

Who are you working for?

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[0:00] Well, happy Labor Day weekend to you all. Those of us who find ourselves in D.C. and not traveling this weekend, it's a great time to be in D.C. because so many people go elsewhere. So I find the traffic lightens up a little bit.

The vibe kind of comes down a little bit. People feel a little more relaxed on Labor Day weekend. It's like the last time to catch your breath before the fall is racing away.

So I love Labor Day weekend in D.C. And it's become our custom in this church to take Labor Day weekend to focus a little bit on work, to talk a little bit about our understanding of our work, our vocation.

For some of us, it's a career. For some of us, it's much bigger than a career. Regardless of what work looks like for you, I would imagine that work is a huge part of all of our lives.

But as I said, it looks different. Some of us do paid work and some of us do unpaid work. Some of us, work means we're commuting to an office. Others mean opening a laptop at the kitchen table.

[1:06] Some of us work, but we're volunteering. Some of us are caring for raising children. Some of us are studying. Some of us are teaching. Some of us are looking for work.

But regardless of what it looks like for you, work is a huge part of our lives. And yet, from just many conversations I've had over the years, in the roughly 20 years I've been a pastor, my sense is that many Christians still experience a kind of disconnect between their professional life and their religious life.

There's a gap between Sunday and Monday that we often talk about where people tend to have their religious compartment, their religious self, and then they have their professional compartment or their professional self, and there's not a lot of overlap.

You just learn to code switch between those two modes of being. And that's why we're going to look at Paul's letter to the Colossians this morning. Because if I had to summarize the point of Colossians in one sentence, it would be this, that the gospel changes everything.

The gospel changes everything. So it doesn't just change what we do or how we spend time on a Sunday morning or a Wednesday evening.

[2:20] It changes the way we respond to email. The gospel changes the way we deal with success and the way we deal with failure. It changes the way we build and manage budgets.

The gospel changes the way we lead teams and organizations. It changes the way sometimes we change diapers. It changes the way we serve clients or customers. It changes the way we find meaning in our daily work.

And so this is what we're going to be looking at. The gospel transforms our work. And in Colossians, this passage that we just heard read by Kyla, we're going to see that it changes our work by giving us a new who, a new why, and a new how.

It changes who we work for. It changes why we work in the first place, and it changes how we go about our work. So we're looking at Colossians 3.

Please pray with me, and then we're going to open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you just moments ago singing. Lord, being so aware of your presence here.

[3:27] Lord, thank you for the blessing of your presence. And now we're here not just to consider human words or wisdom, but we're here actually to hear from you. Lord, I need to hear your voice.

We need to hear your voice. And so we pray that as we open your word, we would hear your voice. That you would speak to us in the ways that we need to hear, that only you can do.

And that as we open your written word, we would come face to face with your living word, Jesus Christ. It's in his name that we pray. Amen. Amen. So the gospel changes everything.

It gives us a new who when it comes to our work. I would imagine that most of us, regardless of what your work is, we work for somebody. You know, there's somebody that we're aiming at when we are going about the tasks of our job, right?

So it could be a boss, or it could be a client, or it could be a customer. It could be a board that you answer to. It could be regulators. It could be shareholders. It could be a child, right?

[4:30] But there's somebody that you're aiming at with your work and your performance. And maybe that's a good relationship, and you love your boss. Or maybe, as is probably often the case, it's a fraught relationship, and maybe your boss drives you crazy.

That's not uncommon. But I guarantee you, whatever the conditions of your work may be, as hard as it may be, we probably have it better than the people Paul was writing to in Colossians. Because he is talking to, in this particular place in his letter, Christians who are slaves. Sometimes we try to sugarcoat it by translating it as bond servants, but really what he's talking about are Christians who are slaves.

Now, I want to be clear here. Paul is not endorsing slavery. In other letters, Paul makes it very clear that if Christians who are slaves have any opportunity to gain their freedom, they should gain their freedom.

In one of his letters, he encourages a master to set his slave free so that they can live out their equality as Christian brothers. He forbids Christians from voluntarily entering into slavery.

