

## **The Sufficiency of Christ at Work**

**Colossians 3:22-4:1**

Bryan Clark

Several years ago, Studs Terkel wrote a book called *Working*.<sup>1</sup> The subtitle is, *People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. It's really a compilation of stories from interviews about people and their hopes and their dreams and what they experience at work. There are a couple of courageous stories. Most of them are very depressing and very discouraging.

But what struck me about the book was what the author said in his introduction. He states:

This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.

The scars, psychic as well as physical, brought home to the supper table and the TV set, may have touched, malignantly, the soul of our society....It is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash,....in short, for a sort of a life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.<sup>2</sup>

Now that's a rather depressing overview of work. As a matter of fact, if you think about the fact that work represents basically one-third of your life as an adult, and if you're figuring your actual conscious hours, it's about half of your conscious life as an adult. You really have to ask the question: Is it supposed to be like that? I think, from the things I've read, it represents pretty much how people feel about one-half of their conscious life as adults.

Now I think that's probably a very complex issue, and it flows from many things. One of the things is people just aren't necessarily in a role that fits their talent or their giftedness. One study shows 70% of people in the workforce are in a role that simply doesn't fit their talent—how they're wired up—so they're miserable all day.

I think another reason is because people have a very bad theology of work. And I think that comes from a couple of different directions. One is I think people think work is a result of the Fall, and we look forward to this day in Paradise when we'll be sitting on a cloud doing nothing forever.

Well, I hate to spoil that for you, but if that's your view of eternity, you are sadly mistaken because the Bible is clear that in eternity we will work, because work is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. It's what gives life meaning and purpose as it flows out of our relationship with God. You can go all the way back to Genesis 2 in a place that God Himself referred to as Paradise, before sin ever entered into the picture, Adam and Eve had work to do. And it was meaningful and fulfilling to them. We work because God works, and that's a part of what it means to be made in the image of God.

Now, clearly after the Fall work became more difficult, and clearly it will be different for eternity. But still, work is a very noble, fulfilling thing as it reflects what it means to be made in the image of God.

But I think we also have a bad theology of work when we start to divide the world up into that which is sacred and that which is secular. And we get it in our heads that doing ministry is maybe serving in the youth ministry or something like that. But forty hours a week I'm just kind of putting in my time to get a paycheck. And there's where we make a tremendous mistake. The fact of the matter is in God's economy, there is no secular and there is no sacred. Everything is sacred when God penetrates it. Those forty or fifty hours a week at work are ministry hours. They are kingdom-building hours, if we choose to view it that way. That's what we want to talk about now.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to Colossians, chapter 3. We have been working our way through the Book of Colossians. We have just a couple of weeks left to go, and the big theme is the sufficiency of Christ, which means that Jesus is sufficient. He's adequate for our every need. Whatever our need is, whatever our longing is, whatever is going on in our life today, Jesus is big enough. And as we come to grips with that, it dramatically changes how we live our daily lives.

Paul has warned us about the dangers of legalism and the effect that has on our walk with God. And then we created this metaphor as we began to get more practical with this great doctrine. The metaphor was the idea of clothing, and everything that this world has to offer us that supposedly will satisfy us or make us happy or fulfilled is like an article of clothing. We try on these different articles of clothing to somehow find what we're looking for.

So we imagined a large warehouse and in that warehouse are all these articles of clothing—the stuff that the world offers that will somehow make us happy. And what Paul says is that one time in your life, you thought there was something in that warehouse—if you could find the right size, the right color—it would somehow make you happy. But now through the teaching of Colossians, he has convinced you that actually there is nothing in that warehouse that will satisfy. You can only be satisfied through the person of Jesus Christ. He is the only One who is sufficient. Therefore, we take off the old articles of clothing and put on the new articles of clothing that are in Christ.

The closure of that particular discussion then moves to verse 17 of Chapter 3 when he says, **“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.”** That's another way of saying if you really believe in the sufficiency of Christ, then every area of your life should reflect that belief. And then he really gets practical and says, “Okay, let's talk about what that looks like in the most ordinary places of your life.”

