

Serving the Lord Christ

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Preacher: Joe Barnard

[0 : 00] If you have a Bible, please open with me to Colossians chapter 3. Let's just bow our heads again and pray for the Word. Holy Spirit, we look to you to give sight to the blind, to enable us to see the beauty that has been revealed to the person of Jesus.

And we pray that what we see would change us from the inside to the outside, and that we would look a lot more like Him. So the world could know Him through us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we're going to look at Colossians 3, and really we're going to focus on this evening. If you look down to verse 24, I've got the ESV in front of me. This sentence, you are serving the Lord Christ. I don't know your experience of work. My experience is that on a given Monday or Tuesday, most of what I do is very tedious. The kind of work that fills our days, it's often washing dishes, filling out paperwork, just listening to another conversation.

And if you think about your typical work week, honestly, most of what you're doing, I would guess, is probably invisible. It's not the kind of stuff that people are recording for the annals of history, or so that people can write your biography.

[1 : 24] You're just getting through another day. And honestly, I would guess that often your tasks, they feel somewhat meaningless. You know, it's not just teachers that give students busy work.

How many people in the last year have had managers just set up Zoom meetings just to make sure that the manager's schedule is busy during COVID? If we just look at our work life, often it fills us with frustration.

We don't have the kind of deep purpose and passion that we read about in airport bestsellers that we should have. Again, there's a sense of lack of fulfillment. Sometimes we look at our peers and we think, that person has a great life.

Why am I stuck with this job? You know, underlying all of this is this problem, because as you listen to podcasts, the message is that, you know, you can change your life, that you can discover this purpose, that there's a passion that you can unfold.

But honestly, as we look at our lives, often we're kind of stuck with where we are. Isn't it frustrating that you spend your young life trying to figure out what you really want to do, and then often by the time you discover that, the train's already left the station.

[2 : 37] And you're just thinking about trying to pay the bills. Now again, if we listen to the world, basically the secular advice is, okay, well, if you want to be happy with your work, adjust your circumstances.

You've got to change them so, again, they're in alignment with your passion. And maybe there's a few of you tonight that you can pursue that path and that's open for you, and by all means do. But actually the message of the gospel is so much more radical than this.

Because if you're paying attention to what Paul is saying in chapter 3 to these bond servants in particular, these are people that have no capacity to change the circumstances of their lives.

And so he says something much more revolutionary, that we don't have to adjust our circumstances, that rather what we need to do as Christians is to frame the circumstances. That if you can just understand who Jesus is and what he's done, and if that's the backdrop of your life, then all of a sudden it doesn't really matter so much what you're doing.

How you do it can be fundamentally changed. And so what I want us to do, I want us to take up this simple sentence that you serve the Lord Christ and just ask what would happen if we actually believe this?

[3 : 53] Well, here's one thing that would happen. Is our lives would all of a sudden have an unbelievable sense of dignity and worth.

You know, there's something about Roman slavery that we probably don't think in terms of. You see, for the Roman slave, their sense of dignity or worth was basically determined by two things. Who they belonged to and what their role was in that person's house. Not every slave was treated equally in that society. You know, if you were just a slave of Joe Bloggs who was some sort of farmer on a croft outside in a rural district outside of Rome, well then, if you're just cleaning up the barn, that's one thing.

However, if you're a slave and you happen to belong to someone like Julius Caesar or Pompey the Great or Cicero, and let's just say that maybe you manage his accounts, that you're in charge of his properties, well you actually could have a dignity that surpasses that of a lot of free people in that society.

Now I would guess that in this church that Paul's writing to, there were probably bond servants doing all kinds of things. But when you read this letter, one thing you have to pay attention to is the way from the outset Paul is trying to expand what these Christians know about Jesus.

[5 : 19] So if you have a Bible, go back to chapter 1, look at verses 15 to 18. What is Paul telling them about Jesus? He's telling them that Jesus, he's the image of the invisible God, that he's the firstborn over all of creation, that he is the Lord of lords, he's the King of kings, that actually he is above everything in heaven on earth, visible and invisible, that these things were actually created through him, and they belong for him.

You've got to connect all that to what he's saying in chapter 3. Because what Paul is saying is something that's actually so radical. It can change our lives. He's telling this bond servant, I don't care who you belong to.

I don't care what your occupation is. I don't care what your role is in that person's house. None of that defines your worth. Because you're a servant of the Lord Christ.