[5:38] So Paul is not pro-slavery. But at this point in history, slavery was universally practiced in every society. And Christians made up a tiny percentage of the population with absolutely no influence.

And so Paul's role as a pastor is to try to help these Christians navigate life in a world full of brokenness and injustice over which they have no control. We also need to understand that slavery was different in the ancient world than the kind of slavery that we think of in the last couple of centuries in the West, in Britain and in the U.S., the chattel slavery that we think of.

Slavery in the ancient world wasn't racially based. It also wasn't a kind of socioeconomic category like we might think of it today. You had slaves who could be very powerful, very highly educated, very influential.

And you also had many instances where people would voluntarily enter into a period of slavery because it was one of the best ways to get an education and to socially advance, to find opportunities to gain greater security and status in society.

So different, and yet, let's make no mistake, this was slavery. They were somebody's property. They had no rights. They had no HR department that they could appeal to.

[7:04] Right? So they had it probably worse than we do. And I think it's important to understand that in order to get the force of what Paul is saying here. He's just, in this point of the letter, laid out the gospel.

He's basically said, Jesus came, he died, he rose again, he conquered sin and death, and now he's the Lord of all creation. And at this point in his letter, he's saying, if that is true, if Jesus is Lord, it means that Jesus isn't just Lord over the religious part of our lives.

Right? He's Lord over everything. It's not like you just have a table of advisors in your life and Jesus gets one chair and one vote. Right?

There is no counsel. Right? There are no advisors. He's saying Jesus is the Lord over everything. And therefore, in Colossians 3 verse 17, he says, therefore, whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

So he's saying very clearly, everything that we do should be done in the name of the Lord. Right? With our eye toward him. And as shocking as it is, a few verses later, he applies this to slaves and masters.

[8:21] In verse 22, slaves, 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.

So what's he saying? You know, there's no division between Christian work and secular work in Paul's mind or in God's mind, rather. Paul's saying, do you want to be a faithful Christian at work? Then work faithfully, work hard, be obedient, and do it with sincerity of heart. That's a Christian job. And you say, well, the slavery and the masters, and none of that's right.

Yeah, Paul's not saying it's right. The Bible doesn't endorse it in any way, shape, or form. This is not because slavery is good or right. It's because as Christians, everything we do is ultimately done in

service to Christ.

He says in verse 24, it is the Lord Christ you are serving. So what's he saying? Ultimately, you may have a master who claims ownership over you, but in reality, you belong to Christ.

[9:28] You're his. Right? Your master may control the conditions under which you work, but he cannot determine who you are, he cannot determine what your work means, and he cannot determine what you are worth.

Only Christ can because you belong to him. So he's saying, Christ sees you. Christ sees your work. Christ was willing to give everything for you. So when you work, even under these incredibly unjust conditions, serve him.

And there's a kind of liberation in that. Right? There's a dignity that is imparted even to the most menial tasks. Because when Christ sees you rendering those tasks unto him, right, he delights in it. Right? In the Old Testament, the word *avodah*, right, it's used both to describe our work, right, manual labor, and it's also used to describe art and craftsmanship, and it's also used to describe worship.

Right? Work and worship, same word. So when we do these things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is a way of worshipping him. The same, I would say, is true for you and me.

[10:48] I mean, if you have a supervisor you don't like, if you have a boss who you don't respect, Paul would say, as Christians, we are called to work hard and to work with integrity no matter what.

Not because your boss deserves it, maybe they don't, but because Christ deserves it. So if you feel unseen in your job, if you feel undervalued in your work, if you feel like other people always get the credit for your hard work, Christ sees you.

Christ sees your work, and his opinion is the only one that matters. Now, to be clear, one final thing before we move on, this does not mean passive submission to everything your boss says.

precisely because Christ is our true Lord, human authority has limits. When Paul says that we are to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, that means we represent his character and his heart and what he stands for.

So if you have a supervisor or a higher up who asks you to do something that is wrong or unethical or harmful in some way, ultimately you have as a Christian to say, you know, I answer to Christ.

