

## Jobs – Where We Do What We Do

There are three standard questions that we Americans ask each other in order to get acquainted: “What is your name?”; “Where do you live?”; “What do you do?”. In fact, for many people, the most important question of all is, “What do you do?” — as though all of life is defined in terms of job or occupation. We pick up with great interest the list in the newspaper or *Forbes* or *Money Magazine* that tells which are the most prestigious jobs in America — what the starting pay is for each position and the median and the high. In fact, all I need to do is list six different occupations and it’s a safe guess that you will have an automatic rating system for the prestige and pay of all six of them: the CEO of a Fortune 100 company, a public school teacher, a neurosurgeon, a used car sales person, a migrant worker, a movie star.

There’s no doubt about it, in America our jobs seem to say so much about us. We define ourselves so many times in terms of our occupations that our job has become one of life’s most important relationships. Of all of your waking hours in life, if you are a typical American, sixty percent of them will be spent on the job. We do our work more than any other single thing in all of life. If relationships at work are good, it goes a long way to making life pretty good. And if relationships at work are bad, that can spoil much of the rest of life.

The Bible says a great deal about this. It gives great advice on how Christians can relate to our jobs. What the Bible does not do is make a big deal out of job titles or job descriptions.

The emphasis is not so much upon what we do as how we do it.

Take a look with me at Colossians 3:22-4:1. Paul, the author, wrote the words to a different time and a different culture, but they cover the whole range of all of the jobs in society from slave to master. He says,

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 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. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism.*

*Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in Heaven.”*

The universal questions are about job, work, boss and pay.

In this past year there was a party at the home of a family from Wooddale Church and they invited mostly other people from the church. We were all asked in advance to fill out a form requesting our name and our answer to the question, “If you could have any job in the world, what would you choose?” As we arrived at the party everyone was given the list of all the occupations chosen and you had to go around and match up which name went with which choice of occupation.

I wanted to choose something they wouldn’t guess, so I put down, “Pastor of Wooddale Church,” thinking that was really creative. I figured they’d never think I was that stupid that I’d pick the job I already had.

We went to the party and there were only a few people that got them all right, but everybody guessed correctly on mine! One guy even came up to me at the end the exercise and said, “Ya know how I knew

it was you?” I said, “No, how did you know?” He said, “Cause I can’t imagine anybody else in the world who would

want to do what you do.” Nice thought!

Of all the choices on that list, nobody wrote down “slave.” Who would want to be a slave who is owned by another person and has to obey whatever your owner says? But, come to think of it, no one wrote down “master” either — although it would seem to be a much better job than being a slave. All you’d have to do is speak your whim, snap you fingers, give a signal and twenty-four hours a day, three hundred sixty-five days of the year, the people you own would do whatever you tell them to do. They would have no choice, no other option.

***...whatever your present position, assume that you’re there because God cares. He’s involved in your life.***

There's an underlying assumption in the Bible that whatever job we have in the whole range from slave to master, we should assume that God has called us to that job and that we should live our Christianity in that occupation. Even slavery! That's a very different approach from common thinking in America where we assume that the only way we will ever be happy and fulfilled in life is if we do exactly what we are wired to do and want to do.

Does that mean that the Bible is telling us that if we have a terrible job we have to stay with it until we retire — for the rest of our working life?

I want to show you something really interesting about this. 1 Corinthians 7:20-24 speaks directly to this issue.

*Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you — although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.*

This passage is talking especially to the new Christian who is told to stay in whatever job he or she had when becoming a Christian. But it's also saying that if you can get a better deal, then go for it! Let's say you're a slave in the 1st century and your master becomes a Christian and offers you your freedom — you should take it! In other words, the Bible is saying whatever your present position, assume that you're there because God cares. He's involved in your life. That's where God has put you and you should stick it out unless God provides an opportunity for something better. Now obviously that doesn't mean you should continue in doing something that is evil or wrong. It doesn't apply to professional bank robbers and Mafia hitmen and things like that! But it is to say that when we have a position that is in the normal range of human occupations, that we should live out the call of Jesus Christ in that context.