So last week we talked about what does the sufficiency of Christ look like between a husband and a wife and between parents and children. This week we want to talk about what that looks like at work. How does this change how we view what we do every day out in the marketplace?

We pick it up in verse 22 with a discussion about slaves and masters, which creates some questions we probably need to address right from the beginning because one of the challenges we often have with the New Testament writers is, *Why don't they say something about slavery? At times, it seems like they really don't care; and at other times, it even seems like they're kind of endorsing slavery.* And that's the case with this passage. What Paul essentially is going to say is, “Slaves, be really

good slaves. Masters, be really good masters.” And it leaves us with the question, *What’s the deal with that? I mean do they really embrace the idea of slavery?*

And the answer to that question is: Of course not. Clearly, God in the Bible opposes the concept of slavery. But you have to understand the first century culture, and I think we learn something by the first century approach to changing the culture. In the Roman Empire was built on slavery. Roughly fifty percent of the people walking down the street were slaves. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 60 million people were slaves. Slaves in the first century were doctors; they were teachers; they were craftsmen. They fulfilled almost every role in society, and it was really the heart and soul of the Roman Empire.

Slaves were considered to be property. They were often mistreated. A master could do as he pleased with his slave. Nobody was going to question that or hold him accountable. So it was still a very miserable way to live, but was part of the society.

Now, I suppose that Paul and the other New Testament writers could have tried to start a revolution—some sort of a social revolution to try to turn over slavery. The fact of the matter was they would have stood no chance against the powerful Roman government. But it goes deeper than that. The reality is both Jesus and the New Testament writers understood that the ultimate revolution is through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and anything the church does that creates obstacles to the proclamation of the gospel is a strategy that’s going backward instead of forward. So the understanding was if slaves become the best slaves, if masters become the best masters, people will begin to see the difference Jesus makes. And through that the gospel is proclaimed; the society is changed; and slavery would be overthrown.

It’s very important, I believe, for us to think about that. We’re obviously in a very highly-charged political season, and there’s a lot of intensity out there in the culture. And I’ve issued this warning before (some of you are probably wishing I’d stop saying it), but I have a high level of concern that we allow ourselves as the church to become way too politically charged to the point where people will no longer listen to us when we proclaim the message of the gospel. We have to be very careful that we do not put obstacles between us and the people around us for the proclamation of the gospel.

Thirty years ago or so, the Christian movement was much more organized politically. It had to do with Jerry Falwell and the moral majority, and it was much more of a large organization. And at the end of the day you’d have to say very little was accomplished.

But it looks very different today—30 years later. Most of the political energy is not in an organization like the moral majority. I think it happens around the water cooler in the marketplace. With the advent of the politics in the media, with cable TV and all the talk shows and talk radio and all of that that’s going on, it’s become much more centralized around the water cooler. And that’s where these highly charged conversations happen.

And what ends up happening is people in the marketplace get to a point where they despise one another. Some even hate one another because of these political views. And the energy gets really intense. And it’s easy for us as Christians to think we’re supposed to take our stand on these social issues. So we stand up and we enter into the debate and we say what we have to say, and nobody is talking to one another. And we think, *Well, that’s the result of taking our stand, and I’ll take my persecution, and I’ve done the job for God.*

But, in my opinion, what happens at the water cooler looks very much like an episode of *Hannity and Colmes*, and that is that everybody's saying something very loudly. No one is listening. And at the end of the day, nothing of substance has been accomplished. We're fooling ourselves if we think we've really accomplished something. We've just kind of vented and gotten something off our chest. But ultimately the likelihood that those people will listen to us when we talk about Jesus is greatly diminished. Now if we think that at the end of the day government and politics are the solution, then that's a good strategy. But if ultimately you believe that the sufficiency of Jesus is the answer, that's a bad strategy.

