

Colossians 3:23-24

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[0 : 0 0] back in Scotland when the first thing that the taxi driver said from the airport back to the manse just a couple of weeks ago was, I, the nights are fair drawing in. And well, I knew I was home when that was the conversation opener. I have to say not much conversation ensued, but these were pretty much the first words that I heard. And of course, it was true what the gentleman said, and that was over two weeks ago, and their fair drawing in even more. And now, it's that time of year. The holidays are coming to an end, and for many, it's a case of back to work. I know some of you have been working right through the summer, but generally, for many, this is a time when we head back to work. It may be to your job after a holiday. It may be with school, going back, obviously pupils, but it's not just pupils and teachers, but for parents, there are any number of associated duties that come with going back to school. It's also true that in the life and work of the church, after the summer, we recommence many activities. Sunday school will be up and running soon, back into the work of the neighborhood fellowships, the teens and the young people, and we could go on. Indeed, in this week that's begun, there's a big piece of work in the holiday club, and I know many of you are involved in one way or another, and will be working hard in this week that has begun. So, it's back to work. And I want us to think a little bit about this subject that dominates, really, or perhaps dominates is too strong a word, but that is such a huge element in our lives, the work that we do, be that paid or unpaid. Work takes many forms, but work in one form or another occupies so much of our time and of our lives. It's a very important subject.

And given the importance that it has, it's not surprising that in the Bible we find considerable instruction concerning this matter of work. Indeed, from the very beginning in Genesis, we have work instituted as a good thing. Part of what God has created and that He was able to declare was very good within that the way in which we have been created as men and women that we might work.

So, work is important, and it's important for us to think a little bit, maybe to think again, to revisit our attitude to work. There are different questions that we could consider that revolve around this matter of the work that we do. Is it the case, for example, that church work is somehow worthier than ordinary work or secular work, as some maybe imagine? Is it the case that some of the work that we do is no more than a necessary evil? We don't really enjoy it. We'd prefer not to be doing it, but needs must. We need to put food on the table. There are bills to pay, a mortgage to cover, and, well, we have to work. We don't delight in it. We'd rather be doing something else, but it's just something we've got to do. Is that the attitude that we have to our work? And these are the kind of questions, and others related to them, that we can think about with the help of Paul's teaching on the subject of work that we find in Colossians chapter 3. And very particularly this evening, we're going to be focusing our attention on verses 23 and 24, and we'll read these two verses again right now. What does Paul say to, in this case, and we're going to comment on this in a moment, to slaves within the fellowship of believers in the city of Colossae? Verse 23, Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. So these are the words, this is the teaching, the instruction, the exhortation that we want to think about this evening for ourselves. Now, we're going to think about this exhortation for ourselves and apply it to ourselves, and I think we can do that very legitimately. But before we do, we do need to just clarify one matter. On this occasion, this evening, I'm not going to be dealing with a very important issue that arises from Paul's teaching, namely, what is the Bible's attitude to slavery? It's very clear, the language is unmistakable. Paul is directing these words in the writing of this letter, his original audience were slaves. It's very clear there in verse 22, slaves, obey your earthly masters. And what follows in verses 23 and 24 that are going to be occupying our attention, clearly

when Paul wrote the letter, he was directing this instruction to those who were slaves. He moves on to speak about their masters and the duties that were laid upon them. And any serious treatment of these verses would need to deal with this big issue. The big issue of the Bible's seeming approval, or in any case, it's seeming ambivalence or tolerance towards the institution of slavery. Now, that is a big problem. We say, well, what's going on here? How can it be that Paul seemingly is so okay with slavery? That's the impression we would get from reading these verses.

