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WHEN THE MAYONNAISE JAR BREAKS Colossians 3:22-4:1

Vincent Van Gogh said, “I put my heart and soul into my work, and have lost my mind in the process.” I suspect he’s not alone. I have a friend who gave his heart and soul to a corporation for 30 years. They recently informed him his services were no longer required and are showing him the door this month with just a few month’s severance pay to show for his loyalty and hard work.

Theodore Roosevelt said, “Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.” I would argue with him, for I believe there are some prizes in life that are better and more important, chiefly having to do with relationships. Nevertheless, it is true that having work worth doing is a good thing. My problem is how do you define what is worth doing?

In his book, *How To Find Fulfilling Work*, Roman Krznaric said there are 5 dimensions to meaning in work. They are earning money, achieving status, making a difference, following your passions and using your talents. What happens if you have a job that supplies exactly zero of those elements? While I was in school for a time I supported myself by working as a janitor. When it came to earning money it was a low end, barely above minimum wage job. As to status, of course everyone admires janitors and aspires to such a lofty position. Not. I guess you could say I made a difference because the offices I cleaned weren’t as dirty after I was done, but did that change the world? Did it change anyone’s life? No to both. In case you couldn’t guess, let me assure you it was not my passion to clean toilets. And I’d hate to think I was using my best talents when cleaning windows and vacuuming.

It is possible to have a job that provides no real rewards at all. How are we to see it as anything other than drudgery and resent it? Today we’re going to think together about work. We’re going to think about what God has to say about work and how we do it. Let’s look at Colossians 3:22-4:1.

OUR PERSPECTIVE MATTERS

For most of us there is something that immediately jumps out in these verses because of its absence. Paul told slaves to obey their masters in everything and he told masters to provide slaves with what is right. Why did he not address the evils of slavery? Why didn’t he tell masters to free their slaves? Why didn’t he tell the

slaves they were being denied their human rights? Why didn't he fight the evil of slavery?

Slaves really had no power and no way to fight against the injustice of their plight, but that doesn't mean Paul couldn't have spoken out against the injustice of it. He also could have told masters to be done with such an unfair system and to free their slaves. So the question is did Paul, and by extension, God, condone a system that we today believe to be abhorrent? Was slavery such a deeply ingrained part of their culture that Paul could not conceive of there being any other possibility?

Paul knew freedom was preferable to slavery. In 1 Corinthians 7:21 he wrote, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so." Gaining freedom was a good and desirable thing. Why doesn't the Bible attack the evils of slavery?

Genesis 1:27 says, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him." The repetition is important. It wasn't that the author was stuttering, nor was it there because he thought you were stupid and he'd better say it again lest you miss the point. Remember that when this was written writing materials were expensive. One did not waste costly ink and papyrus on throw away phrases. That repetition was the Hebrew way of putting an idea in bold font. It emphasizes it. The fact that verse 26 has God saying, "Let us make man in our image" makes the emphasis even stronger. The idea is repeated 3 times in 2 verses. It was like the author was putting a blazing spotlight on the idea that every human being is created in the image of God. This is not true of the majestic galaxies in the universe, nor of the beautiful trees in the forests up in the Sierras. It is not true of the magnificent dolphins frolicking in the oceans or of the most powerful and majestic lion. These things are created by God, and they are wondrous. But they are not made in the image of God. They are not like him and are not able to relate personally to him. Human beings, every single one of them are, and because of this they are of priceless value. Should the image of God be owned by another person? If we are equal and have equal rights, is it right for one person to own another? Clearly the answer is no. So the institution of slavery violates the very nature of humans in a biblical view.

In Matthew 7:12 Jesus said, "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." The Golden Rule, Jesus said, sums up all of God's will. Treat people the way you wish to be treated. Do you wish to be owned by another person? No. Then neither should you own them. Slavery violates the very heart of God's will.

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 we learn that whatever we do, if we do it without love, we are nothing. Can we say that the slave owner owns slaves out of love for them? Clearly no. He owns them because he loves himself and is serving his own interest. The right thing to do at all times, in any and every situation is to love people, and owning them, limiting their freedom, is not love. So there is no question that slavery is a violation of all that God commands us.

