of God who is their real master. More than anything else, Paul wants to recalibrate the scales of both slaves and masters so that they weigh things with the recognition of God’s presence in their lives. Slaves are to work “fearing the Lord” (3:22) because “you serve the Lord Christ” (3:24). In sum, “whatever your task, put yourselves into it [literally, ‘work from

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<sup>12</sup> Western readers often equate slavery in the ancient world with the chattel system of the pre-civil war South in the United States, a system remembered with justification as a largely race-based agricultural set-up noteworthy for its brutality and degradation. At the risk of oversimplification, we might say that the slave system of the ancient world was both similar to and different from the system of the Old South as popularly understood. On the one hand, in ancient times, foreign captives of war laboring in mines were arguably far worse off than slaves in the South. At the other extreme, however, some slaves were well-educated, valued members of the household, serving as physicians, teachers, and estate managers. All were considered to be their master’s property, so that even a household slave could be subject to horrific treatment with no necessary legal recourse.

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller description of first-century slavery, see the introduction to “The Roman World of the Early Church,” just before the commentary on the Acts of the Apostles. For more on the condition of slaves in the Roman Empire, see S. Scott Bartchy, *MALLON CHRESAI: First Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 11 (Scholars Press, University of Montana, 1973).

the soul'] as done for the Lord and not for your masters" (3:23). In the same way, masters [literally, "lords"] are to recognize that their authority is not absolute: they "have a Master in heaven" (4:1). Christ's authority is not bounded by church walls. He is Lord of the workplace for both workers and bosses.

This has several practical consequences. Because God is watching workers, there is no point in being a mere "person-pleaser" who gives "eye-service" (literal translations of the Greek terms in 3:22). In today's world, many people try to curry favor with the boss when he/she is around, and then slack off the moment that person is out the door. Apparently it was no different in the ancient world. Paul reminds us that the Ultimate Boss is always watching, and that reality leads us to work in "sincerity of heart," not putting on a show for management, but genuinely working at the tasks set before us. (Some earthly bosses tend to figure out over time who is play-acting, though in a fallen world slackers can sometimes get away with their act.)

The danger of being caught for dishonesty or poor work is reinforced in 3:25: "For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality." Because the previous verse refers to a reward from God for faithful service, we may presume that God is also in view as the punisher of the wicked. However, it is noteworthy here that the fear of punishment is not the prime motivation. We do not do our jobs well simply to avoid a bad performance review. Paul wants good work to spring out of a good heart. He wants people to work well because it is the right thing to do. Implicit here is an affirmation of the value of labor in God's sight. Because God created us to exercise dominion over his creation, he is pleased when we fulfill that by pursuing excellence in our jobs. In this sense, the words "Whatever your task, put yourselves into it!" (3:23) are as much a promise as a command: by the spiritual renewal offered us in Christ by God's grace, we can do our jobs with zest.

[NOTE: case needed of someone working to please God, rather than merely the employer, in a difficult workplace]

Colossians 3:22-4:1 makes clear that God takes all labor seriously, even if it is done under imperfect or degrading conditions. The cataracts removed by a well-paid ocular surgeon matter to God. So, too, does the cotton picked by a sharecropper or even by a plantation slave. This does not mean that exploitation of workers is ever acceptable before God. It does mean that even an abusive system cannot rob the worker of the dignity of his or her work, because that dignity is conferred by God himself.

One of the noteworthy things about the New Testament household codes is the persistence of the theme of *mutuality*. Rather than simply telling subordinates to obey those over them, Paul teaches that we live in a web of interdependent relationships. Wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters all have obligations to one another in Christ's body. Thus hard on the heels of the commands to slaves comes a directive to masters: "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (4:1). Whatever leeway the Roman legal system might have given to slave owners, they must ultimately answer in God's courtroom where justice for all is upheld. Of course, justice and fairness must be interpreted afresh in each new situation. Consider the concept of the "just wage," for example. A just wage on a Chinese farm may have a different cash value from a just wage in a Chicago bank. But there is mutual obligation under God for employers and employees to treat each other justly and fairly.

