

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Colossians 3:22-25

Sermon Title: "Wholehearted Service in the Workplace?"

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I like reading John Grisham novels. I am reading them in order, from the first book he ever published (*A Time to Kill*) toward the last one published (*The Litigators*). In almost all of his books, there is this reoccurring theme that always surfaces. It is a subtle theme, one you might not be looking for when reading his novels. It has to do with lawyers who want to make the big bucks but who also have to work long hours. It seems like every lawyer he writes about is working 80 hours a week at around \$50,000 to \$80,000 per year. These lawyers wake up at 5:30am to have a small breakfast, they have a working lunch with some client whom they can charge for legal services, they have meager dinners (or no dinner at all), and they finally leave the office at 11:00 at night. This gives them nearly five hours of sleep before they have to do it all over again.

These lawyers, who work long hours, sound tired. They don't have family lives, so they eventually get divorces. They might become alcoholics or pill-poppers in order to deal with the long hours. Every

time I read about these people I am exhausted. It doesn't matter how much money these lawyer types are making, it doesn't sound like fun at all.

Any kind of work might not sound fun to us, either. No matter what we are doing in life, the last thing we might say about it is: "It's fun." We may feel we have to work to make an income. There has to be money for food and bills. We have to try and save some cash for retirement. We may feel we have to work from becoming too bored at home. We can't sit on the couch all day, watching TV. That sounds good for a day or two, but we soon get tired of it.

At our places of work we have interesting people to deal with, customers and co-workers alike. There's a boss to scrutinize everything we do. There are deadlines to meet, or we'll get in big trouble. In the middle of all that, we might not think of work as fun. We might not see the benefit in working, other than receiving some sort of money at the end of every month. We go home tired, frustrated. We may get eight hours of sleep at night, and then we turn around the next day and go to work again.

In Colossians 3, Paul talks about the Christian household. He is familiar with the Roman

government's position on the family, in which the government set a code for how any household should function. According to the Roman government the father was the head of the household, followed by the wife as "second-in-command." The children fall under the authority of the parents, naturally, but then there are servants that may be working for the family. Everybody has to know their place in the family – everybody had a duty to fulfill. If the household is running efficiently, the whole country would run just as efficiently.

Paul takes this government code, this pagan code, and Christianizes it. He simply adds "in the Lord" and "to the Lord." If a household is to run efficiently, it must have the Lord at its center. The people of the household should do all things to the glory of God, for the sake of God our Father. This makes for an efficient, loving family.

During the time of Paul, there were servants in certain homes. Slavery was not outlawed as it is today in the USA. These servants could be slaves who were sold as property from one person to another. These servants could also be people who made themselves slaves to somebody to pay off a debt. Let's say one of us owed a bunch of money to another person. We

might put ourselves under his authority for a period of time, so we could back pay everything we owed. In either case, the servant is an indentured servant not by his or her own will. The servant is forced to be one, and there isn't anything he or she can change about it.

Some people today see themselves as forced laborers in their work. As employees they may think they are mistreated, felt to feel inferior to others. They don't understand the point of doing what they are doing, and it all seems so stupid and boring. Maybe we have heard people describe themselves as slaves to their bosses or companies, and they wished they could just get out of it.

Paul understood that servants of all sorts could complain about the work they had to do. They could feel like non-people, feel more like cattle than like human beings. Or, they could change their perspective. They could see value in themselves and the work they were doing. They could understand that they are disciples of God, serving God in all capacities, so no work is stupid or boring. Ultimately they could feel good to be in a certain place, doing certain tasks, all to the glory of God.

“Obey in all things your masters,” Paul says in verse 22. In our world today, we could say, “Obey in

all things your bosses.” If we were writing to the Colossians, we might keep this sentence out of the letter, because we might not think much about our bosses. They might be the main reason why we don’t like to go to work in the morning. It is difficult to work with a person, male or female, who seems to ride us all the time, constantly finding argument with us, wanting to knock us down. We cannot stand for such abuse, and sometimes we get into argument with our bosses. So is Paul delusional in saying that we Christians ought to obey our bosses in all things?

Notice that Paul says nothing about adjusting the attitude of our bosses. That is not our job. In Chapter 4, he’ll talk to the bosses, the masters, about their attitudes. But in verse 22, Paul speaks to the servant, the employee. He speaks to our attitudes, and says that in all things do what we are supposed to do, and do it all for God’s sake. Obey in all things, “not with eye-service as pleasers of men,” not just when the boss is watching over us do we obey all things. No, “but in the sincerity of our hearts, fearing God.” Even when the boss is nowhere to be found, we do the work set before us. We do that work well. We do that work not to make the boss happy but to make God happy. God has given us the talents to accomplish something, so we should accomplish it out of gratitude to God. In

essence, Paul eliminates the boss from the picture entirely. Who cares what the boss thinks of us, Paul could be saying here. Who cares what the boss throws at us? We are going to take on that job like it is the most important thing. We are going to put forth our best effort before God our Father. We are going to finish it as a Christian, proud to serve the Lord even at the office or on the road. We know who we serve, and we know whose we are. The boss doesn't own us, God does. Nothing stands between that.

