

Paul on WORK

The apostle Paul had a lot to say about life in general, but one topic he wrote about regularly is work: *why* we do it and *how* we do it.

To get the most out of this short list of passages, there are two things to keep in mind. First, Paul is not in any way endorsing slavery as an institution. Paul was writing at a time when the vast majority of workers were slaves (see the page below for details), and he is giving advice to people who have to live within this institution. God's heart, and Paul's heart, about justice and equity is better revealed in passages such as Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11.

Second, although Paul clearly hopes that the world will see broader changes and that believers have a role to play in bringing about these more systemic changes (see, for example, Romans 8:19-22), his focus in these passages is more on "the bottom-up" and on our approach to the work we are already committed to.

Given this context, please look at each passage and note any general principles Paul discusses or hints at about the *purpose of work* or our *mindset about work* and any specific advice he give about *how to work*.

Ephesians 6:5-9

Colossians 3:22-4:1

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

1 Timothy 6:1-2

Titus 2:9-10

Hebrews 13:5-6 (Not specifically aimed at workers but addresses two topics often faced at work: money and power.)

Slavery in the New Testament

The slavery that we read about in the New Testament is not the same horrific institution that was built by the modern world powers. Roman slaves were also often treated harshly, but there were also some significant differences in the Roman system:

- Slavery was not based on race.
- While many slaves were captured prisoners of war, people could also sell themselves or their children into slavery as a way to get out of debt.
- The work slaves did was highly varied and included manual labor but also teaching and medicine.
- Some slaves were not owned by individuals but publicly and performed public service, ranging from janitorial to accounting work.
- There were formal (and commonly exercised) processes to be freed.
- Some slaves were paid for their work.

All this is not to say that slavery was “a good thing” in the Roman Empire. But it was different from what happened in places like the American South. It is important to keep these differences and Paul’s own audience in mind when we read these passages. Much of his advice and teaching is universal, but there are nuances in the context that are different. While it can be difficult to wrestle with words that have such significant baggage as *slaves* and *masters*, the effort to work through this difficulty is worth it. In the end, we have a just and merciful God. Struggling with *His Word* always has its rewards.