## **Philemon**

A workplace application of this theme of mutuality is alluded to in Colossians and discussed in Paul's letter to Philemon, the shortest book of the Bible. In Colossians, Paul mentions "the faithful and beloved brother," Onesimus (Col. 4:9). The letter to Philemon tells us that Onesimus was the slave of a Christian named Philemon ( 16). Onesimus apparently escaped, became a Christian himself, and then became an assistant to Paul (10-11, 15). Under Roman law, Philemon had the right to punish Onesimus severely. On the other hand, Paul — as an apostle of the Lord — had the right to command Philemon to release Onesimus ( 17-20). But instead of resorting to a hierarchy of rights, Paul applies the principle of mutuality. He requests Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to forego any punishment, while at the same time requesting Onesimus to return voluntarily to Philemon. He asks both men to treat each other as brothers, rather than as slave and master ( 12-16). We see a three-way application of the principle of mutuality among Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. Each of them owes something to the others. Each of them has a claim over the others. Paul seeks to have all the debts and claims relinquished in favor of a mutual respect and service. Here we see how Paul applies the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and putting up with each others' faults (Col. 3:12-13) in a real workplace situation.

Paul's use of persuasion, rather than command (Philem. 14), is a further application of the mutuality principle. Rather than dictating a solution to Philemon, Paul approaches him with respect, lays out a persuasive argument, and leaves the decision in Philemon's hands. Philemon could not have failed to notice Paul's clear desire and his statement that he would be following up with him ( 21). But Paul manages the communication in an artful way that provides a model for resolving issues in the workplace.

## **Conclusion**

Colossians gives us a picture of God's standard for work. As employees, we serve our employers with integrity, giving a full measure of work for the wages we are paid (Col. 3:23). As supervisors, we treat those under us as God treats us—with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (3:12). God intends that our work be done in reciprocal relationships, in which each party contributes to, and benefits from, the overall work. But even if the other parties fail in their reciprocal duty, Christians fulfill their obligations (3:22-4:1). Following Jesus' example, we offer forgiveness in the face of conflict (1:13) and we lay aside our power when necessary for the good of others (1:20). This does not mean we lack rigorous standards or accountability or that Christians in business and other workplaces cannot compete vigorously and successfully. It does mean that we offer forgiveness. It does mean that Christians cannot always go along with what their workplace culture deems acceptable (3:1-3), particularly if it would lead to unfair or unjust treatment of a coworker or employee (4:1). We see this illustrated in the case of Onesimus and Philemon. Whatever our work, we strive for excellence, for we do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, not merely for human masters, knowing that we will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward (3:23-24).

## Key Verses and Themes

### Verses

### Themes

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<b>Col. 1:15-17</b> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.	Jesus made everything in the world.
<b>Col. 1:19-20</b> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.	Jesus came to redeem the world, including the work world.
<b>Col. 1:9-10</b> For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God., [with allusion to bearing fruit and multiplying in Genesis 1:26-28]	We work as image-bearers of God in Christ.
<b>Col. 2:8</b> See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.	Depend on Christ's transforming power, not on self-help or human tradition.
<b>Col. 3:2-5</b> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).	Do not accommodate to culture in conflict with God's desires.

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**Col. 3:8-10** But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

Rid yourself of greed, anger, lying and gossip in the workplace.

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**Col. 3:12** As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Work for the benefit of others.

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**Col. 3:13** Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Put up with each other.

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**Col. 3:17, 23** And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him...Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters

Work as for the Lord, and not merely for people

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**Col. 3:22** Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord..

Subordinates must do their work with obedience and sincerity.

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**Col. 4:1** Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Superiors must do what is right and fair for workers, not merely what is legal or culturally acceptable.