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# Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Work

Theology of Work Project

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## Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Work

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### Overview of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Work

Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians are three short but rich books among the letters of Paul in the New Testament. Because of their brevity, their contribution to the theology of work is combined here into a single article. However, the three letters have each their own distinctive themes, and we will explore each letter on its own.

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### Galatians and Work

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.*

*Galatians 5:13*

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### Introduction to Galatians

How do we live as believers in Jesus Christ? If the Christian life begins when we put our faith in Christ as Savior and Lord, how do we express this faith in our daily lives, including our work?

For many of us, the answer to these questions lies in ordering our behavior according to certain basic rules. Thus, for example, when it comes to the workplace, we might adopt the following to-do list: 1. Show respect to colleagues. 2. Don't use inappropriate language. 3. Don't gossip. 4. Be guided by biblical values when making decisions. 5. Speak of faith in Christ if possible. This list could easily be much longer. It contains valuable guidance that reflects biblical priorities.

But there is a danger for Christians in such a list, whether in the workplace or elsewhere. It's the danger of legalism, of turning the Christian life into a set of rules rather than our free response to God's grace in Christ and a network of relationships centered in Christ. Moreover, those who approach the Christian life legalistically often tend to put on their to-do list items that are inessential or perhaps

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even incorrect.

## Paul and the Galatians

This is exactly what happened with the believers in Galatia in the mid-first century A.D. In response to the preaching of the Apostle Paul, they had put their faith in Christ and began living as Christians. But, before long, they started shaping their lives according to a list of do's and don'ts. In this effort, the Galatians were influenced by outsiders who claimed to be Christians and who insisted that the Christian life requires keeping the Law of Moses as understood by certain contemporary schools of thought. In particular, these "Judaizers" were persuading the Galatians to live like Jews in matters of circumcision (Gal. 5:2-12) and the ceremonial law (Gal. 4:10).

Paul wrote the letter we call Galatians in order to get the Christians in Galatia back on the right track. Though he did not address workplace issues directly, his basic instructions on the nature of the Christian life speak incisively to our interests in faith and work. Moreover, Galatians contains work-related imagery, especially drawn from the first-century practice of slavery. Christians, according to Paul, are to live in freedom, not in slavery to the Law of Moses and other earthly powers (Gal. 4:1-11). Yet, ironically, those who exercise their freedom in Christ should choose to "become slaves to one another" through love (Gal. 5:13).

Biblical scholars almost unanimously agree that Galatians was written by the Apostle Paul to a group of churches in the Roman province of Galatia, in what is now central Turkey, sometime between 49 and 58 A.D. [1] Paul was writing to churches he had founded through the preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ. These churches existed in a culturally and religiously diverse environment, and had recently been influenced by Judaizers (Jewish Christians who argued that all Christians must keep the whole Law if they want to experience the full Christian life).

Paul underscores the freedom we have in Christ in his response to the Galatians and the Judaizers who were corrupting them. Applied to the workplace, Galatians helps us understand and engage in our work with a freedom that is essential to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

After introducing himself, Paul greets the Galatians, referring to Christ as one "who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age" (Gal. 1:3). Thus he introduces the theme of freedom, which is central to Galatians and to living as a believer in Jesus.

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## Understanding Life in Christ (Gal 1:6-4:31)

Paul begins by identifying the problem among the Galatians: they "are turning to a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6). This "gospel" requires Gentiles "to live like Jews" (Gal. 2:14). In order to show that this

“gospel” is really not a gospel — that is, good news — at all, Paul presents a variety of arguments: his autobiography (Gal. 1:10-2:21); the receiving of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:1-5); the offspring of Abraham through faith (Gal. 3:6-29); the analogy of slaves and children (Gal. 4:1-11); a personal, emotional appeal (Gal. 4:12-20), an allegory of the slave woman and the free woman (Gal. 4:21-31).

At several points in his explication of the Christian life in chapters 1-4, Paul uses the language and imagery of slavery to fortify his understanding of life in Christ. Slavery, which in Galatians signifies primarily the absence of freedom, is that from which the Galatians had been delivered by their faith in Christ. “You are no longer a slave but a child” (Gal. 4:7). Their desire to follow the Law of Moses rather than to rely on their faith is, in effect, a senseless return to the bondage of slavery (Gal. 4:8-10). Even the Law of Moses, when understood properly, commends freedom rather than slavery to the law itself (Gal. 4:21-31).