I mean, he just blows the ceiling off every notion of status you could possibly think in terms of. This is why Paul was so free of all anxiety about what people thought about him.

If you go to 1 Corinthians chapter 4, what does he say? He says that he's a servant of Christ. And then he goes on to say, you know, I don't care if you judge me, and I don't care if human courts judge me. I don't even judge myself.

[6 : 46] Because he knows that the only one that matters is Jesus, and it's who he is in relation to him that determines his identity. And so this is a radical message that we have here.

It's a message that could have convinced a slave who was just scrubbing the bathrooms, that actually that's not what defines them. That their worth is determined by their relationship with the Lord Christ and the fact that they belong to his household as a brother or a sister of the Lord.

This can change us too. I love Francis of Assisi for the reason that he so grasped this sense that his identity was in Christ. There's a famous story where a bunch of bandits, they come across Francis on a road in Italy, and they say, Who are you?

Francis, he's dressed in rags. He looks like a beggar. You know what he says? I am the herald of a great king. They think he's mad. They think he's crazy, but he wasn't.

He just grasped that, Hey, my worth's not determined by my clothing or my occupation. You see, I know this guy, Jesus. He's the high king, and I'm a herald of him.

[7 : 57] So Francis, in a sense, that was not without humility, but he walked the streets with a sense of security with who he was. That's exactly what can happen to us if we grasp this simple phrase that we serve the Lord Christ.

Now, let's flip it around. Let's think about it from another angle. This truth of serving the Lord Christ, this can be a source of unbelievable joy. Now, wouldn't you agree that most tasks are joyless?

That most of what you do in your day is not that exciting? I love how Elizabeth Elliot, you know, she's the widow of Jim Elliot, the famous martyr, missionary. You know, she served on mission after her husband Jim was dead.

I love how Elizabeth talks about the life of a missionary. She says, you know, your day as a missionary is not filled with these big campaigns and seeing thousands of people saved or, you know, doing, seeing miracles happen before your eyes.

The typical day of a missionary, it's washing dishes, it's scrubbing floors, it's making meals, it's visiting the sick. It's so ordinary, just like us.

[9 : 06] And so how do you actually find joy in the midst of tasks that in and of themselves, they're just monotonous? Well, Paul gives us an answer.

Look again at verse 24. He's telling them to serve the Lord Christ, but look at what he says first, knowing that from the Lord, you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

Think about how it changes to have great expectations. Right now I'm reading that old novel by Charles Dickens. You've got this character, Pip. He's poor.

He would love to be a gentleman. He's got no chance to be a gentleman. He's training to be a blacksmith. He has no future. And then there's this surprise. He finds out that actually there's this legacy that he's inheriting.

And just imagine if you're just this boy, Pip, and you're in the forge, how your attitude changes when you realize that just in a week or just in a month or just in a year, there's this incredible inheritance that's going to be given to you.

[10:12] It's not the same mindset that Paul's committing to these bond servants and slaves.

Okay, yeah, your day job might just be digging ditches. It might be tilling fields that nobody's ever going to take note of.

But just around the corner, there's this inheritance that the Lord Jesus is going to give you. He's going to give you eternal life. He's going to give you a place within his family.

He's going to resurrect you with a new body. He's going to give you a place in his heavens and earth where you're going to reign with him. And Paul would have them know these bond servants and slaves realize he's positioned you where you are.

And so can you hang on just a little bit longer, digging the ditch, plowing the field, filling out the Excel spreadsheet, going on another Zoom meeting, knowing that this isn't your future.

But there's an inheritance that he's going to give you. Knowing that that's the case, how does it change your attitude? Especially if you connect the dots and realize that the one that you're serving today is the one that's going to give you that inheritance.

[11:28] In other words, you're not doing the spreadsheet for your boss. You're doing it for Jesus.

If Jesus, who's given you forgiveness for your sin, and who's going to give you eternal life, if he asked you, would you till that field over there?

Would you be reluctant? If he said, would you just make another lunch for your kids and do the laundry? Would you do it for him? That's the mentality.

That the monotonous can be filled with joy when we realize we're serving the Lord Christ. Now let's flip it again. Let's look at it from yet another angle.

How we can be changed simply by seeing this truth that you're serving the Lord Christ. That this can be a source of deep integrity in our lives. I would guess that you're tempted in the same way I'm tempted.