And it's important for us to deal with that because in and of itself, it's important to be clear what is the Bible's attitude to this matter. But it's also important because today it's quite common that as Christians, one of the sticks, if you wish, that others would hit us with when we are defending a given position, maybe in the area of ethics, and we're saying, well, we believe this because the Bible says, and the retort often is, oh, right, so you're concerned with what the Bible says. Well, what about what the Bible says about slavery? And then there could be a list of other things as well. But often this is one that is prominent in people's response. Well, if you're so keen on what the Bible says, well, the Bible says lots of things that I don't think you should be too enthusiastic about, and this would be one of them. Well, what I've just said is that I'm not going to be dealing with that, important though it is. And the reason we're not going to deal with that this evening is really a very simple one, and that is that in due course, very soon, I don't know exactly when, but within the next few weeks, we'll be returning to 1 Peter. You'll remember before the summer we were going through 1 Peter, and we're going to be revisiting that, recommencing that study of 1 Peter. And when we do, almost immediately, we will be confronted by this very issue. In the second chapter, 1 Peter, there is instruction to slaves, much in the manner, not the same content, but similar to what we find here in Colossians. And then we will deal more carefully with this matter of slavery and the [8:08] Bible's attitude to it. What we're going to do this evening is apply Paul's instructions, originally directed to slaves, that's very clear, but apply them to ourselves as workers. Now, that's something that is very commonly done, and I think quite legitimately done, and that's what we're going to do this evening. As we proceed to the verses in question, I would encourage you to have in mind your work, the work that you do. It could be your job, it could be duties relating to you being a mother or a father, a husband, a wife. It may be work that you do within the life and activity of the church, indeed, any number of areas where you work, but have in mind the work that you do.

Let's just consider some matters that Paul addresses here. The first one that he addresses, or the first one that we're going to be thinking about, is how are we to work? How are you to do the work that you do? And Paul addresses this matter of the manner in which we are to work, and he states very clearly how it is that we are to do so. Verse 23, whatever you do, work at it with all your heart. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, and especially that phrase, with all your heart. How are you to work as a Christian? How are you to engage in the work that you do? Paul is very clear. You're to do so with all your heart. What Paul is saying, or what he literally says, a literal translation would be, from the soul, from the soul, from the heart, with all your heart. And I think the idea is clear enough. We don't need to labor the point. Paul is saying that we are to work with wholehearted endeavor and commitment.

That's the way we are to work as Christians. Not half-heartedly, not just the bare minimum, not just doing the minimum that we can get away with. No, Paul is very clear. A child could understand what he's saying here. When you work, work with all your heart. Some suggest, and the language that Paul uses would give some justification for this. Some suggest that in what Paul is saying, there is an echo of the teaching of Jesus recorded in Mark's gospel. In Mark chapter 12 and verse 30, there are words of Jesus that we're familiar with. Jesus... Yeah, that's right. Mark 12, verse 30, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And especially though that second part of that verse, with all your soul, that's exactly the same language that Paul uses here and applying it to the matter of our work, that we are to work with all our heart. And if that is the case, if there is an echo of what Jesus said concerning the manner in which we are to love Him, if there's an echo of that in Paul's instruction regarding the manner in which we are to work for Him and serve Him, then that only serves to intensify what Paul is saying. We are to work with everything we've got, with every fiber of our being. That's the manner in which we are to work. Now, I think if we're honest and if we take seriously what is being said, we would conclude or part of our response might be, well, that's a very big ask.

You know, it is a very big ask that in everything we do or in the work that we do, we should work in this manner. It's not easy to work in this way. It's what we're being told we must do, what we ought

to do, what God requires of us, but it's a big ask. Well, if we think it's a big ask for us, just imagine how much of a big ask it must have appeared to the slaves that this teaching was originally directed to. I've already said we're not going to deal with that matter, but just remember that originally Paul was writing to slaves, and to slaves he says, work with all your heart. Now, that is a huge ask, and it's such a big ask that we might immediately imagine or hope that it is a demand we can qualify or compartmentalize, imagining or hoping that this demand that we work with all our heart applies only to certain work that we do. We might hope that that's the case. But if that is what we would hope, well, the second question we want to continue to dispels that hope. What is the second question that we can pose? Well, the second question is this, what work is contemplated by Paul? We've looked at the manner in which we're to work, we're to do so with all our heart, but what work is he thinking about? What work is covered? What comes under this injunction of Paul? Well, the answer is crystal clear.