So we see that Paul uses workplace imagery (slavery) to illustrate a spiritual point about religious legalism. Yet the point does apply directly to the workplace itself. A legalistic workplace, in which bosses try to control every motion, every word, every thought that employees have, is contrary to freedom in Christ. Workers of all types owe obedience to their legitimate superiors. And organizations of all types owe freedom to their workers to the full extent compatible with the true needs of the work.

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### Living in Christ (Gal 5:1-6:10)

Galatians 5:1 completes the crescendo of the first four chapters with a stentorian call to freedom: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Yet this does not mean that Christians should do whatever they please, gratifying their own sinful desires and neglecting those around them. On the contrary, Paul explains: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (Gal. 5:13). Christians are free in Christ from slavery to this world and its power, including the Law of Moses. Yet in this freedom, they should choose out of love to serve each other with humility. Such “slavery” is not bondage, but an ironic exercise of true freedom in Christ.

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### Living in the Spirit (Gal 5:13-23)

The Spirit of God, given to Christians when they believed the good news of Christ (Gal. 3:2-5), helps us to live out our faith each day (Gal. 5:16). Those who “live by the Spirit” will reject and be safe from the “works of the flesh,” which include: “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these (Gal. 5:19-21). Parts of this list sound all too similar to life in many workplaces: strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy. Even seemingly religious items such as idolatry and

sorcery have real manifestations in the workplace. If we are called to live in the Spirit at all, we are called to live in the Spirit at work.

Paul specifically warns us against “self-indulgence” in the name of freedom (Gal. 5:13). Instead, we should choose to “become slaves [or servants] to one another.” At work, this means we are to assist our coworkers even when we are in competition or at odds with them. We are to confront and resolve our jealousies, angers, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy fairly (see Matthew 18:15-17), rather than nurturing resentment. We are to create products and services that exceed our customers’ legitimate expectations, because a true servant seeks what is best for the person served, not merely what is adequate.

### Work and the Fruit of the Spirit

We often think of the fruit of the Spirit, described in Galatians 5, in the context of church life. But when we apply it to our work, it can give us a fresh perspective, and have a transformative effect on our workplaces.

**Love** can transform our view of other **workers** (colleagues, customers, managers, etc.) as image bearers of God rather than objects of utility in the course of our work. Love can transform our view of **work**, recognizing the value it brings to others and the world. The book *Theory R Management* illustrates the transformation that comes to the workplace when people are treated with love, dignity, and respect....

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The Spirit of God is not, however, simply a divine naysayer who keeps us out of trouble. Rather, the Spirit at work in believers produces new attitudes and actions. In agriculture, fruit is a delicious result of long-term growth and cultivation. The metaphor, “fruit of the Spirit,” signals that God cares about who we are growing to become rather than only what we are doing today. We are to cultivate “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23) over the course of a lifetime. We have no reason to believe that they are meant only for relationships among Christians in church and family. On the contrary, just as we are to be guided by the Spirit in every facet of life, so we are to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit wherever we are, including the places in which we work. Patience in the workplace, for example, does not refer to indecisiveness or failure to act urgently in business matters. Instead, it means a freedom from the anxiety that would tempt us to act before the time is ripe: firing a subordinate in a fit of anger, berating a colleague before hearing an explanation, demanding a response before a student has time to consider, or cutting a customer’s hair before being completely sure what kind of style she wants. If the fruit of the Spirit seem to have little to do with work, perhaps we have narrowed our imagination of what spiritual fruit really is.

## Working for the Good of Others (Gal 6:1-10)

The first part of Galatians 6 employs a variety of work-related words to instruct Christians in how to care for others in tangible ways. Christians are to be generous to others as we “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2). Yet, lest we be overtaken by pride and imagine that our work on behalf of others excuses poor work of our own, believers must “test their own work” and “carry their own loads” (Gal. 6:4-5).

The analogy of sowing and reaping allows Paul to encourage the Galatians to focus on the life of the Spirit rather than the flesh (Gal. 6:7-8). Sowing to the Spirit involves purposeful effort: “let us *work* for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith” (Gal. 6:10). Christians are to labor for the common good in addition to caring for their fellow believers. Surely if we are to *work* for the good of others, one place we should do it is in the workplace.

