

**Paul's Epistle to the Colossians (21):
"Be subject..." (cont.)**

Last Lord's Day we addressed what the Holy Scriptures teach regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage. A clear teaching of these matters reveals just how wayward our society is from God's will and ways respecting this institution that He created. We have departed from the standards that He has established, standards by which He governs and will judge the world. Even among ourselves we find that we have transgressed His laws respecting these matters. But it should not cause us to despair or to become discouraged. Rather, this knowledge should cause us all the more to be grateful for the mercy and grace of God that He has bestowed upon us through Jesus Christ. Thank God there is forgiveness of sins and the promise that our latter end will be glorious, no matter how ignominious our beginning.

Our rehearsal of this institution of marriage was with view to some of the commands that we have before us in Colossians 3:18ff. Let us again read our paragraph, which is Colossians 3:18 - 4:1.

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. ²²Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. ^{4:1}Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Here we have instruction to the family, even to an extended household that commonly existed among the well-to-do of the first century. Here, in the family, is the Christian faith most clearly manifest. "It is in the closest and most familiar relationships of daily living that the reality of Christianity will be manifest."¹ But in addition to the family context, there are instructions for us as Christians in the workplace. Let us consider these.

1. Instruction to wives. We read in verse 18, "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."

God has not only established the institution of marriage and the family, but He has revealed how He would have the relationships within that institution regulated. Paul wrote, "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." Paul's instruction in Ephesians is even more explicit:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. ²⁴Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. (Eph. 5:22-24)

Because of sin, the wife does not do this normally and naturally. If the truth were known, in the vast number of instances, the wife desires to be led by her husband, but she wants to be led in the way she wants to go. In other words, because of sin, wives will tend to be controlling and manipulative rather than submissive. It takes God's grace for a godly wife to live in the manner that the Lord has commanded for her in this verse. Because of sin, submission does not come naturally. It takes God's grace for a Christian wife to live in this manner consistently.

We could look down through biblical history and see how wives have troubled their own households by taking matters into their own hands, as they resisted or rebelled against their husbands rather than submitting to them. Proverbs 19:13 reads, "the contentions of a wife are a continual dropping." Proverbs 27:15 reads, "A

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of Paul to the Ephesians and Colossians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (William B. Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 289.

continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike.” And Proverbs 14:1 describes what happens when a wife takes matters into her own hands: “Every wise woman builds her house: but the foolish plucks it down with her hands.”

What Scriptural principles should a wife know and follow to help her obey the Lord in this matter? ***First, wives are to humble themselves before the Lord and purpose by God’s grace to do the will of God in submitting to her husband’s leadership.*** She is to obey him, seeking to do his will. Paul wrote, “As the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing” (Eph. 5:24). Take note, the Scriptures say ‘in every thing.’ Of course this does not mean that she is to sin if her husband would have her do so. Again, Colossians 3:18 reads, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, ***as it is fit in the Lord.***” But aside from what is sinful, she is to obey her husband in all areas. To fail in this is to rebel against God and may even result in the word of God being blasphemed. We read in Titus 2:5 that a wife is to be “discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.”

Secondly, a wife is to recognize and respect her husband’s position as the head of the marriage and family. Ephesians 5:23 records, “or the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the Savior of the body.” It is important that a wife distinguish between the position of her husband and the person of her husband. She is to obey her husband because of the position and responsibility that God has given him, irrespective of whether he rises to a level of competence in that position. He has that position irrespective of whether he is a Christian or not. Husbands are the heads of their wives.

Thirdly, a wife must believe that God is sovereign and that He controls the decisions and directs the steps of her husband. The wife must believe that God will overrule even the poor decisions of her husband and thereby the Lord will lead her by means of directing her husband. She must have confidence in God Who is guiding her in His providence. If she in faith believes this biblical truth, then she can be content in the Lord regardless of what her husband does. She knows that even on those occasions when her husband makes foolish and selfish decisions that will adversely affect their lives, she is assured that through it all God will accomplish His purposes for His glory and her ultimate good.