[12:01] And what does that mean? The question you have to ask is, what does it look like to serve Christ faithfully in this situation? That may mean you have to do unpleasant work without complaining.

It might mean you refuse an unethical command. It might mean you report an injustice. It might mean you have to find another job. But the gospel gives us a new who.

There's a new person in mind that we think of when we do our work. We're serving Christ and Christ alone. Also, as we move down in the passage, the gospel gives us in our work a new why.

A new why. Now, everybody, I would say, has a why when it comes to your work. A reason that you get up out of the bed and you go do the work that you do. Unless you're a child, right, one of the things about being an adult is you realize that work matters.

It's important and it's necessary. Right? So, everybody has a why, a motivator to get out of bed and go to work. One of my first jobs as a teenager, I think I was about 16, I was bussing tables at a seafood restaurant.

[13:13] And I would show up and my job was essentially to stand in the corner and then when people got up, I would clear their tables and then when things were slow, I would clean. I would clean the bathrooms or I would go.

My least favorite job was where they prepped all the seafood and I would have to get down under the table where all the scraps fell down and I'd have to pull all that out. So, it was my first job but my why was very clear.

I wanted to make money and as a teenager that money was great. It helped me do all the things I wanted to do. So, for me, you know, and for a lot of people, your why can simply be wanting to make money.

Also, there were perks that came to the job. So, I would stand in the corner and I had my little bus cart and you wouldn't believe how many people would go to this seafood restaurant and they'd order a big seafood platter and they'd barely touch it.

So, I would just be sitting there watching these people, right, and they would get up to leave and I would kind of look around and I had taken a bowl, I got a bowl from the kitchen and I called it my

snack bowl and I would put it on the cart under my towel and I would roll over to the table and when nobody was looking, I would take the, and I would put some of the fried seafood in my snack bowl and then when nobody was looking, I would just kind of be snacking on those fried shrimp and fried scallops.

[14:31] You wouldn't believe the waste. So, growing teenage boy, insatiable appetite was one of my favorite parts of the job. So, that was my why. I wanted to make money and I liked to eat the snacks on the side.

So, everybody has their why and I, you know, I think that when it comes to your why, these are all very legitimate reasons to work. I mean, I think some people just may need money to pay the bills and provide for the people under them.

That's a very honorable reason to work. You're providing for yourself and those who depend on you, right? Some of us work just because we enjoy the satisfaction that comes from using our gifts and talents well. That's a great reason to work.

Just a sense of a job well done. And there is a kind of godly ambition, I think, wanting to be in a place where you're maximizing who you are and contributing meaningfully, right? Others want to feel like they're making a difference in the world.

A lot of people come to D.C. and they work for peanuts because they want to make a difference. Those are great reasons to work. Hopefully, you can find work that gives you some of all of that.

[15:32] You know, you're making decent money, you're using your gifts and talents, and you're making a difference. But good reasons to work can gradually, over time, start to become ultimate reasons.

Work can gradually become the source of your security, not just a way to pay the bills, but the source of your security. Not just a way to communicate, to contribute with your gifts and talents, but a source of identity.

Not just a way to sort of make a difference, but a source of self-worth. And when your work starts to become a source of security and identity and self-worth, it is becoming something altogether different, something it was never meant to be.

And in D.C., for those of us who live here, if you're visiting from out of town, D.C. is a place where the culture rewards and encourages people who view their work as ultimate.

You're incentivized to be that kind of person. For many of us, it is normal to put in a seven-day work week. For many of us, it is normal for the phone to never be off, for the texting to never stop, for the work to really never have an end point.

[16:45] Right? In D.C., it's very normal for work to be the non-negotiable center of your schedule. And then everything gets built in around that. You know, you fit in some friend time, you fit in time with your family, you maybe fit in some church involvement.

Right? But work is the non-negotiable center. And the hardest thing is you feel like if you're not doing that, then you're falling behind. And that the people that you're in competition with are racing ahead because they're more ruthless and more willing to sacrifice.

So we live in a culture that is malforming us to elevate work to ultimate status. So we have to ask as Christians, how do I know when this is starting to happen in my life?

