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BIB 5123 Biblical Hermeneutics
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EXEGESIS AND EXPOSITION: Colossians

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SCRIPTURE PARAGRAPH TEXT: Colossians 3:22 – 4:1

²² 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.

²³ Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men;

²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve

²⁵ For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

¹ Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

BOOK REVIEW: Completed

SCRIPTURAL CONTEXT:

(1) Immediate Context: Both the passage of Colossians 3:22-4:1 and the previous passage of 3:18-20 deals with household relationships and how Christians should practically behave now that they recognize Christ's greatness and Lordship in their lives. As a prelude to both passages, verse 17 says, "whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus," thus all relationships are to be governed by the internal desire to please Christ and behave according to His character and will. Christians are to honor the Lord in their relationships with their husbands and wives (3:18-19), relationships with their parents and children (3:20-21), and relationships with their masters and slaves (3:22-4:1). In submission to the Lord Jesus, Christian wives are to submit to their husbands, and Christian husbands are to love their wives; Christian children are to obey their parents, and Christian fathers are not to excessively anger their children; Christian slaves are to obey their masters heartily, and Christian masters are to grant slaves justice and fairness. The next passage deals with prayer and proper behavior for a Christian in relation with unbelievers who need to see and hear appropriate conduct in order to be more receptive of the gospel they may share (4:2-6). This first part of this passage requests Christians to devote themselves to prayer in an attitude of thanksgiving and to pray that God would open a door for Paul to minister the gospel of Christ to others. The passage concludes by exhorting Christians to conduct themselves with wisdom toward outsiders and to speak with grace toward them. In all three passages, the Lord Jesus should make a difference in the behavior of Christians as demonstrated practically in their relationships with people.

(2) **Book Context:** The apostle Paul writes the letter to the Colossians to kindly explain that Christ is extremely important, thereby refuting some recent erroneous teachings that devalue Christ, and how the centrality of Jesus must reflect in a believer's behavior. As a result, the theme of the book is the greatness of Christ, for he is supreme over creation, redemption, and the church. As a Christian properly recognizes Christ's greatness and importance doctrinally, these beliefs will reflect in a Christian by the way he lives and behaves in society. The passage of Colossians 3:22 – 4:1 falls within the section of Paul's letter that addresses the proper behaviors of believers who have died with Christ and have risen with Him in newness of life. Thus, the bad behaviors of the old nature should be removed from one's life and replaced by the good behaviors of the new nature. Since Christ is Lord of creation and Lord of one's life, then everything that a believer does in word or deed should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, in accordance with His good will and character (Col. 3:17). Furthermore, believers should reflect Christ-like behaviors in their family relationships--whether it is between wives and husbands, children and parents, or slaves and masters (3:18-4:1). Slaves are to obey and serve their masters as if they were obeying and serving the Lord Jesus, for a believer who is a slave has a new Master and all that is done should be to ultimately please the Lord Jesus. Similarly, earthly masters who are now believers also have a Master who is in heaven, the Lord Jesus. Thus, masters should act properly toward slaves, with justice and fairness, to reflect the character of their Master. Both slaves and masters should die to sin as they have shared in Christ's death, and they should be alive to right living just as they have shared in the resurrection of Christ, the firstborn from the dead. This passage certainly belongs in the part of the book that deals with the practical outworking of having a high Christology, and if the passage did not exist in the book at all, then the readers would not have the specifics on how such a high Christology applies to practical household responsibilities of both the master and the slave. Although I can imagine that slaves were expected to work hard for their masters in the Greco-Roman society, I can also imagine that particular society not requiring such good treatment of slaves by their masters as was required now of a Christian master. If Jesus is really great and Lord of all creation, as indicated by the theme and purpose of the book, then believers will make every effort to reflect their new Master's attitude and will in their own behavior, including in their relationship with their earthly master or slave.