Fourthly, a wife must learn to appeal to her husband when she disagrees with his decision. When we speak of a wife submitting to her husband we are not suggesting silence on her part when she perceives things are not going as she thinks they should. No, she has a responsibility to make known her opinion, but to do so in a godly, humble, and biblical manner. What then is it for a wife to appeal to her husband? It occurs when the wife politely and in a spirit of meekness attempts to lay out her case to her husband as to what she perceives to be the will of God. She expresses to him in meekness and with respect toward him her assessment and her advice. But, and this is important, she conveys to her husband that she will abide by his decision. Ultimately, right or wrong, it is his judgment call. God has made him responsible for his wife and his children.

2. Instruction to husbands.

We read in Colossians 3:19, “Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.” Husbands are to humble themselves and purpose by God’s grace to do the will of God. This involves first, that a husband denies himself of his own pleasures as the priority of his life and assumes his responsibility to lovingly lead his wife. We read the command in Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives.”

Second, a husband is to be patient with his wife to the point of patiently enduring her insensitivity or resistance to him. The Lord Jesus Himself provides an example. Husbands are to love their wives “even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” Christ is patient with His church. Husbands are to be patient with their wives. The husband must not use coercion or force to impose his will. He is to lead her, not drive her. He is to be loving and patient toward his wife even when she resists or refuses to yield to him. Again, Colossians 3:19, “love your wives, and be not bitter against them.”

Third, a husband is to seek to lead his wife to become holy and pure. As Christ with His church, the husband should seek to “sanctify and cleanse” his wife “with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church (bride), not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

Fourth, a husband is to listen to his wife’s counsel, for she is designed by God to be his helpmate. But ultimately the responsibility rests upon him. God has ordained that the husband determines the direction for his

family. There are times when he should listen and heed the advice of his wife. There are other times he must disregard her counsel if he is convinced the will of God should take them in a different direction.

One can look down through biblical history and see that husbands have failed their wives. Husbands tend to act out of selfishness even at the expense of their wives. You remember Abraham. Although he was a godly man, he accepted out of selfish concern placing his wife Sarah in a very difficult situation. Genesis 20:2 reads, “And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, she is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah.” Nevertheless, God preserved Sarah. She was a godly woman who trusted the Lord to protect and preserve her. We read in verse 3 that God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, “Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man’s wife.”

Abraham’s son, Isaac, followed his father’s example and acted the same way toward his wife, Rebecca. Rather than preserve the moral purity and safety of his wife, Isaac placed Rebecca in a very vulnerable situation. After they went to dwell in Gerar, “the men of the place asked him of his wife; and he said, She is my sister: for he feared to say, ‘She is my wife; lest,’ said he, ‘the men of the place should kill me for Rebecca’; because she was fair to look upon” (Gen. 26:7). God spared Rebecca through her difficult experience just as He had spared Sarah before her.

3. Instruction to children.

Colossians 3:20f read, “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Children are to be obedient to their parents. This is the will of God. God has appointed parents as the protectors and instructors of their children. It is the parents’ responsibility to be faithful to their children in instruction, chastening, and training. It is the responsibility of children to obey their parents. Of course this is what is stated in the 5th commandment. “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you” (Exo. 20:12). A child honors his parent by obeying his parent. A child who disobeys his parent, dishonors not only his parent, but also God, for God has appointed that parent to that important position of responsibility. The son or daughter that ignores or resists the guidance of the parent, incurs the displeasure of God, the forfeiture of His blessing upon his or her life.

4. Instruction to fathers. Before moving on to relationships outside the immediate family, another word is given to **fathers**. Verse 21 reads, “Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.” This shows the important role of fathers in the raising of their children as well as the terrible consequences if they fail to lead their families rightly.

F. F. Bruce quoted another regarding these matters:

“For the children his only precept is ‘obey your parents’; let parents see to it that they deserve obedience: more than this, that they make obedience easy. The law, which for the Christian is summed up in the word ‘love,’ is formulated in ‘thou shalt not’ for the lawless and disobedient. And the ‘thou shalt not’s’ of the Sinai have their counterpart in the ‘don’t’s’ of the nursery. Grace teaches us to keep His commandments, law warns us not to break them. And it is on his latter principle that children are generally trained. ‘Don’t be naughty’ is the nursery version of it...

“William Carey ... wrote to his son: ‘Remember, a gentleman is the next best character to a Christian, and the Christian includes the gentleman.’ And if a little of the effort used to teach the children not to be naughty were devoted to training them to be gentlemen and ladies, parents would come nearer to fulfilling the Apostolic precept.”²

Again, Paul wrote, “Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.” Sons and daughters will have difficulty in life, those children who become discouraged due to their fathers’ failures. They will struggle not only while under the authority of their fathers, but will continue to struggle when no longer under the direct authority of their fathers. If they do not respond to the authority of the father, they will not respond well to authority in the work place, or in their own future marriage.