[13:40] Verse 23, whatever you do, whatever you do, work at it with all your heart. And there's really no wriggle room there at all. Whatever you do, whatever the nature of your work, whatever the activity that you're engaged in, you are to do it in this manner with all your heart. Whatever is indeed whatever.

All work, all chores, all duties, all activities are included in this requirement that we should do them with all our heart. I think you can work out what that means for yourselves and in the various activities. But forgive me if I give examples that may be unnecessary because it's so obvious. But given that it is whatever, that includes the work that we do within the context of the congregation, church work. It includes obviously our secular work, if indeed that's even the best way of describing the jobs that we do. It includes work that's paid. It's work that's voluntary, work in the home, work at the office, in the workplace, work that is fascinating, interesting, that we enjoy, that challenges us, that we can really get stuck into, and also work that is tedious and repetitive, and that we might think, well, I'd really rather be doing something else. That's all included. It all comes under the umbrella of this injunction that we should do this work with all our heart. It also includes, thinking of those here who are studying, be it at school or at college or at university, well, that work also very clearly comes under this direction, this instruction of Paul that you are to do what you do with all your heart. Not just the bare minimum, not what you can get away with, but with all your heart, with all the abilities that you have, with the resources at your disposal, you are to do that work with all your heart. Indeed, we can go further really and say that the demand extends beyond what we might call work. The reference to work here in verse 23 is really just the application by Paul of a greater, broader principle that we find just a few verses previously.

We've read the whole chapter, and notice what it says in verse 17, and it is having stated what he states in verse 17 that Paul proceeds to then develop what he said in the area of Christian households and our concern this evening, the matter of work. But what has introduced Paul to this matter?

Well, what do we read there in verse 17? And 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. Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, and that big principle, that foundational principle is then applied to the area of work, whatever work you do. But it is something that is broader even than just our work or what we might call work.

Everything we do, we are to do in this manner. Notice also that that verse that we've just commented on, verse 17, as we digest it and understand it, helps explain how we can do all the work that we do with all our heart, difficult though that may seem, and indeed is. Well, as we appreciate that everything that we are doing, we are doing in the name of the Lord Jesus, and in thankfulness to God through Jesus, then that appreciation certainly should help us do everything we do in the manner that we are asked to with all our heart. It takes us on to a third question.

There's five questions in all, but the final one we're going to deal with very briefly. The third question that arises or that finds an answer in these two verses in Colossians is, who do we work for? Paul has touched on the question of how we're to work with all our heart. What work is contemplated by that? Well, everything, whatever you do. But then the matter of, well, who do we work for? And what does Paul say there in verse 23? Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for men. Especially these words, as working for the Lord, not for men. Now that phrase could be understood in different ways.

[18 : 34] One way of understanding it, or one way in which it might be understood, is that Paul is saying is that the Lord is our only master, as working for the Lord, not for men. You're not working for men, you're working for the Lord. The Lord is your only master as a Christian. Well, I think that would be a wrong understanding of what Paul is saying, especially given that in the previous verse, he states very clearly that there are indeed earthly masters that the slaves had to submit to.