I would say it like this: Anything that comes out of your mouth that makes it less likely that people will listen to the proclamation of the gospel is bad strategy. First and foremost, the strategy is to create an environment where we can have a meaningful discussion with lost people that they might come to know Jesus, because until Jesus changes the hearts of the people in our culture, no significant, lasting change can be legislated.

That is exactly the first century strategy for overthrowing slavery. So Paul here is not endorsing slavery. He is not saying he agrees with it. But what he understands is if you are the best slave you can be, and you are the best master you can be, it will be such a radical testimony to the life-changing power of Jesus that eventually the gospel will be proclaimed. People's hearts will be changed. And slavery will be abolished. And that's exactly what transpired.

So with that in mind, let's dig into the text here. Verse 22:

**Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth.** (Colossians 3:22; \*NASB)

Now, there is not a direct correlation (although some of you may feel there is) between slavery and employment, but that's as close as we're going to come. The principles that have to do with slaves and masters certainly have application to us as employees and employers. And that is the way we're going to apply this. "Obey in all things (of course, unless it's immoral or illegal, they're expected to obey) those who are your masters on earth." Literally, the Greek is "your masters in the flesh."

One of the dangers, when we talk about the sufficiency of Christ, is to push that to the point where we say as Christians, "I answer to no one but God." And that's a very popular refrain in this Western, individualized and isolated Christian culture. We tend to think, *Christianity is just between me and God. And I'm a church unto myself. And this is just some place I attend once a week.* Well, we have to understand that's really a very unbiblical view. From Genesis to Revelation, it's always about the people of God together and who we are as a community of faith.

It's very easy if I disagree with my employer at work, if I disagree with the government, if I disagree with my church to say, "At the end of the day, I answer only to God." So where I disagree, I do my own thing. My question to you would be: Where does the Bible say that? Because over and over and over again, the New Testament writers are very clear that is not true. God has put structures of authority in place on earth. And we as Christians, unless what we're being asked to do is illegal or immoral, are expected to obey.

There are many things in the government I don't agree with, but if it isn't illegal or immoral I am expected to obey. I do not have the right to say, "I answer only to God, and I can do my own thing."

The same is true within the context of the church. God has put spiritual authority over you. You may not agree with everything. Frankly, as the senior pastor, I don't agree with everything. Every single person in this room could find something within this church you disagree with. Hey, welcome to the club! But God has clearly put in place spiritual authority. And unless it's illegal or immoral, you're expected to submit yourself to the authority over you. That's God's plan.

The same would be true then in your employment. As an employee, you may not always agree with the decisions of your employer. But unless it's illegal or immoral, as long as you've submitted yourself to that employer, you're expected to obey in all things.

Now, the phrase **"in all things"** is exactly the same phrase that is used of children obeying their parents in all things. Just as I said last week, it's very hypocritical if a parent expects a child to obey in all things, but that parent isn't willing to be equally as submissive out in the marketplace or to the government or to the local church. We should, as parents, be the model of what we're asking our children to do.

**Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.** (vs. 22-23)

When he says, **"...with external service,"** the Greek there is "with eye service." Literally, what he's saying is that men-pleasers (and we all know these people in the workforce) are people that work really hard when the boss is watching, and they slough off when the boss isn't there. They've made a science out of when they need to work and when not to work. And they're doing that to be seen by the boss.

But Paul is calling us to a higher standard and saying we shouldn't operate that way. There should be no difference in how we respond to work, whether the boss is watching or not, because ultimately the boss we answer to is God. And God sees us 24/7. Therefore, out of respect for God and who He is, we seek to give our best all the time.

He says, **"...with sincerity of heart."** We might translate that "with integrity in our hearts." If we're going to take an hour's worth of pay, then with integrity we should work an hour's worth of work. That's just simply the right thing to do. And **"...fearing the Lord,"** in other words, respecting the fact that ultimately God is the boss.