How are we to understand, then, the fact that there is no direct condemnation of slavery anywhere in the Bible, but in fact it seems to almost condone it. The astounding thing about God is he meets people where they are. He even allows them to do things that are not his will. It is in fact, this aspect of his character that allows us to be loved and to stand in his presence and worship him even though we are undeserving of those privileges. For instance, Jesus made it clear that from the beginning God's will in marriage is that the two would become one. Yet in the Old Testament you see even the patriarchs of Israel, the people of God, married to more than one woman. This was not his will. Yet God allowed it while pointing people to his will. Because he allows it does not mean he condones it.

Parents do the same thing. For instance, when Toby was in his middle school years we fought the battle of video games. There was a time where if he was given his way he and his buddies would have played those early video games 16 hours a day, with breaks only to sleep. Some people dealt with that by just outlawing the games, and kudos to those who were able to pull that off. Our perfect will would have been to have pretty close to zero video games. Playing those games tended to make both his body and his mind get mushy. But we decided to allow some video games and to limit their usage. We didn't condone it or promote it, but we lived with it. We picked our battles. God, as a Father, chooses to pick his battles. In the end, with Toby things worked out. He still loves video games, but he is in terrific shape physically, and as for his mind, he's in med school. God did kind of the same thing with slavery. In the long run he won the battle.

In fact, the gospel planted the seeds for the destruction of slavery. At some point a Christian slave owner would have to face the fact that his Christian slaves were his brothers in Christ. Eventually that would create intolerable dissonance. The gospel message would inevitably lead to the impossibility of owning slaves. God took a roundabout way of undermining slavery. That's what we did with Toby. We allowed the video games while planting ideas and values that would eventually lead Toby in other directions.

Having said that, we can see that in this passage there is a mindset that is radically different from the mindset of nearly every human being. If we can grasp and begin to live by this mindset it will be revolutionary. In 1 Peter 2:15 Peter wrote that “it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” Then in verse 19 he wrote, “it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God.” In that context Peter told slaves to obey masters in reverent fear of God, even if the masters are harsh. Peter was saying there’s something more important than how we’re treated in this world. The thing that is more important is displaying reverence for God. Doing good and right even in the midst of suffering will silence the talk of foolish people. In other words, it reflects positively on the kingdom of God.

Both Paul and Peter were saying that what matters is that we obey God and bring glory to him. What matters is God’s kingdom advancing in our lives and in this world. In Philippians 1:20 Paul, in prison at the time not knowing how that was going to turn out, wrote, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.” The issue for Paul was not whether he was treated justly or not, it was not whether he would be acquitted and live or be convicted and executed, it was that Christ would be exalted. That’s what mattered. Whether he lived or died was not the main point. Exalting Christ was the main point.

The message here is that the circumstances of our lives are, in the end, not the most important point. The point is exalting Christ. That is something that we can do no matter what our circumstances. Can a political prisoner exalt Christ? Yes, Paul did it. Can a slave exalt Christ? Yes, many in the early church did just that. Can a person who lives in poverty exalt Christ? Yes. Can a wealthy person exalt Christ? Yes. Can a person with poor health exalt Christ? Yes. Can a person who is very gifted exalt Christ? Yes. Can a person who is maybe not so blessed with gifts and abilities exalt Christ? Yes.

What we are to care most about is exalting Christ. When that becomes our heartbeat we become free. Would I rather be free than in prison? Of course, but I can exalt Christ either way. Would I rather have abundance than poverty? Yes, but I can exalt Christ either way. So if we can improve our circumstances, by all means do so. If you are a slave and you can earn freedom, certainly do that. But don’t make it the point of your life. Make exalting Christ wherever you might be,

whatever your circumstance, the point of your life. Then you will truly be free, for nothing can stop you from exalting Christ in any and every situation.

OUR WORK MATTERS

This passage does not translate directly into our culture, for we no longer have slaves and slave masters. However, there are analogous lessons for us to learn from this passage in regard to working. Verse 23 says, “whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for man.” That says that God cares about what we do and how we do it. Even the fact that God addressed how slaves work says it is important.

Psychologists and other experts today tell us that work is important to our health. In his book, *A Blue Fire*, psychologist James Hillman wrote, “the hands themselves want to do things, and the mind loves to apply itself... working is its own end and brings its own joy.” So he claims that humans have an innate compulsion to work and that work is satisfying to us.

Genesis 2:15 says, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” This was before the Fall. I sometimes joke that work is a curse. It originally was not. But one effect of the Fall was that work is going to be difficult and at times painful. That’s why they call it work. The fact that work existed before the fall tells us it was not intrinsically the onerous thing it can often be. Work was built into us by God. This makes sense because we are created in the image of God. According to Genesis 2:2, “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.” God’s character is to create, to sustain, to provide. He does that continually. In other words, he works. And that’s a part of our nature.