Slaves obey your earthly masters in everything. So, having said that, when he goes on to say what he says in verse 23, clearly he's not saying that as Christians, our only master is the Lord. Another way that it might be understood, I think probably incorrectly, would be to think that what Paul is saying is that in everything we do, in all the work that we do, even if it is for earthly masters, we should do it as if the Lord were our master, as if He were. You know, we use that kind of language in other contexts. You might say to somebody who's about to, I don't know, take part in a big sporting event, and the coach says, right, you've got to play as if your life depended on it. And then the phrase means that you should play in a way that you would as if your life depended on it. Your life doesn't depend on it, obviously, but play as if it did. It doesn't, but play as if you did. Is that what Paul's saying here, that you're working for an earthly master, but work for your earthly master as if it was the Lord? It's not, but as if it was. Well, I don't think that does justice either to what Paul is saying. Rather, what Paul is saying, or what I would suggest he is saying, is that he is recognizing that as workers, in the case of his original audience, the slaves, but applying it to ourselves, as workers, we have both earthly masters and the Lord as our supreme master. And as we work, we are to work principally for our supreme master. We are to work principally with a view to his opinion and his authority. Now, in so doing, we will, of course, render dutiful and excellent service to earthly masters. If as Christians we work principally for the Lord, conscious that he is the one we are principally serving, then inevitably the work that we do will be of a high standard and the best for our earthly masters who also have a measure of authority over us. I wonder how such a perspective that is being presented to us, how such a perspective or motivation in working could help us. Well, when we appreciate or when we are clear that we are working principally for the Lord, we are able to recognize that we are working for one who is himself, one who has worked for us. Our Lord has done his great work on our behalf. We are the beneficiaries of our Lord's work for us. And so for us, it's a matter of great privilege that we can work for him as we think of all that he has done and continues to do for us. Our master, if you wish, is very much a working master. And that makes a lot of difference in the attitude we have. I remember I had a summer job in Dornach many moons ago at the Forestry Commission and it involved working at the nursery just outside Dornach. And the boss would occasionally wander around supervising, I suppose, the summer staff. And one of his favorite wee phrases as he would wander up and down was, are you winning boys? Are you winning? And then he would carry on and he'd be back an hour later. But he never got down and actually worked with us. All he did was come along and ask us, are you winning? Are you winning? And well, that was his prerogative, I guess, as a boss.

[23 : 01] But I think we have a lot more warmth towards and respect for a boss who also we perceive to be and recognize to be one who works hard as well, who works with all his heart. Well, when we recognize that we're working for the Lord, then we know that it is such a master that we work for. And we're working also for one who is, we know, a loving master. Now, for the slaves that Paul is speaking to, this would have been particularly helpful when for some of them, not for all of them, after all these are slaves who were part of a Christian community, although admittedly many of them may not have had Christian masters, but some of them may have had masters who were harsh with them and dealt unfairly with them.

And so, for them to be reminded in the midst of difficult circumstances that ultimately the work that they are doing is for a master who is loving and for a master who is just would have been, I'm sure, an encouragement to them. Moving swiftly on, and we're drawing things to a close now, Paul here also answers the question, what reward will we receive? There in verse 24 he says, having stressed that we are to work for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward, the reward that we'll receive. Allow me to suggest one reward, if we can call it that, that Paul does not mention, but that I think it's worth mentioning or suggesting.

A reward of taking seriously what Paul says here and doing all that we do, all the work that we do, with all our heart. And I think one reward in the here and now is a much happier life.