WORD STUDIES :

1. Servants (1401) - a slave (literal or figurative, involuntary or voluntary; frequently therefore in a qualified sense of subjection or subserviency):--bondman, servant. Robertson, IV, p. 507 – Christian slaves who had Christ as Lord, but even so they were to obey their lords in the flesh. Wuest, I, “Ephesians and Colossians,” p. 229-30 – slaves; Christian slaves working for the most part in the service of pagan masters. Slaves made up a large part of the population of the Roman Empire. Wuest, III, p. 122-23 – a slave in the most servile condition. The chief idea that it conveys is that the slave is bound to his master. He is in a condition of bondage. According to Wuest, the Greek word *doulos* represents “a person who was born into his condition of slavery, one who was in permanent relationship to his master which only death could break, one whose will was swallowed up in the will of his master, one who served his master even to the extent that he disregarded his own interests.” [However, recent scholarly writings on slavery in N.T. times show that the slavery condition was not permanent, but the slave was usually released by age 30 or could purchased his/her

freedom. Additionally, although most slaves were born into slavery, people could become a slave through other means such as selling themselves into slavery.]
Vine, p. 562 – A “servant,” frequently indicating subjection without the idea of bondage.

Within the context of a relationship with masters in this particular passage, I believe the author intended the Greek word *doulos* to designate slaves who are bound to serve to their masters.

2. Obey (5219) attentive hearkening, i.e. (by implication) compliance or submission:-- obedience, (make) obedient, obey.
Vine, p. 438 – “to submit, to obey” to masters by servants.

Within the context of a relationship between slaves and masters in this particular passage, I believe the author intended the word “obey” to mean attentive compliance and submission of a slave to a master.

3. Masters (2962) supreme in authority, i.e. controller.
Robertson, IV, p. 507 – Lords.
Vincent, III, p. 508 – Lord and master were used interchangeably in the New Testament, though originally “master” involved great authority as in the relation of a master to a slave. Greeks applied “masters” only to the gods.
Vine, p. 395 – “a lord, one who exercises power.”

Within the context of a relationship with slaves in this particular passage, I believe the author intended the word “masters” to designate a lord who exercises great power and authority over a slave.

4. Eyeservice (3787) sight-labor, i.e. that needs watching.
Robertson, IV, p. 507 – A uniquely Pauline word only used here and Eph. 6:6 meaning “service while the master’s eye was on the slave and no longer.”
Vincent, III, p. 508 – Here and Eph. 6:6, the word seems to have been coined by Paul.
Wuest, I, “Ephesians and Colossians,” p. 230 – “service performed under the master’s eye, service which is most zealous when the eye of the master or overseer is upon them.”
Vine, p. 220 – “service performed only under the master’s eye,” diligently performed when he is looking but neglected in his absence.

Within the context of masters and slaves in this particular passage, I believe the author created the word “eyeservice” and intended the word to designate a slave’s work that is done only when the master has an eye on the work; otherwise, the slave does not perform the required work when the master is not looking.

5. Menpleasers (441) man-courting, i.e. fawning.
Robertson, IV, p. 507 – Paul uses this word here and Eph. 6:6 only, but it is used in LXX.
Wuest, I, “Ephesians and Colossians,” p. 230 – desiring recognition from men instead of from the Lord Jesus, thus the slave will neglect his duty when this motive cannot operate.
Vine, p. 403 – designates “not simply one who is pleasing to men . . . , but one who endeavors to please men and not God.”

Within the context of a relationship of slaves working for masters in this particular passage, I believe the author intended the word “menpleasers” to indicate a motive of only desiring to please a human master and not God, and thus the motive does not include a thought or desire of pleasing the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, when a master is not able to observe the work and be pleased by it, the slave tends to slack off on the work since the motive for the work is to please a man, the human master.

6. Singleness (572) sincerity (without dissimulation or self-seeking) or generosity (copious bestowal):—bountifulness, liberal, simplicity, singleness.
Wuest, I, “Ephesians and Colossians,” p. 230 – contrasted to the idea of double-dealing of eyeservice. With undivided service.
Vine, p. 75 – sincerity.

Within the context of a relationship of slaves who should work for Christ and not just for men in this particular passage, I believe the author intended the word “singleness” to mean sincerity of heart in working. Furthermore, “singleness” refers to work that is not out of false pretenses of pleasing human authorities only when they are looking, but work done generously for its sake alone and for pleasing Christ, regardless if man notices it.