Verse 23:

**Whatever you do, do your work heartily** [we would maybe translate this "enthusiastically"] **as for the Lord rather than for men.**

So we are to do what we do to the best of our ability because ultimately we answer to God.

Now, if statistics are correct, they would indicate that we have a tremendous opportunity to be a light for Jesus in the marketplace. In a book called, *The Day America Told the Truth*<sup>3</sup>, one of the statistics was that only one out of every four people in the marketplace gives their best at work. So, roughly if we're average, then 25% of us give the best that we have; the other 75% of us slough off, so we're getting paid for something that we aren't actually doing.

The book went on to say that the average person wastes 20% of an 8-hour day. If you do the math, that means that you're getting paid for a 5-day workweek, but you're only working a 4-day workweek, which in essence would be stealing from your employer. Now, if that's the case, there is dramatic room for improvement. If it is true that that is what is happening in the marketplace (and we have every reason to believe that it is), then if there are those who work differently, who conduct themselves differently, it would be a dramatic difference—which would be an opportunity to declare that Jesus affects us in the most practical, everyday places in our lives.

Now, how do we do that? I mean, what would be the motivation? We've already talked about the fact that God is ultimately the boss. So whether the fleshly boss or earthly boss is there or not is irrelevant. God is there, and that's what He is asking of us out of the integrity of our hearts. But it's also based on what we know. Verse 24:

**...knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.** (vs. 24-25)

What he is saying in verse 24 is going back to what we have learned in Colossians and now knowing what we know, that we are going to receive the inheritance. This has to do with the fact that God has promised us a glorious future. It has to do with Christ is our sufficiency. It has to do with the fact that we've gone from darkness to light. Everything that's true of us now in Christ. Knowing that's true and that is now ours in Christ should dramatically change the way we conduct ourselves in the marketplace.

Think of it this way: Let's go back to our warehouse. If I am convinced that what's in that warehouse ultimately is what's going to make me happy, ultimately going to satisfy me, ultimately going to give me what I need, and I'm convinced that my employer somehow is blocking me from getting what I need (My employer doesn't pay me enough; therefore, I can't afford the clothes I need that will make me happy or the stuff of this world), it frustrates me. It makes me angry, and it creates this certain mindset toward my employer. And because of that, I am able to justify that I don't have to give my best. I don't have to work a full eight hours. I don't really have to obey the rules. I don't have to do what he's asked me to do because he/she's been unfair to me. I don't think the salary is fair. I don't think the benefits are fair. On and on and on we go, and we've convinced ourselves because all of that's true, I can give less than my best and it's okay. All of that flows out of bitterness because we believe what's in that warehouse is what we need, and my employer is in the way. And if my employer were different, I would be happier.

But once we have come to grips with the fact that there is nothing in that warehouse that ultimately will make me happy, but that it is found in the sufficiency of Christ and I have everything I need in Jesus (My employer cannot block that from me.), now that creates a completely different attitude. And I am able now because of the sufficiency of Christ to conduct myself in a different way in order to be a light and a testimony to the difference Jesus makes in me. And if the statistics are correct, it would be a dramatic difference between our behavior as followers of Christ and the behavior of others around us.

For a slave to hear this talk about inheritance was really quite radical. A slave understood that he or she stood no chance of receiving the inheritance. It would always go to the son. What the slave received was always punishment, a raw deal, unfair treatment. But what they could never receive was the inheritance.

Of course, Paul is turning that all upside down and saying, “Wait a minute! Now in Christ you are receiving the inheritance, and you do have a glorious future. And because all that is true and is coming from your ultimate boss, it really ought to change the way you conduct yourselves at work.”

The other reality of the life of a slave is they never got a fair shake in anything. And that is why he says in verse 25 that at the end of the day, those who have done wrong will suffer the consequences of doing wrong, without partiality. No question, the masters always had the upper hand. They could blame anything on the slaves. They could treat their slaves in any way, and there was never anything the slave could do about it. So they always felt like life was going to give them the raw deal and there was nothing they could do to change that.