To work in the way instructed by Paul makes everything we do meaningful and satisfying. However seemingly trivial or mundane the task, if we do it in the manner that Paul instructs us, it very, in a very real way, it transforms what we're doing. And so instead of spending half your life or 80% of your life bored because what you're doing is so tedious and because you don't really enjoy it and you'd rather be doing something else, but you've got to do it because you need the money to then do the stuff that you really want to do. And so of all your life, only a small portion is that part that you actually enjoy and take any kind of satisfaction in. If we adopt the instruction that Paul gives, it transforms everything. And we can live a much happier life, a much more satisfied life, a much more meaningful life. Because everything we do takes on a meaning that it doesn't have otherwise. And that in itself is, if you wish, a reward or in any case a very happy consequence of what Paul is teaching. But of course Paul does explicitly speak of a reward. He speaks there of the inheritance that you will receive from the Lord as a reward. Well, what is this inheritance that Paul is describing as a reward? I think it is worth just noting that the manner in which Paul expresses himself is, he says there in verse 24, in introducing this matter of receiving this inheritance, that little phrase where he says, since you know that you will receive, the idea is knowing that you will receive. And I think we should distinguish that from in order that you might receive. There isn't so much the sense of, well, if you work really hard, then you'll receive. But work really hard knowing that you will receive. There's no doubt as to receiving or not receiving the reward. But work in the knowledge that this reward is yours. And he speaks of the inheritance. Now, the language of inheritance is language that Paul has already used in this letter, and that can instruct us or can cast light on this for us. So, in chapter 1 of Colossians in verse 12, we read, and we're really interrupting into a sentence, but we'll do that, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. And indeed, in 1 Peter, something that we looked at a few weeks ago, this language of inheritance is also found, and I think is, again, cast some light on this reward that Paul is speaking of in 1 Peter chapter 1 and from verse 3, praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His great mercy, He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you. And again, if we think of his original audience especially, Paul's original audience of slaves, some of them in very difficult circumstances, and it's as if Paul is saying, listen, however tough your lot is today, and for many it was very tough, however unrewarded you are today for all your efforts, be assured and be confident that there is a reward that you will enjoy, that's kept for you, that's guarded for you, as it is for all the saints. Be assured of that. Finally, in the light of all this, what are we to do? Well, I think the final words of verse 24 are a fitting way to draw to a close what we're saying. What are we to do? Well, what does it say there at the end of verse 24? It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Now, it's interesting that the language that Paul uses here can be understood and legitimately either in the way that it's translated as an indicative in the sense of a statement, it is the Lord Christ you are serving, but it could also be translated quite correctly as an imperative, as a command, in which case what

[29 : 16] Paul is saying there at the end of verse 24 is, serve the Lord Christ. So, having given this instruction concerning work and how we are to work and who we work for, Paul then says to his hearers, serve the Lord Christ. Just do it now. Do it. Serve Him. That's what you ought to do. That's what I'm saying should be your perspective in everything you do. Well, now do it. Serve the Lord Christ. And, of course, that is a fitting imperative, a fitting command for us. As we, perhaps some of us, return to work following a time of rest. As we return to work, be it in our homes or in our workplace, as parents, as children, as pupils, as students, whatever it is, let's take on board this command that is directed to us. Serve the Lord Christ in all that we do and do so with all our hearts. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we come to you. We come confessing that we do fall short, so far short in this matter, in this very practical matter where you give us instruction in the work that we do. We confess that sometimes we do do what we do far from the manner in which you direct us to. We don't do what we do with all our hearts. And we pray that you would forgive us for that and help us to see how we are missing out that to grasp and to live our lives in the way that Paul instructs us will indeed inject into our lives and in all that we do so much more meaning and purpose and satisfaction. And so, we pray that in this week that has begun, even as we think of what tomorrow holds, that you would help us to take these truths and this instruction and very methodically and

very carefully apply them to what tomorrow holds, so that whatever we're doing tomorrow, whatever work awaits us, whatever activity is before us, that we would endeavor with your help to do it with all our hearts, recognizing that principally all that we do, we do in the service of yourself. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, let's close our service singing, and we'll sing words that we find in Psalm 90 in the Scottish Psalter on page 350. Psalm 90, it will sing from verse 14 through to the end of the Psalm, and we'll sing these verses to the tune, Wetherby. O with thy tender mercies, Lord, us early satisfy, so we rejoice shall all our days, and still be glad in thee. Singing on through to the end of the Psalm, and we'll stand to sing.

O with thy tender mercies, Lord, us early satisfy, so we rejoice in this, and we'll sing His love has early satisfied.

So we rejoice, shall all our days, and still be glad in Thee.

[33 : 04] According as the days have been, wherein we grief have heard, and hills wherein we e'er are seen, so do Thou make us glad.

O let Thy work and power appear, Thy servants face before, and show us who, their children dear, Thy glory evermore.

And let the beauty of the Lord, our God be as a home.

Our heavy works establish now, establish them each one.

Amen. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always.

[35 : 17] Amen.