The Bible advises: "Whatever you do, work at it with all you heart as working for the Lord, not for men." (Colossians 3:23). In other words, whatever the job, whether slave or master, migrant worker or

CEO, it is not so much the job that is important, it is how we do the work that we do in the job that we have.

William Barclay, a Scotsman, tells a fascinating story about a man who was negotiating to buy a house and because of circumstances he never actually went to see the house. The day came for the closing and he actually signed all the papers and bought the house, site unseen. A friend and business advisor told him that that was a strange and excessive risk for him to take. When asked why he took such a risk he answered, "Yes, but I know the man who built the house and he builds his Christianity in with the bricks."

As Christians, we are to work Christianly no matter what we do. Our jobs are a primary means for us to flesh out, to live out, to work out all that it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Christianity is not primarily something that we do when we gather together with other Christians on a Sunday morning. What being a Christian is all about is how a person builds a house, or answers the phone, or manages the home, or programs the computer, or treats the patient, or manages the apartments, or deals with difficult customers, or teaches the students, or works at the job of finding a job during unemployment.

1 Corinthians 10:31 says, "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." The "glory of God" refers to God's reputation. Whatever the job I do, my job is to enhance the reputation of God in the way I do that job.

Some of us may hold the most menial and unpleasant of jobs in society and therein we have the opportunity to show heaven and earth the way a Christian lives and works to make God look good in the worst of circumstances. And there are some of us who have among the most prestigious and comfortable jobs in all of America and it is our opportunity to show heaven and earth the way a Christian lives and works to make God look good in the best of circumstances.

Some may say, "You don't know my job. For one thing, I am so under-employed. My education and my background and my experience make me overqualified for what I am doing. And the people with whom I work are anything but Christian; they are anti-Christian in many of the things they say and do. My job is really tough!"

Set the thoughts of your job aside for a minute

and imagine with me what it was like for Jesus in the carpenter shop in Nazareth. He probably spent most of his time building cabinets for the homes of the people in his community — cabinets and perhaps wooden yokes for oxen that were used to plow the farmers' fields. In his previous job he used to make stars and planets and universes and mountains and trees, sunsets and sunrises. He was highly overqualified for working in a carpenter shop. He went from Master Creator to apprentice carpenter. But I suspect that what he did in both of his jobs was to work well to make God the Father look good, to enhance his reputation. He made God look good with his creation of mountains and galaxies and magnificent sunsets and he also made God look good in the sturdy chairs and well-constructed tables and yokes that he made. As Christians our model is Jesus. Whatever we do, wherever we do it — let us do it like Jesus.

We are going through a profound restructuring of business in America. With downsizing and mergers, acquisitions and lay-offs and the rapid high-tech advance of the industry of western civilization, we can no longer count upon or really even expect that there's any possibility that we will have lifetime employment in a company. Peter Drucker says that what we are now seeing in America is the move to functional self-employment. At best, we are all just temporary employees of businesses and really work for ourselves — it is our own responsibility.

People complain that they work most of the year for the government just to pay their taxes. Many are slaves to debt. They feel that between their mortgage and credit card debt, who they work for most of the days of the year is the bank or the credit card companies. And then there are some loyal employees who say they work for their manager. The most important thing for them is to make their boss happy.

Imagine, instead, tomorrow when you go to work, that Jesus is your boss. For he is really the only boss a Christian worker has to please. Think of it this way: Jesus got me the job so nobody can fire me without his approval. Jesus is the boss and he is delighted when I serve him well but disappointed when I mess up. Jesus is one hundred percent committed to my success. He wants me to be

both effective ( doing the right things) and efficient (doing them the right way). Jesus is my boss and his reputation is on the line when I answer the phone, design a product, balance a ledger, tutor a child, fly an airplane or anything else that I do. Jesus is the kind of boss who wants me to learn and grow, who stays close enough to help and supervise, but who lets me go out to develop my independent creativity without reining me in too much. He's committed to my success. He trusts me enough to give me hard assignments — things that I would never want, working with people that I would never choose — because he knows that's good for me. He is a great boss to work for!