What is the litmus test for when I know I'm crossing that line from vocational diligence to vocational idolatry? Well, it's when we start to, for instance, allow our work to determine our worth.

You know, when you're either overly eager to tell people what you do because it's going to impress them or you don't want to tell people what you do because you're afraid they will look down on you. Or when you look down on other people because their job isn't impressive enough.

[18:01] Or when you get success in your work and it gives you a swelled head. Or when you get critical feedback in your job or you fail and it destroys you. That's a sign, right?

Another sign is if you really cannot rest. If you can't stop. Either because of guilt or anxiety or ambition. If you find yourself remaining mentally at work all the time, even on a Sunday afternoon with your family or your friends, but your mind is always at work, you cannot rest.

You know, we often say that's, you know, God says again and again in the Old Testament, I'm the Lord, your God, who freed you from slavery in Egypt, right? And he says that in connection with one very specific command. Sabbath.

It's like when you're not taking a Sabbath, you're forgetting that you're not a slave. Slaves can't say no. They can't take a Sabbath. A mark of a free person is that they can take a Sabbath. Another

sign is that you sacrifice things that God has entrusted to you.

You sacrifice your integrity, you sacrifice your health, your friendships, your marriage, your relationship with your kids, your compassion toward your coworkers. And in your mind and your heart, you defend these sacrifices as necessary for the goal you're aiming at.

[19:24] Is it? Or you feel diminished by other people's success. You know, you're constantly comparing yourself. Well, this person's only been in this job for three years and I've been in this job for eight years and look how far they've advanced and they overlooked me for this and when other people have success or they get promoted, you can't celebrate it really because you feel threatened by it.

These are signs that work that we're in that gray area that we've crossed from. I'm not just diligent and working hard and serving the Lord but my work has started to become something more.

I'm looking to my job to give me things only God can give me. And this, friends, is why we need a new why. Because there are some things that work can give you.

Sometimes you hear a sermon like this and it's like, well, don't look to your work for anything. No, no, no. Work is good. But God loves when we work. God created us to work before the fall.

Work is a good thing. It's a part of a good creation, right? So being able to pay your bills and meet your needs because you work is good. The satisfaction of a job well done is good.

[20:31] But the deepest things in life, ultimate security, identity, self-worth can only be found in Christ. So look again at verses 23 and 24.

Whatever you do, work heartily. You know, that literally translates work from the soul. I love that.

Work from the soul. Whatever you do, work from the soul as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

I want you to catch that word. You'll receive the inheritance. The gospel says that when we turn to Jesus, we become part of a spiritual family.

You're not just adopting a new set of beliefs. You are grafted into a spiritual family. J.I. Packer, the late, great Anglican pastor, says that the best definition he knows of what it means to be a Christian is that a Christian is someone who can call God father.

You gain a new father. And with that new father and that new family comes an inheritance. An inheritance is not a reward.

[21:37] You can't earn an inheritance. The only way to get an inheritance is by being a part of the right family. You gain an inheritance. And the best way to understand when the Bible talks about this inheritance is the best way to understand it is this is like talking about ultimate security, ultimate identity, ultimate self-worth.

You gain the assurance that you will be in eternity with Christ. All those things you're looking for here in these shadowed forms you will one day have in abundance in Christ because you're a child of God.

And what this means for us practically as we think about our work, think about what you do week in and week out. Nothing that you get from that work will ever come close to what you already have in Christ.

You will get to the end of a 50 year career and you will look back and you will never have gained anything that comes close to what you had all along in Christ.

So if you think that way then it changes the why. If I don't get the respect that I think I'm owed from my coworkers and my boss who cares?

[22:54] I have the delight of the only one whose opinion really matters. Who cares? If I don't achieve everything that I hope to in this life you know I just turned 49 so I'm right on the cusp of 50 and right in that zone where you're really grappling with the fact that many of the things you thought you might accomplish are never going to happen.

Right? I threw out my back this morning getting into the car. I'm barely standing at this point. Right? It's not looking good for my sense of accomplishment. Right? You grapple with that but you say you know if I don't achieve everything I hope to in this life who cares?