If somebody's looking over my shoulder, watching me, I've got a very high standard. At the moment, I feel like nobody's watching and the task is meaningless. All of a sudden, I start to settle for something that's really of kind of subpar mediocre work.

[12:41] Now part of what Paul is committing to us here is what we see through the whole of the New Testament, that we are called to an exceeding righteousness.

See, the way that the world operates is it always settles for less. I mean, just think of the Sermon on the Mount. What does Jesus talk about in the Sermon on the Mount? Don't be like those people.

They do their charitable deeds to be seen by men.

They've got their reward. When you do a charitable reward, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Why? Because your Father who sees in secret. You see, you're not doing it for the eyes of men.

You're doing it for God. And He's watching. He's there. Jesus says the same thing. When you pray, you know, don't stand on the street corner. Don't blast a trumpet. You know, don't go position yourself into the church where everybody can see you.

You go into your room. You close the door and you pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret, He'll reward you openly. Part of what's so stunning about the Christian life is we're not just concerned about the exterior.

[13:49] We're not just trying to do it for the praise of men. And look, this is exactly what Paul says in verse 22. He's telling these bond servants something very difficult. Obey in everything those who are your earthly masters.

But how? Not by way of eye service. Don't do it as people pleasers. But do it with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

It's a beautiful psalm. You probably know it's Psalm 136 or 139. You know, that reminds us, first of all, just of the presence of God that wherever we go in our rising, in our sleeping, no matter where we travel, that God is always there.

And as soon as you grasp hold of this truth that He's always present and that He's watching, that can't but change your attitude concerning how you're going to do things.

Because as Paul says here, it's ultimately out of reverence for Him. You know, you're digging that ditch in the field. Your supervisor's probably never going to look. You're never going to get evaluated.

[14:56] Why on earth would you care about this ditch? Only one reason. Because the Father sees and it delights Him when you pour your heart into this simple task. And if you do this heartily unto the Lord and not to men, it's not just the angels that rejoice.

So does Jesus. So does the Father. And so you do see the way in which when you realize that you're serving the Lord Christ. That's why you're doing the laundry.

That's why you're doing the dishes. That's why you're cutting the grass. That's why you're doing the spreadsheet. That all of a sudden, again, it matters even if no one's going to ever see it.

And one of the most interesting features of the medieval cathedrals are how if you would go on top and look from above, a vantage that no one will see, you'll see craftsmanship and you'll see carving.

Why on earth did they do that? Certainly wasn't for men. They were doing it unto the Lord. And that's the kind of work ethic we're called to here. Now let's flip it again.

[16:02] Let's see it from yet another angle. The way in which this serving the Lord Christ, that this is a source of long suffering. It's a source of patience.

Look at verse 25. Paul says something that might sound a little bit scary at first. It's hard to understand it in its context but it's worth understanding. He tells us that the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done for there is no partiality.

Why is he saying this? I would guess that you've probably seen injustice before in the workplace. It wasn't just the ancient world that struggled with this.

no matter how hard we try, there's still prejudice, there's still biases in the workplace. You know, people don't get positions, somebody who's more attractive, somebody who's got a more dynamic personality, somebody who's younger, someone with a different set of beliefs.

All of these things bring in all kinds of injustice in the workplace. The question comes in, what do you do if you find yourself under somebody's authority and you've got no legal remedy?

[17:11] Well, think about these bond servers. Think about these slaves. What would they do if they're being mistreated by their master? You might say, well, go to the courts, go to the magistrate.

Well, what if the magistrate is a friend of the friend of your master so that you know you're not going to get a fair hearing? What do you do if deep down there's a real sense of injustice, but there's nothing you can do to remedy your circumstance?

That's why Paul writes this in verse 25. He wants us to know that there is a seat that's impartial. That Jesus is not a respecter of persons in the sense that he treats billionaires different from the poor.

That he treats one person with one skin color different than another person with a different skin color. that that's not how he operates. That when he comes, he will bring real justice.

And that's why when we're in positions where we can't establish justice for ourselves, we can do what Jesus told us to do. Blessed are the meek or the patient, for they will inherit the earth.

[18:26] And we wait on Christ to bring the righteous judgment that only he can bring. Friends, this is an important verse to remember in a time like this where we think of Christians, say, in a place like Afghanistan.

What do you do when you're surrounded with injustice? When you're surrounded with oppression? And there's no place you can go for help. Well, you can cling to this verse.