And, he pays well. One of the basic rules of a job interview is that your first question should not be about the pay. There's a subtle transaction that goes on when you're being interviewed. You're supposed to convince the employer to like you and if he does, then let him bring up how much the pay is. It's not that we don't care — it's just that's the protocol through which we go.

Colossians 3:24 told those 1st century Christians to work for boss Jesus, "since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward." Now God knows that pay isn't everything. Much research has been done that shows if somebody is extremely well paid yet they hate their job, the money is not enough. In fact, there are a lot of people who will switch jobs and take a pay cut in

order to increase other aspects of job satisfaction. But God also knows that we like to get good rewards. He's the one who created us — he knows how we think and how we func-

tion — and he promises to benefit us by sharing his wealth with us.

No one is richer than God. He pays very well. He gives to us an inheritance. Inheritances generally are deferred income — they are a ways off, like in Heaven. But inheritances can also begin paying out early, can be distributed here and now.

A man I know very well was offered a job in Minnesota some years ago for an organization twice the size of where he currently worked. He was somewhat disappointed when the new employer never asked him his current salary. He was simply of-

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ferred a salary package and it was really never discussed. It was kind of take it or leave it. What his potential employer did not know is that it was just one hundred dollars more than the man's current job. He made a decision to take the new job for virtually the same pay and moved half way across the country for it. And it didn't quite make sense. But when he was asked how he made that decision, he said that he made the decision not on the basis of the numbers but on the basis of his expectations. He was convinced that his new employer, far more than his old one, would do what was right, would give regular raises and in the long run he would be far better off.

Now the same goes for our pay when we work for Jesus. It may seem at times as if we could do better if we worked for ourselves. If we did it the wrong way instead of Jesus' way we might be ahead at least for the short term. But if you really trust Jesus to be the good and great God and Savior that he is, you come to the conclusion that you are working for someone whose resources are unlimited. His love and concern are unmatched, his inheritance for us in heaven is infinite and his grace to us here on earth is always adequate. And so we need not worry, for we can always trust Jesus to do what is fair and good and right.

I would like you to imagine with me God calling a meeting of all Christians. He's up front and he's telling his vision for the future of the world. It's pretty exciting. He tells that he dreams of having his representatives in every country of the globe. We will represent him and work together with him to accomplish his great purposes for humankind.

Then God starts making assignments. The excitement is running high. He says, "This group over here goes to Germany; you over here are assigned to France. That group goes to Belize and this section, you go to the USA." There is a group that goes to the People's Republic of China and another group that is assigned to Bolivia. He divides us all up all around the world.

The USA section he then divides up by states. Some are assigned to Mississippi, some to Montana and Missouri and some end up in the Minnesota group. From this group some are sent to Thief River Falls, some to Willmar, some to Duluth, some to Worthington. And then he assigns about half of that group to live in the seven county metropolitan area of Minneapolis/St. Paul.

We are in that group and our group meets with God and he explains that now that we have our territory, we are to work for God to demonstrate what it means to be a Christian in all the different circumstances of life. He tells us, "I want you to represent my son, your Savior Jesus, and show everybody what it's like to be a Christian independent of the varying circumstances. I would like some of you to live with superlative health and show the world that even though you are strong and healthy you still depend upon Jesus. Others of you I'm going to trust with pain and a prognosis that is at best uncertain, so that you can show faithfulness to me even when you do not have what everybody desires. To some of you I am going to give great wealth so you can show everybody that it won't turn you head or your heart. And then there are some of you who will live on the edge of poverty so that you can show the world that you are still loyal and faithful and that you have a joy that transcends even the things that you do not have. Some will have difficult marriages, others romantic delights. Some will have children and some will be childless. I want to be represented everywhere."

Finally, God assigns us to specific jobs. Contractor. Store manager. Homemaker. Physician. Counselor. Stockbroker. Volunteer. Accountant. Designer. Teacher. Writer. Self-employed and unemployed.

What's your assignment? What did you get? What matters most is not the job you got. What matters most is the work you do and the boss you serve so that whatever your job, do it well as an employee of God, as a representative of Jesus Christ. Whether a slave or a master, "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

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