One day I'm going to share in the renewal of the heavens and the earth. I'm going to dance on the streets of the new Jerusalem. It's okay.

So it gives us a new why. Instead of working to get what we want what does a Christian job look like? It looks like somebody who works out of the security of what they already have.

There's a lightness of being. There's an ability to like plunge in and work from the soul but to at the same time hold it lightly. To see it relative to eternity.

[24:07] Right? And so you know you say once you work from that security then you begin to see work the way God sees it. This is not a way for us to get identity and security and self-worth.

It's simply a way for us to love and serve other people. It's a way for us to love and serve. So what does that look like? Well, a couple of examples. Joey, who is a member of our church, he works at the Department of Labor and he helps other people find pathways into meaningful careers.

But if you know his story, he grew up in a working class family. Money was always tight. The Great Recession happened. His father lost his job. Mother was injured at work.

They had years of unemployment and struggling and not having enough money and at one point they lost their house. And if you grow up like that as a child looking at that kind of reality happening, it would be very understandable for you to see work as a means to get financial security.

Right? And there could be a lot of fear and a lot of anxiety around not having enough. And so work could become that thing for you. But then if you know Joey's story, he meets Christ.

[25:19] He comes to faith and he will tell you work completely changed after that. He says after he met Jesus, his whole view of work expanded. So it's not like financial security doesn't matter.

As we said, we need to make money. We need to pay our bills. But now, if you ask him, he sees his work as part of the larger story of God's work in the world. He sees it as a way to love and serve other people.

So he says, you know, his work isn't merely a way for him to secure his own future. Now his work is about securing other people's future. Right? Helping them figure out what their future is going to look like.

That's what it looks like to have a new why. There's a turning outward. There's an aligning with God's purposes. There's, it's seeing your work as a part of God's work in the world. I'll give you one more example. Jennifer works in pediatric oncology.

Every day, she has to deal with pain. Every day, she has to deal with broken systems. Every day, she has to deal with unimaginable grief. She's working with children who are dying of cancer.

[26:21] And sometimes, she has to tell people the worst possible news. And she says people often ask her, how do you do it? That just sounds so hard. And inside, she thinks, it's actually probably harder than you think.

And she says, you know, anybody, doctors, nurses, anybody who works in that field will tell you it's so easy to become overwhelmed by the suffering because you can't prevent it, you can't cure it, you can't fix it.

And so for her, work could easily become a place of burnout and exhaustion and cynicism and despair. But, she says that her relationship with Christ has changed the way she thinks about her work.

She has a new why. And I'll just quote her here. She says, I often say that I love my job but I wish it didn't exist. And I'm pretty sure that in the new creation it won't.

Because we won't have childhood cancer and won't need chemotherapy. My work has made me long even more deeply for that day when the Lord heals all and makes all things new.

[27:30] That's what it looks like to have a new why. You see your work as part of the larger story of God's work in the world. And for her, she is anchored in the hope of that imperishable inheritance that will one day be ours.

So the gospel gives us a new who, it gives us a new why, and lastly, and very briefly, it gives us a new how. A new how. Because God doesn't just call us to work hard but to work well.

Again, there's no such thing as a sacred job or a secular job. I think it was Dorothy Sayers who said, a Christian job is a job done well. So for Christian employees, it says in verse 22, obey in everything those who are earthly masters.

Not by way of eye service as people pleasers but with sincerity of heart. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done and there is no partiality. So if you feel unappreciated or mistreated or overlooked or overworked, if you think your boss is incompetent and that you should have their job, right, it's very easy if you feel that way to justify slacking off.

It's easy to sort of think that that injustice that you feel gives you license to work half-heartedly because you don't think your boss deserves anything more or you're disillusioned with the institution and you don't think they deserve any more and so you kind of phoned it in at a bare

minimum.

[29:04] But what this is saying and this is kind of we need to hear this, there is no excuse for Christians. There is no excuse. We should always work our hardest from the heart and do our best not just when we're being watched but all the time.