² Bruce, *Colossians*, p. 292.

To grow or become discouraged is to lose motivation for doing rightly and living rightly in order to please dad and/or mom. What kinds of failure by the father can result in a discouraged child? Perhaps a number of things could be cited.

- A father may discourage his child through uncontrolled outbursts of anger.
- A father may discourage his child if the child witnesses glaring failures or inconsistencies in his father's behavior or character.
- A father may discourage his child through his failure to honor his wife, the child's mother.
- A father may discourage his child in failing to make clear what pleases him.
- A father may discourage his child through a failure to discipline properly.
 - He may be too controlling in his discipline.
 - He may be too slow or lax in exercising discipline.
 - He may be inconsistent in his discipline, leaving the child unclear as to when he will be disciplined or when he will escape discipline.

4. Instruction to slaves. (Col. 3:22-25)

²²Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

Now in the verses before these, Paul addressed the Christian's responsibility within the family. Here, however, he gives instruction for the Christian in the work place.

There are varying estimates of the percentage of slaves in the Roman Empire. But I have read that one third to one half of the population of Rome itself was probably comprised of slaves. Now I mentioned last week that the institution of slavery in the Roman Empire should not be equated with the institution of slavery that characterized western European civilization for a handful of centuries. This is somewhat true, for many slaves were indentured due to financial debt. But there were many slaves who had been forced into slavery after Rome had conquered them in foreign lands. But Christianity is applicable and practical in every kind of social or political environment. And although the Scriptures do not embrace or promote the idea of slavery, they give instruction to Christians who find themselves in that condition. And so, the biblical principle that is taught and illustrated throughout the Scriptures is that the one under the authority of a man or woman over him, is to submit unto him or her in the Lord.

Now Paul makes it clear that every person who labors, even the slave who labors, is actually serving the Lord in that which he does. "Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord." This is the key to living righteously and in peace as a Christian in a fallen world. This is a key principle. Whatever work we may do, we are to regard ourselves as serving the Lord in that work.

The Christian in the work place is such an important aspect of life that I thought it would be good to speak of the matter of the Christian in the work place and how he should view the role of work, or labour, in the Christian life. One's occupation is a significant aspect of life. It is important that we have a right biblical understanding of the nature of work, knowing how God would have us view labor and how He would have us go about our business. Let us read together **Psalm 128**.

- 1 Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
Who walks in His ways,
- 2 *When you eat the labor of your hands,
You shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.*
- 3 Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine
In the every heart of your house,
Your children like olive plants

- All around your table.
- 4 Behold, thus shall the man be blessed
Who fears the Lord.
- 5 The Lord bless you out of Zion!
And may you see the good of Jerusalem
All the days of your life.
- 6 Yes, may you see your children's children!

Peace be upon Israel!

Psalm 128 is one of fifteen psalms that are called "songs of ascents." Jewish believers journeying to Jerusalem to worship God sang these songs as they ascended the mountains to the city of God. These psalms were songs of celebration. The people were joyous, for they felt themselves to be blessed of God. They were travelling to Jerusalem to render thanks to their God in His temple.

This psalm celebrates the goodness of God toward His people who order their life according to His ways, who seek to obey His law. The one who does so is a happy person. He is happy in his marriage and happy among his many children. He is joyous toward His God, recognizing that God will continue to bless His life throughout his many days on God's earth.

Take note the realm of God's blessing at the head of the list in the areas of God's blessing. "***When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.***" The man who fears the LORD and walks in His ways will be happy and successful in his work.