7. Work Heartily (2038b) [Strongest NASB Exhaustive Concordance] to work, labor.
Robertson, IV, p. 507 – from the soul and not with mere eye service.
Vincent, III, p. 508 – from the soul. With a personal interest.
Wuest, I, “Ephesians and Colossians,” p. 230 – out from the soul.

Within the context of a slave who ultimately works for the Lord Jesus in this particular passage, I believe the author intended the important phrase “work heartily” to mean that a Christian slave should perform his/her work from the soul and with personal interest and not merely to please a human lord who may be looking.

8. Inheritance (2817) a patrimony or a possession.
Vine, p. 325 – the prospective condition and possessions of the believer in the new order of things to be ushered in at the return of Christ.

Within the context of this particular passage of Jesus rewarding a believing slave who works unto the Lord, the word “inheritance” means the future condition and possessions a believer receives in the hereafter from God when Christ returns.

9. Wrong (91) to be unjust, i.e. do wrong:--hurt, injure, be an offender, be unjust (do, suffer, take) wrong.
Robertson, IV, p. 507 – not clear if the wrong is done by the master or the slave.
Vincent, III, p. 509 – The reference is primarily to the slave; but the following clause extends it to the master. If the slave does wrong, he shall be punished; but the master who does wrong will not be excused, for there is no respect of persons.
Vine, p. 689 – “what he did wrong” which brings consequences both in this life and at the judgment seat of Christ.

Within the context of this particular passage that addresses Christian slaves and their

masters along with Christian masters and their slaves, I believe the author intended the word “wrong” to mean unjust, hurtful, offensive things done by slaves to their masters or by masters to their slaves, which will be punished both in this life and at the judgment seat of Christ (in the hereafter).

10. Respect (4382) partiality, i.e. favoritism:--respect of persons
 Robertson, IV, p. 508 – There is respect with men, but not with God.
 Vincent, III, p. 509 – Although the Old Testament carried a positive connotation of favorable regard, the New Testament carries a negative connotation.
 Wuest, I, “Ephesians and Colossians,” p. 230 – Judging upon the basis of outward appearance; showing partiality.

Within the context of slaves and masters doing wrong and receiving punishment from the Lord, I believe that the author intended the word “respect” to mean partiality or favoritism, thus the Lord will not show respect or bias in regards to who is punished.

11. Equal (2471) likeness (in condition or proportion); by implication equity:--equal.
 Vincent, III, p. 509 – Not equality of condition, but the brotherly equality growing out of Christian relation in which there is nether bond nor free.
 Wuest, I, “Ephesians and Colossians,” p. 230 – equity, fairness, what is equitable.
 Vine p. 205 – equity, fairness, what is equitable.

Within the context of masters relating to slaves, I believe that the author intended the word “equal” to mean fairness in treatment, thus Christian masters were to treat slaves with fairness and justice, just as they would prefer to be treated by their Master in heaven.

THEME OF THE SCRIPTURE PASSAGE :

Slaves, especially, and masters, who are Christians, should do their designated work properly as unto the Lord, with a motive and an acknowledgement of serving Jesus, their ultimate Master.

AUTHOR 'S ORIGINAL MEANING :

In the passage of Colossians 3:22 - 4:1, the apostle Paul writes with the purpose of addressing slaves, especially, and masters, who are Christians, to exhort them to do their designated work properly as unto the Lord, with a motive and an acknowledgement of serving Jesus, their ultimate Master. For a Christian slave or a Christian master, Jesus is their Lord by virtue of Him being supreme in their redemption as well as supreme over creation and the church. Paul writes the letter to the Colossian Christians to kindly explain that Christ is extremely important, thereby refuting some recent erroneous teachings that devalue Christ, and to explain how the centrality of Jesus must reflect in a believer's behavior. As a Christian slave or master properly recognizes Christ's greatness and importance doctrinally, these beliefs will reflect in a Christian slave or master by the way he or she lives and behaves in society, especially in regards to their slave/master relationship. Prior to this passage, Paul addresses other household relationships that should likewise be transformed by acknowledging a high view of Christ including husband/wife relationships and parents/children relationships. While the functional differences in the positions do not change in the relationships, the way in which each person

relates to the other changes in accordance with a behavior desired by Jesus and expressed by Paul. Slaves and masters should reflect their new Master's attitude and will in their own behavior, for they have died with Christ and have risen with Him in newness of life.