Realize, also, one other thing: Paul is writing to slaves in Colossians 3. They were seen as the lowest of the low. They had no real rights to argue with the master or protest against their work. At least as employees we can quit a job and find another. We can get on the Internet and surf around for employment. Slaves in Paul's time could not do this. And he tells them to be the best servants they can be, whatever the conditions are, whether the boss is around or not. Our situations are not as drastic. We are not seen as the lowest of the low by all people. So if Christian slaves during Paul's time could do their work with God smiling down on them, so can we.

“And whatever you do,” Paul says, “do it heartily as to the Lord and not to people.” Why don't we like the

places in which we work? Why don't we like the work? Maybe because we don't do it heartily. We don't carry out the work with all our hearts. The word Paul uses here is *psuche*, which in English is psyche. The word *psychology* comes from the Greek word *psuche*. This Greek word means the vital force that animates human beings. The *psuche* is where our feelings, our emotions, our desires, and even our dislikes have a home; and all those things drive us to act. When we see a cute puppy, we turn into little kids, getting down on one knee and talking in high voices. When a politician says something on the TV that we do not like, some deep hatred might surface that we usually do not feel.

Paul is saying that when we work, we should have all our emotions and feelings involved. Paul doesn't want just negative emotions to surface, which only make us sour toward the work. Paul wants that work to touch us in such ways that we become invested in it. As said before, we view the work as the most important thing we can do at that moment. We put all our heart into it. We drive ourselves to do the best, no matter what that work may be. We get it done, and we feel good about it.

I must admit that flipping hamburgers at McDonalds would not be my ideal job. I would admit

that working in the kitchen of a Chick-Fil-A as a chicken fryer is not something I would want to do as my main career. I could see myself as a barista in a Starbucks somewhere, although I don't know if I'd want to work at the Starbucks we usually visit, because they can get really busy. Yet, I have flipped burgers before. When I was in North Dakota, the son of a church member would visit country fairs, and he'd bring along his three or four large grills for making food. I joined him, and I had a wonderful time. I didn't see much of those fairs. The son of this church member wanted those burgers and hotdogs cooked quickly. He had to stop what he was doing a few times, step beside me, and show me how he wanted me to do the work. I sweated in the summer heat, and had to wipe layers of grease of my arms and face. And I enjoyed it all. I didn't even get paid for the hours I spent next to those grills, but I did the work with joy in my heart. I was helping this man make some extra cash. I was putting food in people's stomachs, and thus adding to the fun of being at the fair.

Before I became an ordained pastor, I worked as a front-desk receptionist for a pharmaceutical company. It was a temp job. Not the most glorious job, answering phones and telling people which direction to go to find a certain room. There was a lot of sitting



and staring off into space. But I enjoyed the job. I got to memorize a lot of Scripture, and read some books during the slow times. I got to talk to one or two employees who visited me on their small breaks. I found out who the president of the company was, and I stood every time he entered the building. I greeted him heartily, and usually I just got a nod of the head. I was only there for six month, but I wanted to put myself into it.

No matter what the job is – even if we have to work the job until we retire – it all has to do with attitude. There are times we are frustrated, but that frustration has to turn to satisfaction eventually. We will feel the need to argue with the boss, but maybe we should listen careful to what is said, no matter what the tone is. What are we doing wrong, and how can we do things better? Even when we think the boss doesn't know what he or she is talking about, we should be able to express ourselves without using the same tone of voice, without becoming just as angry.

We do our work heartily, with all our emotions, with all our thoughts. We give God the glory for giving us the ability to work things out, to solve problems and create something useful. We give thanks to God for giving us a job in the first place, not just for

receiving a paycheck but also for being able to use our talents as ministry for others.

God willing, most of us have the day off tomorrow, because it is Labor Day. We will pull out the BBQ, and cook steaks or just burgers and hotdogs. We may go somewhere quiet with our families, and enjoy the day together. And then Tuesday will arrive. The alarm clock will go off early in the morning, and we will try to roll out of bed, half asleep and achy. Some of us will have to go to work, but let us go as representatives of God. Let us go with our true Master watching us, giving us the strength to work, smiling down on us in our work. Tuesday can be different. The workplace can be a place where time is well-spent. The workplace can become for us a holy place where something is done for the Lord. Even in our jobs, we serve others as God's people. We are still his disciples, making a difference in the world.