Notice the emphasis on **manual labor**, "When you eat ***the labor of your hands***, you shall be happy." The Scriptures seem to give great value and importance to those whose occupation involves both hard manual labor as well as creative work with one's hands. This emphasis may reflect the pre-modern society in which the Bible was written, but the value of hard work should not be easily dismissed. Hard labor is viewed as healthy, normal, and wholesome. A sense of well-being and satisfaction comes to the one who is able to provide for himself and his family through his hard labor. Proverbs 12:14, "A man will be satisfied with good by the fruit of his mouth, and the recompense of a man's hands will be rendered unto him." There is satisfaction in a finished hard day's work. Moreover, people generally respect a hard worker. Paul was concerned with the testimony of the believers at Thessalonica. He encouraged them to be diligent in their work ethic so that they not be dependent on others. "But we urge you, brethren, that you ... aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and ***to work with your own hands***, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing" (1 Thess. 4:10-12). Hard manual labor seems to be the remedy ***for thievery***. Again, Paul wrote, "Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, ***working with his hands what is good***, that he may have something to give him who has need" (Eph. 4:28).

Many of us, of course, are not involved principally in the area of manual labor. Our work involves **the employment of skill or knowledge** whereby commerce is transacted or service is rendered to others. Our wit rather than brawn is that which is strained in our occupation. This, too, is honorable labor, and in some ways it is more difficult than hard physical labor. The point that the Bible seems to stress is that God's people may receive great satisfaction from their work, even though their work may be quite difficult in various respects.

I think that all of us can readily recognize that to be happy and fulfilled in one's work is indeed a great blessing. Sadly, this is not the case with many people. (1) ***Some view work as only a necessary evil.*** They see their workplace to be characterized by drudgery and boredom, or perhaps even difficulty and misery. They do not feel themselves blessed, but rather cursed to trudge the same place each day from which they are anxious to leave after the slow passing hours of labor have passed. Perhaps the main problem at work is that it is a godless environment, in which labor is shared with people who are strangers to God's Word and grace. Fellowship is non-existent. (2) ***Others may enjoy their work, but they do not see this very large portion of their lives through a Christian perspective.*** They may view their secular job as unimportant in a realm in which God is not vitally concerned. They perceive a lack of meaning or sense of value that their work entails respecting Christ's kingdom. Sometimes these people devalue the work that God has them doing because they long for what they perceive to be "Christian" work. But all work is Christian, if it is legal and ethical, and especially if it is perceived to bring benefit to others. (3) Sadly, ***there are others who see work as an end in itself.*** They make an idol out of work.

They seek to achieve or obtain from work that which can only be found in knowing God. This should not be how we view work.

Most of us will spend the majority of our waking hours as adults doing work. Therefore, it is extremely important that we understand the Lordship of Christ over this huge area of our lives. **Abraham Kuypers** once said, “There is not an inch of any sphere of life over which Jesus Christ does not say, ‘Mine.’” An aspect of life such as one’s occupation, should be understood and ordered according to the fear of the LORD, for then “***When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.***”

Let us consider several matters regarding this subject by first considering more broadly the biblical teaching respecting work.

A. Work in the Garden of Eden, before man’s fall into sin

When we look at the Genesis account of life in the Garden of Eden, we read that God had instituted work prior to the entrance of sin into the world. We read of God’s act of creation of man:

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and ***let them rule over*** the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; 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 rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.***” ...God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day (Genesis 1:26-28, 31).

We see that God created mankind with the purpose for them to accomplish work on His behalf. It was work to be performed at His direction and in His authority. “Work” for Adam and Eve involved cultivating and keeping the garden. God’s task for us will not necessarily be the same as Adam’s. God has not called many of us to be farmers. But all of us in our work are faced with challenges that are to be understood, mastered, and subdued, and we are to do so on behalf of the Lord. The task of subduing and ruling encompasses every legitimate occupation. Someone put it this way:

A plumber is called to use pipes, gravity, and principles of pressure to channel water and other things in ways that are useful to people. A factory manager is called to learn how his factory operates and coordinate others in applying their skills to subdue and rule. A teacher is called to pass along knowledge so that others can be equipped to subdue and rule. All occupations call us to subdue and rule in some fashion.