Paul begins the passage in Col. 3:22 by first addressing slaves, *doulos* in Greek. In the culture of New Testament times, much of the Roman world consisted of slaves who were bound to serve their masters who were considered lords that exercised great power and authority over slaves. Paul wants his readers to know that a slave who has become a Christian has a new Master in heaven in addition to the earthly master. With a high view of Christ, Christian slaves should have a great desire to serve and please their heavenly Master who is always watching them and their work. Due to sinful human nature, the tendency among slaves would naturally be to "slack off" when their human masters are not watching their work or to disobey undesirable commands given by their masters. Yet, Paul is exhorting slaves to obey their masters in everything; however, Paul surely does not mean for slaves to obey masters when their commands clearly cause them to disobey their heavenly Master, for whom a greater allegiance is required. With the exception of ungodly commands, Paul exhorts Christian slaves to obey and submit compliantly to their masters always and "not with external service" or eye-service whereby a slave's work is done diligently only when the master has an eye on the work, but the slave should perform the required work even when the master is not looking. Those slaves who are "men pleasers" are slaves that have a motive of only desiring to please human masters and not God, and thus the motive does not include a thought or desire of pleasing the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, when masters are not able to observe the work and be pleased by it, the slaves tend to slack off on the work since the motive for the work is to please men, their human masters. Paul says that slaves are to serve with "singleness" or sincerity of heart, not out of false pretenses of pleasing human authorities only when they are looking, but working generously for its sake alone and for pleasing Christ, regardless if man notices it. Since a Christian slave ultimately works for the Lord Jesus, the author intends for the slave to "work heartily," which means that a Christian slave should perform his/her work from the soul and with personal interest and not merely to please a human lord who may be looking. Such a work ethic becomes easier when slaves realize that they are ultimately serving the wonderful Lord Jesus, who always sees and recognizes their work and who will reward properly motivated work with an inheritance. The word "inheritance" means the future condition and possessions a believer will receive in the hereafter from God when Christ returns. Ultimately, Christian slaves serve the Lord Jesus as they serve their human masters. Thus, the behavior of Christians who serves the Lord should be reflective of the will and attitude of Jesus in their work and thus they should not wrong those for whom they serve or oversee. Within the context of this particular passage that addresses Christian slaves and their masters along with Christian masters and their slaves, it is likely that Paul intended the word "wrong" to mean unjust, hurtful, offensive things done by slaves to their masters or by masters to their slaves, which will be punished both in this life and at the judgment seat of Christ (in the hereafter). Within the context of slaves and masters doing wrong and receiving punishment from the Lord, Paul says that consequences are meted out without "respect" or partiality or favoritism, thus the Lord will not show bias in regards to who is punished.

Paul ends the passage in Col. 4:1 by addressing masters of slaves. Paul exhorts Christian masters how they should treat slaves appropriately. Paul reasons that masters should behave properly because they themselves have a Master in heaven now that they are Christians. Surely, human masters would like to be treated justly and fairly by Christ their Master, so also they should treat those who serve them with justice and fairness. A further motive for fair treatment can be reasoned from the context and theme of the book. Due to sinful human nature, the tendency among masters would naturally be to treat slaves harshly, unjustly, and unfairly, yet Christian masters now serve Christ as Lord who has redeemed them and transformed them to

live a new resurrected life that is not governed by the old self, but by the new self that behaves in accordance with Christ's desires. Christ desires that slaves be treated with justice and fairness, thus masters should put forth the effort to behave accordingly with their slaves. Overall, a high view of Christ will make a difference in the behavior of both Christian masters and Christian slaves.