But Paul is reminding us, “Wait a minute! At the end of the day, God is the boss, and ultimately God is the judge. And one day all of that will be sorted out. And wrong will be wrong, and right will be right; and there will be no partiality! The masters, the rich, the powerful will not have an advantage with God. So if you believe that, then just trust God and do your part, and God will sort it out at the end.” That’s in essence what he’s saying.

Chapter 4, verse 1:

**Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.**

This again is radical language. As I mentioned before, a master could do as he pleased with a slave. There was no law; there was no consequence. As a matter of fact, what would have been expected of the master would have been to squeeze every ounce of work out of a slave. That was just standard procedure. Anything less than that would have been considered to be poor management for the master. No one probably had ever said to one of these masters, even as Christians, that the expectation is that you be fair and just. So this is raising the bar in a way these masters had never heard before.

It reminds us that just because something is considered to be acceptable in our culture, just because something is the way our industry does it, doesn’t make it right. There are things you can do in the marketplace that are legal, but they are not morally right. It’s very easy as Christians to say that’s just the way our industry operates. That may be the way your industry operates, but that’s not the way God operates. And at the end of the day, we’re called to a higher standard—that we do what is right; we do what is just; we do what is fair.

There is a reminder in this verse that the masters have a Master. It’s kind of like what we talked about last week—that parents should parent their children the way God parents us. It’s the same idea that we as managers, we as leaders, should manage and lead our people the way God manages and leads us.

If you are a boss, if you are an employer, if you’re a manager, you need to ask the question: Do you really want to be treated by God the way you treated your people this week—because that’s the reminder in verse 1—that the masters have a Master, and they should master their people the way God masters them. It’s a very sobering reminder.

Let’s go back to the warehouse. If I as an employer, if I as a manager or a supervisor or a boss, believe there’s something in that warehouse that will ultimately make me happy, that will ultimately

satisfy, that will ultimately lead to what I'm looking for, then it's going to dramatically affect how I treat the people I lead. It's going to affect how I treat the people I manage, because I'm convinced that those people who work for me are in my way. If they worked better, if they worked harder, if they worked differently, if they were more successful, that would mean more success for me or more money for me. And ultimately it would get me what I need in the warehouse. So I believe that my people are what is blocking me from ultimately what I need, and that affects then how I treat them. But if I understand that my sufficiency is in Christ, there is nothing in that warehouse that ultimately gives me what I need; therefore, I get what I need in Jesus, it dramatically affects how I am able to manage, supervise, and lead the people that I oversee in the marketplace.

The reality of this text is if the marketplace is that bad, if it's that discouraging, if Studs Terkel's description is accurate, there are two things that are true: One is it's a very discouraging, depressing place, and two, it may be our greatest opportunity for witness as a church.

There's a story that's told—I don't know if it's true or not but it's been around for years—of two shoe salesmen who went to India. After being there a period of time, one of them communicated back very discouraged. "Coming home; no one wears shoes." The other one sent back a communication very excited that said, "Send more shoes; no one wears shoes." One saw the discouragement. One saw the opportunity.

The fact of the matter is, if it is such a mess in the marketplace that may be our greatest opportunity to demonstrate the difference that Jesus makes.

Now there are several things to think about with that. One thing would be we have to be very careful as Christians not to create this "holy huddle". Around the marketplace the Christians kind of always huddle together and kind of remain isolated from the rest of the group. Some businesses only do business with other Christians in business, which I think is a huge mistake. I don't need a Christian doctor. I don't need a Christian plumber and a Christian electrician, and a Christian this and a Christian that. That's one of the best places I have to penetrate out into the community.

There is a temptation, when you do business with a fellow Christian to think, "*This person ought to give me a favor because he's a Christian.*" One of the discouraging things is that a lot of Christian business people would say the most difficult people to do business with are other Christians. They don't pay their bills. They're pretty sloppy on fulfilling their commitments. And there's this sense in which, "Hey, if we're fellow Christians, we cut each other a deal." What that Christian owes you is to be fair and just—nothing more, nothing less. But we really have to be careful of the "Christian Club". If you are an employer, don't just hire Christians in your place of employment. You are missing perhaps your greatest opportunity to demonstrate there's something different about us.