Another aspect of work can be understood by considering what God accomplished in His work of creation. We read in Genesis 1 that when God created He brought order out of chaos. We too, are to be ***creative*** in our work. Much of what constitutes work is to bring order out of chaos. Do not speak of your work as something to be avoided simply because it is difficult. Whether it be a difficult task or lesson in school to learn, or as a teacher to teach either a belligerent or perhaps handicapped student, whether it be a seeming impossible problem to overcome in construction or repair, or a hard-nosed customer to please in retail or service, all work comes with challenges. Our God would have us see each one of these matters to be addressed, successfully and appropriately managed and resolved according to the principles that He has set forth in His Word. We are to recognize the very day-to-day events that arise in our work as a challenge and opportunity to bring order and purpose and value to your work and workplace. All of life falls under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Work is a calling – a vocation (from the Latin word for “call”). Germans do not like to view their work as a “job.” It seems to them to render work as a mere drudgery or meaningless effort, something that a person does not truly wish to do. Work is an occupation, even more, it is a ***vocation***, a calling of God. Through the work that God has given us we are to render and return glory to Him who made us and on Whose behalf we labor. Legitimate work, therefore, carries great dignity. Whether or not you view your work as service on His behalf is essential. If you are working you have experienced a call of God to serve Him in that place of work. Please recognize that God regards your work as something of dignity. It is the work of God.

Since God has ordained work, we should recognize that work is a stewardship. God is our employer and supervisor in whatever we are doing. We are to serve Him through our work with this in mind. We are to give all diligence to our work. We are to give our best effort to do our best work for which we are capable with the skills and opportunity that God renders to us. A lazy, inattentive, slacker worker who just logs his time and is unconcerned about his product or the quality of his work is a person who is not pleasing God.

I would encourage you not to speak of your work as though it is a burden to be avoided. Work is a good thing, a blessed thing! Yes, you can speak of the challenges and difficulties of your work, even the problems that are encountered in the workplace. But I would urge you to see the work and the workplace as a challenge to bring forth order, peace, and production, as well as enjoyment, rather than as merely a means to an end—a way to get money to expend on leisure, entertainment and relaxation. That attitude is completely unbiblical! Work is good and wholesome and rewarding. Work is honorable. God created us for work. This is seen in Adam and Eve's labor in the Garden of Eden even before they fell into sin.

Our work is also a stewardship for which we give an account to God. After each day of labor God came and met with Adam and Eve in the Garden. They would walk about in the cool of the day and talk about the labor of the day. We are stewards in the realm of labor in which God has placed us. We are to labor on His behalf and we are to recognize that He would have us reflect upon our labor on His behalf, having fellowship with Him respecting our labor.

Yes, there is also a need to rest from labor. God established for man a day of rest, *a Sabbath day*. But rest and recreation derives their value and meaning even in the light of our work. The Sabbath existed from creation, derived from the pattern that God Himself displayed before us.

And on the seventh day God ended his work that he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made. (Gen. 2:2f)

God established the Sabbath to be a day of rest for man that he may recuperate from the previous six days of labor. It a day on which one's work could be reflected upon and could be appreciated. God rested, of course, not because He was exhausted from creating. Creation took no effort on the part of God in the sense that He was strained or exhausted from what He had done. He merely spoke, and all things came into existence. His "rest" was a reflection on what He had wrought and He took pleasure in what He saw.

B. Work after man's fall into sin

God's Word makes it clear that the mandate to work remains our calling even after the fall. When God pronounced His curse on Adam for his sin, God said to him

Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it':

Cursed is the ground for your sake;
In toil you shall eat of it
All the days of your life.
Both thorns and thistles it shall it bring forth for you,
And you shall eat the herb of the field.
In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
Til you shall return to the ground,
For out of it you were taken:
For dust you are,
And to dust you shall return. (Gen. 3:17-19)

We are still called to work, but because of the fall, *work is more difficult*. Whereas before the ground was cooperative with Adam and Eve's labor, yielding fruit readily, afterwards the job became much more difficult. So too, our work is now cursed by difficulties, frustration, and unintended consequences. You pull weeds, and

they're back tomorrow. You spend days preparing or building something, only to see it fail. Sales fall through. Customers are unhappy. Equipment breaks down. The government comes down on you. This does not mean that we should avoid work; instead, we are called upon to work that much harder and to persevere in that task which is before us.

Work seems to be the arena in which many of us seem to have to face *the devil that opposes us*, seeking to defeat us, and simply to make us miserable. There may be more truth than not in the familiar expression, "the devil is in the details." Upon the fall of man into sin, much control of our lives was given over to him and his minions. He would afflict us, make our lives miserable and unrewarding. He will cause problems in the workplace as we interact with customers, fellow workers, and challenges of the work itself. All these are to be overcome by us in the name of the Lord as we act and react in a manner that our Lord has prescribed in His Word.