ETERNAL UNCHANGING TRUTHS :

1. God desires people to work with sincerity of heart.
2. God desires people to work well even when those in authority do not notice.
3. The Lord desires to be feared or respected by others.
4. God always notices people's work.
5. The Lord can be pleased with all kinds of work—whatever tasks one does—if it is done unto the Lord.
6. The manner in which work is done matters to God.
7. God is more interested in how one does their work than in what kind of work one does.
8. The Lord rewards believers with an inheritance.
9. The Lord Christ desires every believer to serve Him.
10. The Lord Christ desires all work to be done as service to Him.
11. Christ is the supreme Master of the universe.
12. All believers have a Master in heaven.
13. God will punish those who do wrong.
14. God does not show partiality in punishing others.
15. God desires those in authority positions to treat subordinates with justice and fairness.
16. God desires people to treat others in the same good manner they would like others to treat them.
17. Believers in Christ have died to their old self and have risen with Christ to a new self.
18. Those who believe in a high view of Christ will reflect behaviors in line with Christ.

APPLICATIONS BY THE AUTHOR :

1. Christian slaves are to work with sincerity of heart.
2. Christian slaves are to obey their earthly masters.
3. Christian slaves are to work well even when their masters do not notice.
4. Christian slaves are to fear or respect the Lord.
5. Christian slaves should recognize that God always notices people's work.
6. Christian slaves should recognize that whatever work they do, it is pleasing to the Lord if it is done unto the Lord.
7. Christian slaves should appreciate the fact that the Lord rewards believers with an inheritance.
8. Christian slaves should have, as a motivation for work, a desire to serve Christ.
9. Christian slaves should recognize that Christ is supreme and their ultimate Master.
10. Christian slaves should realize that their work has dignity because they serve Christ.
11. Christian slaves should realize that Christ will punish those who do not behave appropriately to their masters.
12. Christian masters should realize that Christ will punish those who do not behave

- appropriately to their slaves.
13. Masters should treat subordinates with justice and fairness.
 14. Masters are to treat slaves in the same good manner they would like Christ to treat them.
 15. Christian masters should realize that they have a Master in heaven, Jesus.
 16. Slaves who hold a high view of Christ should reflect Christ-like behaviors.
 17. Masters who hold a high view of Christ should reflect Christ-like behaviors.

VIEWS OF OTHER SCHOLARS:

In *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* for Colossians by N.T. Wright, pp. 149-51, Wright comments on Col. 3:22 – 4:1 in similar ways to my interpretation of the passage, yet some differences appear too. We both place the duties the slave-master relationship within the context of family relationships that should be done “in the Lord.” While I qualify that “obeying in all things” does not include things that would cause slaves to disobey the Lord Jesus, Wright does not make such a qualification for verse 22. Although I also describe how a slave should not be an eye pleaser and should work with singleness of heart, I like how Wright says that Christians who work must be “totally given to the task in hand, not merely doing the minimum required to avoid rebuke, with a show of effort when one is being observed.” Wright sees Paul as expressing human dignity for slaves who may see their work as unimportant or trivial. Furthermore, they have an opportunity to turn their work into an act of worship. We both interpret “the inheritance” as a reference to the age to come. Wright gives some interesting background in saying that a slave could not inherit property on earth, so it is especially encouraging and meaningful for a slave to know they can inherit a reward after this life. We both make an emphasis that work is to be done for the Lord Christ. While I say that both slaves and masters must not do wrong, Wright references only the slave and says that God’s justice will come to a Christian slave who does wrong, which is both a warning and an encouragement in that God sees everything and will reward or punish appropriately. While I did not comment on the institution of slavery, in Col. 4:1, Wright says that “Paul does not protest against the institution of slavery,” since that is futile, but Paul does emphasize that slaves are humans too and deserve to be treated as such and have certain rights. We both comment on masters needing to treat slaves with justice and fairness, or equality. Wright summarizes that Christians should live “for the Lord” in whatever tasks they do and to maintain harmony with others, for this will create a state of true freedom.

In *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 11, containing comments on Colossians by Curtis Vaughan, pp. 219-20, Vaughan comments on Col. 3:22 – 4:1 in similar ways to my interpretation of the passage, yet some differences appear too. Vaughan provides considerable background information on slavery and the status of slaves during New Testament times. He mentions that slavery, in spite of its many evils, was universally accepted and that neither Paul nor the other apostles denounced slavery in an effort to overthrow it. However, Vaughan emphasizes that the apostles did not condone slavery, and Paul had given principles of spiritual equality between slave and master that could eventually erode slavery as an institution. I was pleased to read Vaughan’s extended comments that qualified what obedience “in everything” meant to Paul in verse 22. Vaughan says that slaves were not to obey orders “contrary to the principles of the gospel” since a Christian’s highest duty is to God. I like how Vaughan comments on verse 23 saying that slaves who see their work as service to the Lord will “transform the most menial responsibilities and give dignity to all of their work.” While Vaughan mentions that verse 25 applies to the slave, he mentions that the parallel passage in Ephesians addresses the master with regards to God showing no partiality in His punishments.