And just to come back to it for a moment, that actually means no snack bowls. No, what was I really doing? I was taking liberties, right?

I was justifying it and I was thinking, well, I'm here cleaning the bathrooms and I'm getting paid minimum wage and this is getting thrown out and who cares if I take a little of this for myself, right? Now, hopefully that didn't do any harm to anybody but ultimately, ultimately I'm taking a little liberty that's really not okay for me to do. And over time, those little liberties add up and that way of approaching your work adds up and over time, it's not just individuals doing that, that begins to affect a community and a work culture, right?

And you can easily have a work culture where everybody's taking little liberties and skimming a little bit here and there and cutting corners here and there and all justifying it and over time, that can really do damage and even if it doesn't do damage to the institution, it does damage in here.

[30:21] It does damage to my relationship with Christ. So, I would actually encourage you, do you have any snack bowls? Now, you're probably not as nasty as I was doing that but what is your version of a snack bowl in your work?

Right? Little liberties that you take because you think that's what you're owed. Not so with Christians. And then, Paul addresses Christian bosses or masters.

He says in chapter 4, verse 1, Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly knowing that you also have a master in heaven. Mm. Right? For those of us who are in positions of authority, who lead teams or institutions, Paul reminds us that no one is above, no one is above the law.

We are all under to, and answer to, the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ. He says, so therefore, treat others justly and fairly. Don't take credit for work that other people do who work for you.

Give credit where credit is due. Show grace when people make mistakes. See those as opportunities to build them up whenever you can.

[31:37] Fight for equal pay and equal opportunities, especially for people who are least likely to have those things in our society. If you have any influence in your institution, ensure that those things are happening.

Make sure that all of your leave and family policies are generous, erring on the side of being overly generous if you can. Right? Don't just hire from your own networks, but look for opportunities to hire people with less privilege.

don't overwork your people, but treat them as human beings and make sure they have time for friends and family. If you give people PTO, force them to take it so that you don't have a culture in your workplace where people feel guilty taking time off.

God is a God of justice. Right? And one day when Jesus comes back, God's justice is going to fill the earth. And if we're truly serving him in our work here and now, we want to do it in a way that reflects his heart, his priorities, his character, and his vision for the world.

So pulling all of this together, when you go back to work this week, whatever that looks like for you, paid, unpaid, in an office, in a home, whatever that might be, if you're getting on a plane Tuesday morning, the gospel changes everything.

[33:03] Including our work. So it changes who we work for. Ultimately, we work for Christ. So I would encourage you, take a moment before you sort of begin your day every morning and just take a moment to pray and devote the tasks of that day to the Lord.

When I respond to these emails, I'm going to do it in your name. Right? When I work on this plan for later in the week, when I put this agenda together, when I work on this spreadsheet or balance these numbers, this is for you, Lord.

I'm going to do it in a way that honors you. The gospel gives us a new why. So think about your own motives. Am I working from a place of security in the inheritance that I have in Christ?

And if not, what am I chasing? And is the fact that I'm chasing that leading me to do things that I know are harmful and disobedient? Right?

Or think of it this way. If I was working from a place of absolute trust and security in my inheritance in Christ, how would that change my work? How would it change the number of hours I work?

[34 : 10] How would it change how I treat the people in my work? Right? And then finally, the gospel gives us a new how, how we work. Wholeheartedly, honestly, justly, reflecting the heart of God.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your grace to us. We thank you for your word. And Lord, we thank you for our work. For those of us who have it, thank you, Lord.

And for those of us who are seeking work, we pray that you would help them to find good, meaningful work. Lord, we thank you that work is at its best a gift, that it's a part of what it means to be human, that we're here to be productive, to care for and cultivate all that you've made.

Lord, we pray that you would give us grace to do our work as faithful followers of our Lord Jesus. We pray that there would be a kind of saltiness, a kind of light that we bring to our jobs, Lord, that puts you on display.

We pray that we would approach our work in ways that provoke questions only the gospel can answer. And we pray this that we might glorify you, Lord, and it's in your name that we pray. Amen.