Thankfully, *God in His mercy did not remove the blessing of the Sabbath after our fall into sin*. The creation ordinance of one day of rest after six days of labor abides. Our Lord Jesus taught that it was in God's loving-kindness that He gave us this day. He said, "*The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath*" (Mark 2:27). We bring peril and problems to ourselves when we violate this ordinance. Many forfeit God's blessing on their work because they fail to trust and obey God in respect to the Sabbath Day principle.

Of course *the Sabbath Day was later codified in the Law of Moses* in the fourth commandment.

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: 10 But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it. (Exo. 20:8ff)

Sabbath Day observance became a sign to Israel that distinguished them from all other nations of the earth. Their strict observance of the Saturday Sabbath showed their dependence on God for their protection and provision, and also showed forth that they were God's special people in the earth. Restrictions were imposed on the people respecting the observance of the Sabbath. Extreme penalties were imposed upon violators. Many of these were Old Testament pictures of the nature of God's grace toward us in Christ. As the people were to rest from their labor, it portrayed for us that a heavenly rest waits us after this lifetime of labor is accomplished (cf. the book of Hebrews). Also, it illustrated that our approach and worship of God cannot be enjoyed by us based upon the merit or performance of any work on our part.

C. The Christian's view of work

When we come to the New Testament and see how we as Christians are to view work, we understand that our view of work in its responsibilities, relationships, and outcome, is all to be assessed, understood, and interpreted in the light of the person of Jesus Christ. God the Father has determined that all of life, including our work life, is to be governed by our relationship with Jesus Christ. God has determined that "in all things He may have the pre-eminence" (Col. 1:18), and that includes our work.

This may be clearly seen in our Lord's own words when He asserted that He had authority over the Sabbath Day.

Now it happened on the second Sabbath after the first that He went through the grain fields. And His disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate them, rubbing them in their hands. And some of the Pharisees said to them, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?" But Jesus answering them said, "Have you not even read this, what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he went into the house of God, took and ate the showbread, and also gave some to those who were with him, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat?" And He said to them, "*The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.*" (Luke 6:1-5)

As we read of what the Lord and his disciples did, we might at first be somewhat taken back by an apparent lack of consideration for another's personal property. Here they are, walking through someone's field and they help themselves to a snack. But actually, it was an accepted custom and permitted under the Law of Moses:

“When you enter your neighbor’s standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor’s standing grain.” (Deut. 23:25).

The Pharisees made an accusation, demanding an explanation, **“Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” This was no trifle charge, for the penalty of such an infraction was public execution.** The Pharisees did not object to the activity itself, only that it was done on Saturday, the Sabbath day, a day of rest on which no work whatsoever was to be performed. Here we see the extreme legalism of this religious group being displayed. They regarded as work what Jesus and His disciples were doing, and therefore their behavior was prohibited on the Sabbath. Beware of man-made religion. There is nothing more threatening to civil and individual freedom. There are always those who would impose upon society their ways of morality and religion. They would bind men’s consciences and assert their authority over every facet of life if given half a chance. Thankfully, we live in a day and in a society in which such things are not imposed upon us forcibly.

The Pharisees were extreme in this regard. They would not live by principle that the Sabbath was a day in which work generally was set aside for the purpose of rest; they would stipulate and define precisely what constituted work and impose their rules and penalty for infractions on the people of God. Over the course of years, the legalistic element in Judaism catalogued **39 categories** of what they regarded as work. Each category had **6 minor categories**, each minor category had a list of specific laws prohibiting specific activities, **234 violations** in all. According to their accounting, the Lord and his disciples were guilty of two violations, by plucking the heads of grain with their hands they were **guilty of harvesting**; and by rubbing them in their hands they were **guilty of threshing**. Our Lord repudiated them, asserting that He has authority over the Sabbath to determine what was appropriate and proper and what was not.

The Lord Jesus has authority over the Sabbath. The Day of rest which in the Old Testament commemorated the completion of creation was Saturday. The New Testament records that when Jesus Christ rose from the dead, the day of rest came to be viewed by Christians as the first day of the week. The Old Testament Sabbath celebrates the completion of the old, physical creation; the New Testament Sabbath celebrates the onset of the new creation brought to realization through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Our Lord Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. He also has authority over all work that precedes the Sabbath. As Christians we are to view our work as unto the Lord. He is our supervisor. He is our inspector. Ultimately He is our wage dispenser. We might even say for some, He is to be our chief customer; that is, we are to serve others as though we were serving Him.