It is easy to understand that our work matters to God. Do you remember when your kids were little and they came home from school with something they drew in class? What did you do with it? You put it up on the refrigerator so that everyone who came into the kitchen, which was kind of the center of family life, could see it. You displayed it proudly, saying, “What you did is great!” Now the truth is, that picture was not a work of art. Although these days much of what passes for great modern art resembles the scrawled crayon drawings of a first grader, that kid art had no intrinsic value. Put it up for sale at an art auction house and it would be laughed at. But for you, it was terrific. What gave that value was that you valued it. What would be the effect on your child if he or she brought home that work and you said, “I don’t care about this. This is worthless,” and you threw it away? That would have been devastating for that child. That’s because he or she sees a

correlation between valuing him or her and valuing what he or she does. And it would be devastating for us if God said of what we do, “I don’t care about this. It is irrelevant and worthless.” But he doesn’t do that. He says in this passage, “I care about your work. It is precious to me. I’ll put it up on the fridge.”

As the real value of that child’s kid art is not its intrinsic value, which is near zero, so our work is not valuable because of its intrinsic worth. That’s a crucial point for us. Our work is valuable because our Father values it. I’ll say that again: ***our work is valuable because our Father values it!*** This is hugely important for us.

There was a time when people could see obvious value in their work. If your work was to work a field to grow crops for your family to eat, to hunt and fish so that you had food, to build a house of some sort to give your family shelter, the value of your work was obvious. You either did the work or you died. Unfortunately, today the value of our work is not always so obvious. Much of the work people do these days has been depersonalized and dehumanized. In our culture there is an excessive, extreme emphasis on productivity and the financial bottom line of a corporation. When those are the values that drive decisions and thinking, human beings become objects to be treated impersonally. They become a resource. Has it ever bothered you that there is likely a department in the company where you work called “Human Resources”? There was once a time when that department was called Personnel. We’ve gone from being persons to being resources. Resources are things that you use. Humans are not resources. They are not to be used. But in our culture that is precisely how they tend to be regarded and treated.

This tends to create dissonance in us. Where is the value in my work? Some can identify it, but many more cannot. The simple reality is that for the majority whatever their work is, it does not match up with their deepest passions. You hear that what you should do is find out what you love and do that and everything will work out. Unfortunately for the overwhelming majority, that’s not how things go. Most have to work to put food on the table, plain and simple. It’s hard to see all that much value in what we do, especially if we don’t like our job and can’t see any large meaning in it.

Some people have down right awful jobs. I was reading about people’s worst jobs. For one it was punching holes in belts in a belt factory 8 hours a day. One woman who worked in a clothing store said one day she had to change the price tags on 200 blazers from 79.99 to 80.00. It was mind numbing work. They next day the price went back down to 79.99 again.

The television show *The Office* was an often uncomfortable, quirky show that presented all manner of awkward situations. It featured people being in a place they didn't want to be, doing work they didn't enjoy, often with people they didn't especially like for paychecks that were never really enough. They didn't want to be there but they would show up for work day after day. In the opening episode the receptionist, Pam, tells the audience, "I didn't dream of growing up to be a receptionist as a little girl. What I really want to be is an illustrator of children's books." But she doesn't get to do that. And she depicts the plight of the majority of people.

The Street.com says, "It's rare to meet someone that doesn't complain about their job." In her book, *Generation Me*, Jean Twinge quotes a 27-year-old man named John Pozniak. He said, "Will you always hate going to work? Yes. It is a way of life. There is a support group for it called Everyone, and they meet at the bars on Friday... The good thing is since your job stinks everything else you do seems that much better and more rewarding."

Part of our problem is that we tend to evaluate our work on the basis of how much other people esteem it. Why do so many kids dream of being professional athletes? It is because those jobs are so highly esteemed by our culture. The solution for us, the thing that can enable us to be at peace with whatever our work is, is to recognize it has value because the Father values it. That is true whether you are a millionaire business owner, an entertainer, a teacher, an engineer, an accountant, a stay at home mom, a sales rep, a factory worker, a garbage collector or a pastor. Perhaps you're a customer service rep, answering phones, and you think your job is not nearly as important as that of a missionary, or a CEO of some huge company. Its value derives from the fact that God values it, not anything else. And he values it as much as that missionary's work.