It's not bad news for the Christian. It's good news that one day the wrongdoer, that that wrong will be righted, that Jesus will turn the world right side up in that he won't be partial to any particular government regime or to any person, but it will be a perfect justice.

And that can create great patience when you're in a hard place and you're just having to persevere. And there's one more way that we can think about this.

Again, the same sentence, that we're serving the Lord Christ. Christ, this truth is also a source of great humility.

[19 : 37] Really, we see this if you look at verse 1 of chapter 4. Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven.

Power is dangerous. There's that old adage, power corrupts, absolute power corrupts, absolutely. There's a lot of truth in that statement. There's a reason why when we read through verse 18 on in chapter 3 that we get a little bit fidgety.

It scares us a little bit to hear that wives are told to submit to their husbands because we know how easy it is for a husband in a position of authority to abuse that authority. Again, we're a little bit put off by that statement that children obey their parents and then this statement really about to fathers in verse 21 because again, fatherhood is something that has been used so damagingly to so many children.

Of course, you've got this situation with masters as well. And so what do we do? What is the truth that protects us from abusing power because we find ourselves in positions of authority?

It's exactly what Paul says in verse 1 of chapter 4 that we've got to remember that we are always a servant before we're in a position of authority.

[21 : 03] I know this sounds kind of strange but if you really think through this passage, how should husbands operate? Husbands should remember that even before they're a husband, they're a wife because every Christian is the bride of Jesus which means you can't have any kind of authority in the home unless you are coming under and submitting and yielding yourself to Christ.

What's your greatest protection as a father? It's knowing that you're actually a child. That you can't exercise that role with any goodness unless you realize that you are absolutely dependent and under a heavenly father and that you've got to look to him to discover the character that then you've got to reflect to whoever's under your care.

What does Paul say to masters which although we may not have this really role in our society you could say it equally of employers that if you are going to be the kind of employer if you're going to be in any position where you've got some sort of mastery over others that you've got to begin by recognizing no that you are actually a bondservant and that your first rule is to seek to honor your master before you exercise any authority over anyone else.

I want to pull out to end just one difficulty that I think as we read through this passage you know it arises there'd be other ones but this is one that I think is important to pick out. You know if you're thinking deeply about this passage and you're thinking about you know verse 22 of not doing things according to eye service as people pleasers but with sincerity fearing the Lord you're looking at verse 23 whatever you do work heartily as to the Lord and not to men this could easily land you in a place of great anxiety.

How on earth is this not a recipe to feel like you are under a relentless taskmaster that there's constant surveillance there's constant measurement so that you can never do enough and you can never rest.

[23 : 20] How does it not result there? There's two things I'd say. The first is that we've got to recognize the incredible freedom that comes from only having one audience to please.

If you were to look in your life I guarantee you've probably got a hundred people you're trying to please all the time. You've got some memory of your father or your mother or your grandparents you're trying to please maybe some friends and some colleagues you've got that boss or that line manager you've got all those expectations they're kind of it's anonymous crowd but just living in a society or living in a neighborhood makes you feel like you have to conform to people's expectation and it goes on and on and on and on.

How wonderful would it be if somebody said actually there's only one set of eyes that matter and if you please him everything else is going to fall into place. Now that's one piece of the puzzle but we've got to add a second and the second is this it's the heart of the one that you have to please. It's when you realize that the only one you have to please is the person who said come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest take my yoke upon you learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in spirit and you will find rest for your soul.

When you realize the only one you have to please is the one who gave himself absolutely for you and the one who is constantly working for you to encourage to sustain to hold you up when you realize that he's working his strength in you that he's a kind and gracious and merciful shepherd that's what removes that surveillance that endless taskmaster and all of a sudden you can rest

before him and say okay Jesus what does it look like for me to live this day for you and that's the only question that you have to answer in the morning what relief what peace could that bring to us and so let's pray that this week that God will enable us not just to think in these terms but to live this out that incredible truth that no matter what we're doing that we serve the

[26 : 00] Lord Christ let's pray father we just rejoice in the gospel it's so incredible it's so much better than the advice of the world we don't have to do anything radical we don't have to abandon our families we don't have to change our career we can just frame our lives against the backdrop of truth Jesus is king he's going to reward us with the inheritance that the only question that we have to think about is how do we live and abide and serve him help us to simplify the confusion of our lives and help us to accept that invitation that's there today come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest show us how to take his yoke upon us we ask this in his name amen let's you as you