Understanding our relationship with Jesus Christ is to shape our understanding of who we are as either employers or employees. Our work ethic is to be shaped by our recognition that all work, even “secular” work so-called, is in actuality spiritual work that is played out in His view for which He takes great interest and concern. Let us look at several passages that suggest to us some of these principles:

We read this principle in **1 Corinthians 7:17-24**.

But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For **he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord’s freedman**. Likewise **he who is called while free is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men**. Brethren, let each one remain with God in that calling in which he was called.

We see that those in even menial work (slavery in the 1st century) are to take their identity from the fact that they are “freedmen” before the Lord. On the other hand, those who are in positions of authority are to be “levelled” by recognizing they are “Christ’s slaves”, that is, in service to Him in the work which they are performing. All believers belong to Him and serve Him, and therefore are not to adopt the attitude or outlook that they are at the whim of, or under the control of evil or oppressive men.

Often times Christians may feel that they can compromise the quality or the energy that they put into their work because either the company or their supervisors are persons who deserve no respect or loyalty. The Christian recognizes that He serves the Lord and so the quality or energy he puts into his work is not diminished.

And then we have the instruction in our text of Colossians 3:22-24.

Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.

Here we see that all of life, including our family relationships and duties as well as our employment duties and relationships are all to be shaped by our understanding that we are serving the Lord in those places of calling into which our Lord has placed us. We are serving Jesus Christ whoever we are and wherever we are. Our labor therefore should always be characterized with joy, enthusiasm, creativity, and diligence. One day our Lord will dispense bonuses upon those who have served him well, whether they were serving him in the home, in the workplace, in school, or in church. Your work is to be viewed as your service to God. God has called you to your work. There is no distinction between secular and spiritual work; all work is to be regarded as spiritual, playing out under the watchful and concerned view of God. We are to see that our work pleases God and that we may derive great pleasure from our work.

D. The Protestant work ethic

A modern Christian view of work began at the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's. God caused a great return to His Word the Bible as the source for all truth for the people of God respecting the nature of God and how He would have them live in His world. The two great Reformers, Martin Luther in Germany and John Calvin in Switzerland, both addressed the matter how people could serve their God through work. Luther broke with medieval Catholic teachings about work, but it was Calvin who developed a biblical theology of work that has existed in western society down to this day. Calvin taught that all men must work, even the rich, because to work was the will of God. It was the duty of men to serve as God's instruments here on earth, to reshape the world in the fashion of the Kingdom of God, and to become a part of the continuing process of His creation. Men were not to lust after wealth, possessions, or easy living, but were to reinvest the profits of their labor into financing further ventures. Earnings were thus to be reinvested over and over again, to the end of time. Reinvestment was to be done in the community in which the Christian lived. By his investment of his capital in his community, he would be used of the Lord to raise the standard of living of his neighbors. This was viewed as one way that we may love our neighbor as yourself.

The choice of an occupation and pursuing it to achieve the greatest profit possible was considered by Calvinists to be a religious duty. God encourages the pursuit of unlimited profit. This idea was a radical departure from the Christian beliefs of the middle ages. Calvin considered it appropriate to seek an occupation that would provide the greatest earnings possible. If that meant abandoning the family trade or profession, the change was not only allowed, but it was considered to be one's religious duty. This view of optimism and pursuit of opportunity under girded much European immigration to the new world to be able to make a better life for oneself, one's family, and posterity. Calvin considered it appropriate to seek an occupation that would provide the greatest earnings possible. If that meant abandoning the family trade or profession, the change was not only allowed, but it was considered to be one's religious duty. This Protestant work ethic was the basis on which the great expansion of our economy has brought great blessing to those who live in the west. It is sad that our people have departed from this historic view of biblical capitalism. People now view their work as a means to gain their own benefit only, and to build what they think is security against what may come. May we have an understanding and appreciation of work that goes much beyond this rather narrow and selfish view of life.

Before we conclude, Paul has one last word of instruction which is the first verse of Colossians 4. "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. The master should not think himself better, but rather as one over whom he has rule. The Master has a Ruler greater than He is and he is accountable to the Lord.

²⁴Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present *you* faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, ²⁵to God our Savior, Who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24f)