OUR ATTITUDE MATTERS EVEN MORE

That brings us back to the fact that it is how we think about our work that is of enormous importance. There are two extremes that we can go to that are deadly, and both can be found commonly in our world. The first extreme is reflected somewhat in John Pozniak's words. It is to see work as an unfortunate but necessary means of paying the bills. In this thinking whatever our job is, it is essentially meaningless. It is just what we have to do to earn enough money to live on so we can hopefully do a few things that we really want to do.

Is it not obvious that to have that attitude is a deadly way to live? Where will be the joy and enthusiasm in a job that you just have to do because you need money?

At first if they pay you enough so that you can afford to do things you really want to do you'll be fine with it. But over time the everyday-ness of it will grind you down. It will sap energy from your soul and joy from your heart. Eventually you will grow to despise it.

At the other end of the spectrum is another common extreme, which is work as an idol. This is a common error in our culture. Dr. Amy Sherman, the director of the Sagamore Institute's Center on Faith in Communities, says we have work as an idol when we make it the center of our identity, when we try to draw life from it or from success and recognition through work. When we are convinced that our work is going to give our life meaning and it is going to establish our worth and identity, then we have it as an idol, for we have put it in place of the one who can actually give us worth, the one in whom we have true identity, and that's God.

This is rampant in our culture. In fact, it is this thinking that has devalued, for instance, the role and the value of a mother staying home to raise children. The thinking is a woman can only have real worth, can only experience her true identity, when she has a career that pays her a good income. It is this thinking that leads to the workaholism so pervasive in our society. If my worth and my identity are found in my work then I will go to any length to make sure that I am highly successful at it.

David Kim, a pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, says, "For most people our functional gospel is...our work. We want our work to give us a sense of identity, a sense of worth, a sense of calling." He says we start to think that we are justified by our work. It is another form of salvation by works rather than by the gospel of grace. This desperate idolatry results in fighting with bosses and co-workers, and causes us to promote and defend ourselves vigorously.

In short this idolatry does what idolatry always does. It turns us toward self, leads to conflict and war, warps our priorities and even our morality, damages our relationships, leaves us distant from God, introduces great fear into our lives, exhausts us, tends to burn us out in the long run and in the end destroys us. Whether you go to either extreme one of the dangers is burnout. It's just too hard to keep going when you hate your life. And when you violate God's priorities because you are pursuing an idol, at some point you'll realize you've wasted your life on emptiness and burnout.

A few years ago I went to the deli department of a grocery store and ordered a turkey sandwich. The woman behind the counter cheerfully went about her

business, and as she did so chatted with me. She was your basic middle aged woman, but she was very chipper and friendly. When she made my sandwich she put a whopping amount of turkey on it. I said, “Wow, that’s a lot of turkey.” She said, “Yeah, we put more meat on than the corporation says we should. I just feel like it’s important to give people more than they expect. It annoys the corporation, but we do it anyway. We get away with it because we sell more sandwiches than any other store.” I mentioned that she seemed to enjoy serving people, and she said, “I do, but really I’m serving God by taking care of people.” That woman wasn’t finding her identity and fulfillment in making sandwiches. But neither did she despise her job. She just saw the work itself as valuable and went about it with a cheerful and positive attitude, feeling that doing a good job was the thing that mattered, regardless of what the work was.

How can we have that attitude?

Work for the Lord

We’ve all encountered those people who only work hard when they think the boss or the coach is watching. Paul called that “eye-serving” in verse 22. Just work when you know someone is watching, but slack off whenever you can. If we work for the Lord we will not be eye-servers. We will work hard at whatever we do because we are working for the Lord, and the fact that we love him motivates us to do our best in whatever we do for him.

I don’t get guys that wear jewelry. Many professional athletes these days have diamond earrings, necklaces, diamond rings that they wear. I don’t get it. I don’t understand jewelry. I wear one piece of jewelry. It’s my wedding band. It makes sense to me. But spending absurd sums of money to buy blingy things with sparkly rocks that are easy to lose just doesn’t compute for me. So buying jewelry for my wife doesn’t make sense to me either. It doesn’t make her any more beautiful. Yet I have on many occasions cheerfully gone to jewelry stores to buy her just such baubles. In fact, it actually grieves me that I cannot afford to buy more of them, and buy even gaudier ones. I do that with joy because I love her. It pleases her, and if it pleases her then I can do it enthusiastically to the best of my ability and even beyond. When we do our work and see it as something that God values, if we love him we will do it to the best our ability and beyond. Even the most menial appearing job becomes a gift of love to the God who loves us.