Wouldn't it be a remarkable thing if all over this city we decided to conduct ourselves as followers of Jesus differently, and that we give five days of work for five days of pay, that we seek to be the absolute best employee we could possibly be. And the people in the marketplace would say, "I don't know what's up with those Bereans. I think it's kind of a nutty cult, and I think their pastor's just kind of whacko. But I'll tell you this: I wish I had 20 more just like them working for me because they make the best employees."

And imagine what would happen in this city if all of our employers, all of our supervisors and managers conducted themselves in such a way that they treated people differently to the degree that

people would say, “I don’t really know what’s up with those Bereans, but I do know they are the best people in town to work for.” Imagine the possibility for presenting the truth of Jesus in the marketplace. That’s what the sufficiency of Christ looks like in one of the most practical arenas of our lives.

*Our Father, we are thankful that you are the ultimate Boss, the ultimate Master. Lord, You supervise, You manage, You lead, You guide us perfectly. Lord, for those of us who are leaders, supervisors, managers or bosses, may we give prayerful thought to how You have managed us, that we might so consistently manage others that we might be defined as being fair and just. Lord, I pray for those who are employees that they would seek to be absolutely the best employee they could possibly be, to give their best every day, enthusiastically, with integrity in their hearts, whether the environment is fair or not, because ultimately you are our Master. You are our Boss. You are our Supervisor. Lord, help us to remember we work for You. Lord, we have received an unimaginable inheritance. Lord, help us to really understand the sufficiency of Christ and what it looks like every day at work. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

<sup>1</sup>*Working* by Studs Terkel, (New York, New York Press), 1974.

<sup>2</sup>*Working*, p. xi.

<sup>3</sup>*The Day America Told the Truth* by James Patterson and Peter Kim, (New York, Prentice Hall) 1991.



## Study Questions

*Complete in Christ: A Study in the Book of Colossians*

### The Sufficiency of Christ at Work

**Colossians 3:22-4:1**

Pastor Bryan Clark

#### Opening Discussion

1. Studs Terkel in his book *Working* states: “This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us” (p. xi).

Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree? Does this statement reflect how most Americans view work? Why or why not?

2. What has been your own personal experience with work? Share both positives and negatives.
3. What do you think is an accurate “theology of work?”

#### Bible Study

1. Read Colossians 3:17, 22-4:1. What is the connection between 3:17 and the discussion about slaves and masters? There is not a direct correlation between slaves and masters and employees and employers. However, the general principles of the text would certainly apply to our lives at work.
2. What is the expectation of employees (slaves)? What would justify our doing less than our best at work? If you are paid to do your best at work and do less, is that stealing from your employer? Why or why not?
3. Statistics show the average person wastes 20% of the time he or she gets paid for. That means the average person is paid for 5 days of work and only really works 4. Do you think that is true?
4. If the statistic in question #3 is true, what are the possibilities for Christians to be a significant witness at work simply by having a better work ethic?

5. As a believer, the key to conducting oneself differently at work is to remind oneself of what we know according to 3:24, 25. What do we know and how does the sufficiency of Christ change how we view what we do at work each day?
6. What is the responsibility of employers (masters) according to 4:1? What does it mean to be just and fair?
7. Is there a difference in the marketplace between what is legal and what is morally right? Explain.

## **Application**

1. On a scale of 1-10 how would you rate yourself as an employee/employer? What specific things could you do to raise that score?
2. What practical things can you do to keep these important principles in mind as you go through your work week?
3. Does anyone in the group have an “I’m not sure what to do in this situation at work” question that the group might be able to help with? Sometimes we may want to do the right thing at work, but knowing what the right thing is gets complicated both for employees and employers.