

Reflection for Sunday 25th October: Colossians 3:22-4:6 – ‘Homemade Work’

If someone was to ask you which jobs God used most for his glory, what would you say? Most of us would construct a list that went something like this: top would be missionary called somewhere dangerous, then missionary called somewhere not so dangerous, then ministers and other paid Christian workers, then key workers and people with a vocation like nurses or teachers or carers, then lots of other normal jobs that didn't earn too much money, then jobs that *did* earn a lot of money, then at the bottom – 20 years ago that would have been people working in marketing and advertising (I know that because I was working in marketing and advertising 20 years ago), 10 years ago that would have been bankers, now it's probably politicians.

But is this really how God sees it? Our theme for today is Homemade Work – and for many of us, we've had to get used to working a lot more from home in the last few months. But I want to start by looking at all work from God's perspective. Here's a lovely short video which sets out some basic truths about work....

SHOW VIDEO 'What does the bible say about work?'

So **work is a God-given thing, designed for our flourishing**. And the second thing I want to emphasise is that, according to the bible, **all useful activity is work**. It includes things we don't get paid for. In fact, the Hebrew word for 'work' is derived from the word for worship. That's interesting, isn't it? So when it comes to looking at our lives, there are really only two biblical categories: work and rest.

Nowadays we would create more categories: work, raising family, volunteer activity and leisure. So other forms of unpaid but highly valuable work are treated as lesser categories. But that is not God's view of it: in biblical terms all useful activity is work, which is a sacred activity. Your parenting is sacred, your volunteer work is sacred, how you use your retirement is sacred. A lot of our current social problems would be massively reduced if we stopped seeing work in purely economic terms.

So what do we learn from today's passage about how to work well? Firstly, let me start by tackling the 'slaves' issue head-on. The context here is teaching given to slaves and masters, and it's true that Paul does not advocate social revolution. Because of which, many have wrongly concluded that he was somehow endorsing slavery, but that is not true. There is a quieter revolution going on here, and this is why.

First, we have to remember that the church was extremely small and vulnerable at this stage, and persecution was increasing. Paul spends much of his latter years in prison, unable to see the people he's nurtured over all these years. So first and foremost he wants to ensure the survival of these tiny, fragile communities. He never endorses slavery in his letters, but he does recognise the reality of their situations. Most churches had a high proportion of those on margins, precisely because it offered a deeper freedom and welcome than the rest of society offered.

Second let's note that this letter was likely read out to the each church – which meant that slaves and masters were there, sitting together in the same congregation – that would have been unheard of previously. Finally let's notice that Paul does not only address slaves but masters. He reminds masters that their lives are no longer their own either: their authority is limited because they are answerable to God. Fair treatment of their workers is not just a good strategy but a godly requirement.

So what is the basic principle at work in our work? It is this: **Do everything for the audience of One**. Our responsibility is not ultimately to our employers but to God. Work is a sacred activity and we are to do *all* our work for the Lord.

In practice, this means firstly that **our work is to be whole-hearted**: v23 'whatever you do, work at it with all your heart,' says Paul. The type of job doesn't matter: you're doing it for God. So we don't obey our bosses because they're great bosses or the company is perfect, we do it as an act of reverence for God – i.e. an act of worship. That's not to condone all their actions, and there are times when we will be called to challenge unjust practices, especially to protect the vulnerable. But our default setting is whole-hearted commitment.

Second, **we trust in God to repay our actions**. Those of us in paid work will be contracted to work a certain job for a certain amount of pay. And that's fine: we need to put food on the table. But it's not the whole story either. We're working for eternal rewards too. This is where Paul directly picks up Jesus' own teaching. Our lifestyles are also earning eternal rewards, regardless of how much we get paid in this life. Like George Bailey in the classic film 'It's a wonderful life', our work can change the lives of others in many ways. *How* we do what we do is more important ultimately than what we do. At least, that's how God sees it, even if our culture doesn't.

Finally, **our words matter**. Paul encourages his readers to 'let your words be full of grace, seasoned with salt.' Most work involves communicating, and our words speak deeper truths than the simple content of what we say.

When I first started my working life as an executive in a market research company, one of the divisional managers told me: 'There are good people, and good execs.' In other words, to do your job well, you have to have a nasty edge. I never agreed with that statement, and for the 12 years I worked in marketing, I was determined to show that kindness and gracious words could get the job done. Love is much better motivator than fear.

I hope I did: in some ways I'll never know this side of heaven. But as I close, let's return to where we started: **your work matters to God – all of it**. Your voluntary work, your parenting, the jobs you do around the house. You may be a plumber or a van driver or an administrator or a teacher or a lawyer or a fulltime carer or homemaker or any number of other roles – God is interested in *your* work. It is a sacred task and the only command is this: Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.

And may God bless your work, and you in your work – and may it bear fruit for his glory. Amen.