That could become an excuse for becoming an extreme workaholic. After all, you’re working for the Lord, so surely that should be the most important thing in all the world, right? That is a classic pastoral cliché. The pastor is working for the Lord so he blows off his family and his own well-being and works night and day,

because it's for the Lord. However, God speaks to our priorities. He says the first thing in our lives must be worshiping and serving him. Then he says we must love our spouses and our children. He also says we should love and serve our neighbors. If we put our work before worshiping God, if we put it before loving our families, if we always put it before ministering to other people, are we in fact, doing that work for the Lord? Here's a principle that we all need to remember: *it is impossible to serve God by disobeying him*. It is a dead giveaway that we are not serving God but serving ourselves when we violate God's priorities for our lives.

Remember your reward

Observe that verse 24 says, "you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward." In 4:1 Paul reminds masters that "you also have a Master in heaven." Both the masters and the servants need to remember they have a master in heaven and that master will reward them.

For masters that means you'd better do right by your employees. For employees that means seeing everything you do as being done for the Lord. Often in this life we will not be rewarded for our good work and our good attitude. It would be wonderful if it was always recognized when we were working hard with enthusiasm and doing a great job, but there is no guarantee that will happen.

Remember it isn't so much the thing we do that matters. It is the attitude of serving the Lord that will be rewarded. It can be hard for us at times to keep our eyes on that ball. But remember this analogy. We have an IRA that we are putting money into. I don't get to enjoy that money. In fact, it comes out of my pocket when I could be spending it. But we put it into an account because some day there will be the reward of having that money when we need it and I can't work anymore because I'm too decrepit. That's what we do when we do our work for the Lord. It has value not because the thing is so meaningful or big or important, but because we are doing it out of love for God and it is storing up a reward for us in eternity..

One of the less enjoyable jobs I have had was working as a "courtesy clerk" at a supermarket. One classic moment in my career as a courtesy clerk happened toward the end of a shift. I was tired and knew when I got home I had a paper I had to finish for school. I was at a low ebb both physically and emotionally. Over the PA system I heard the announcement, "Rick, wet cleanup on aisle 9." That meant something needed to be cleaned up using a mop and I was assigned to do it. I went to the back, got a mop and bucket and headed to aisle 9. Now understand that at this point in my life I already had a college degree in math. I was in grad school working on a master's degree in theology in preparation for a meaningful and

fulfilling career in pastoral ministry. And there I was doing wet cleanups on aisle 9 in a grocery store. This was not scintillating, inspiring work. I was not building something great, I was not helping people or changing anyone's life, I was not building the kingdom of God, I was not making much money. I was just mopping stuff up. I arrived at aisle 9 and discovered someone had dropped a large jar of mayonnaise. Have you ever had to clean up a large bunch of mayonnaise? You can't just sweep it up or pick it up and you can't really mop it up because the mop just spreads it around. I was looking at a mass of mayonnaise with broken glass all around. I finally figured out a way to scoop the mayo up and to pick up the broken glass. Then I mopped the floor to get rid of the remaining mayo. When I was done I felt proud of the fine work I had done. The floor was once again clean. I put the mop in the wheeled bucket, and headed for the back of the store. However, as I turned to go to the back the end of the mop swept around and hit a large mayonnaise jar, knocking it off the shelf so it shattered on the floor, inches from the original accident site. I stood there thinking, "Really? I've got to clean up another jar of mayonnaise? I'm tired, I'm frustrated and I hate this." But I recalled this verse. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord." Ephesians 6:6 tells us to do our work "from your heart." In verse 7 it says to "serve wholeheartedly." All right, Lord, this cleanup is for you. Since it is for you, it is going to be the best, the most enthusiastic cleanup in the history of grocery stores. That mayo doesn't stand a chance. I'm going to attack it with everything in me, and I'm going to do it enthusiastically.

That was not a big crisis. I wasn't doing some horrible, disgusting job. But I learned that a job that's basically menial and annoying can be turned into a challenge that is full of meaning. It can be done enthusiastically when it is done for the Lord. That job didn't have value because it was crucially important. I wasn't Jack Bauer, doing a dangerous job with thousands of lives at stake. I wasn't building some empire nor amassing a fortune. But what I did mattered because it mattered to God!