Thus it is biblical to say that God shows no partiality in His punishments of Christian slaves or Christian masters, as I had mentioned. I really liked how Vaughan gave a practical implication from this passage in saying that all Christians need to see their work “as a service rendered to the Lord,” for this will motivate them to “give honest, faithful, ungrudging work,” as well as “a sense of dignity in work, regardless of how unimportant it may seem.” I think Vaughan treats Col. 4:1 in a similar fashion as my interpretation, stating that Christian masters also have obligations to treat slaves properly and are accountable to God for their treatment of slaves.

In *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* for Colossians by F. F. Bruce, pp. 167-171, Bruce comments on Col. 3:22 – 4:1 in similar ways to my interpretation of the passage, yet some differences appear too. Bruce elaborates more and gives more background information than the other two commentators for which I referred. Like me, Bruce puts this passage within its context of household codes, though I did not use the term “household codes” which seems to have historical roots. Bruce makes a case, drawing from other Scriptures as well, that Christian slaves are to provide service that is of a higher quality because they ultimately want to please Christ and see themselves as serving Him. As a practical application imbedded in his exposition, Bruce has no issues with applying the slave references to today’s Christian employees in general. Bruce sees verse 25 as mainly applying to slaves, but he also sees the parallel in Eph. 6:9 as admonishing masters. Like my own interpretation, Bruce reasons that masters should treat their servants in a good way just as they would want to be treated by their heavenly Master. I thought it was interesting that Bruce says that the household codes (for wives/husbands, parents/children, slaves/masters) given by Paul were not meant to “abolish or reshape existing social structures, but to Christianize them,” though after a long time, many Christians eventually realized the incompatibility of slavery with the ethic of the gospel. However, I would go a step further and say that recognition of Christ as Lord does make a powerful impact in these household relationships to such an extent that they could be classified as transformed by the gospel. I think I placed a stronger emphasis on the book’s theme and outworking in a person’s work life than even Bruce did.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS :

1. Christian employees are to obediently work for those in authorities and with sincerity of heart at all times and not just when their bosses are noticing their work.
2. All work should be done “heartily” with a motive to please the Lord and not just to please human authorities.
3. Recognize that all kinds of work can be pleasing to the Lord if it is done with a motive to serve the Lord, and thus work of all kinds has dignity.
4. All Christians should treat one another properly in their work relationships, for the Lord will punish, without bias, those who do wrong.
5. Christian employers, managers, supervisors, and those in authority over other workers should treat their employees, workers, or subordinates with justice and fairness, realizing that they too have a Master in heaven that holds them accountable for their work done for Him.

OUTLINE FOR SERMON or LESSON:

Introduction

- I. Responsibilities of employees
 - A. Work obediently for those in authority
 - B. Work with sincerity of heart
 - C. Don't work as an "eye pleaser"
 - D. Work unto the Lord Jesus as the foremost Master
 - E. God will punish those who do wrong in their responsibilities
 - F. God will reward faithful employees with an inheritance
- II. Responsibilities of employers, managers, and supervisors
 - A. Treat employees, workers, subordinates with justice and fairness
 - B. Realize that human authorities are accountable to a Master in heaven
 - C. God will punish those who do wrong in their responsibilities
 - D. God will reward faithful supervisors with an inheritance
- III. All kinds of work can be pleasing to the Lord
 - A. God takes pleasure in whatever work you do
 - B. All work has dignity because it is service rendered to the Lord
 - C. God is more interested in how you do your work than the kind of work you do
 - D. Christians who claim Jesus as Lord should reflect Christ-like behavior in work
 - E. Work unto Jesus, realizing He is the ultimate Master whom you are serving

Conclusion