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## Closing Remarks (Gal 6:11-18)

In his closing remarks, Paul reminds the Galatians of the center of the gospel, which is the cross of Christ: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).

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## Conclusions (Galatians)

In his concluding use of crucifixion language (Gal. 6:14), Paul echoes what he had said earlier in the letter: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:19b-20). Faith in Christ is not only believing certain facts about his life, death, and resurrection, but also dying with Christ so that he might live in us. This “Christ in us” reality does not disappear when we enter our offices, warehouses, shops and boardrooms. Rather, it urges and empowers us to live for Christ, in the power of the Spirit, every moment, in every place.

The Christian life is based upon faith. But faith is not passive assent to the truth of the gospel. Rather, in the daily experience of the Christian, faith becomes alive and active. According to Paul, faith can even be said to be “*working* through love” (Gal. 5:6). Thus, faith at work in our lives energizes loving actions, even as the Spirit of God helps us to be more loving both in heart and in action (Gal. 5:22). We reject the slavery of trying to justify ourselves by our work. However, when we embrace our freedom in Christ through faith, our work leads to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We see our work as a primary context in which to exercise our freedom in Christ so as to love others and “work for the good of all” (Gal. 6:10). If we do not see the fruits of faith

in our places of work, then we are cutting off a major part of our life from Christ's mastery.

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## Ephesians and Work

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.*

Ephesians 4:1

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## Introduction to Ephesians

What is the place of our work in the grand scheme of things? Is work just an activity we need to get by in life? Or is it also a place where we find meaning, healing and personal integration?<sup>[2]</sup> Does our work have a place in the cosmos of God's creation? Does it mean anything alongside Christ's work of redeeming the world?

The letter to the Ephesians tells the story of God's cosmic work, beginning before the creation of the world, continuing in Christ's work of redemption, and leading up to the present moment and beyond. It draws us into this work both as awestruck observers of the drama and as active participants in God's work.

Thus, Ephesians gives a new perspective, not only about God, but also about ourselves. Our lives, our actions and, indeed, our work, take on fresh meaning. We live differently, we worship differently and we work differently because of what God has done and is doing in Christ. We do what we do with our lives, including our professional lives, in response to God's saving activity and in fulfillment of the assignment he has given us to cooperate with him. Each one of us has been called by God to participate in God's work in the world (Eph. 4:1).

The letter we know as Ephesians is both similar to and different from other New Testament letters attributed to the Apostle Paul. It is similar most of all to Colossians, with which it shares common themes, structures and even sentences (Eph. 6:21-22; Colossians 4:7-8).<sup>[3]</sup> Ephesians is different from the other Pauline letters in its exalted style, distinctive vocabulary, and in some of its theological perspectives. Moreover, it is much less oriented to a particular situation in the life of a particular church than Paul's other letters.<sup>[4]</sup> In this commentary, authorship by Paul is assumed.

Rather than focusing on the needs of one particular congregation, Ephesians presents an expansive theological perspective on the work of God in the universe and the central role of the church of Jesus Christ within that work. Each individual believer contributes to this ecclesial effort as one who has been "created in Jesus Christ for good works" (Eph. 2:10) and who is essential to the growth and

ministry of the church (Eph. 4:15-16).

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## God's Grand Plan: A Theological Vision (Eph 1:1-3:21)

The first half of Ephesians unfolds the grand narrative of God's salvation of the whole cosmos. Even before the "foundation of the world," God graciously chose us in Christ for relationship with him and to live out his purpose in the world (Eph. 1:4-6). At the core of this purpose, God will "gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). To put it differently, God will restore the whole cosmos, once broken by sin, under the authority of Christ. The fact that God will renovate his creation reminds us that this world, including farms, schools and corporations, matters to God and has not been abandoned by him.

God's restoring work, centered in Christ, involves human beings, both as recipients of God's grace and as participants in his ongoing work of gracious restoration. We are saved by grace because of faith, not because of our works (Eph. 2:8-9). But our works are vitally important to God: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Eph. 2:10). Thus we are not saved *by* works, but *for* works. These works, which include all that we do, are a part of God's renewal of creation. Therefore, our activity in the workplace is one crucial element of that which God has prepared for us to do in fulfillment of his purpose for us.

The church features prominently in God's plan for putting the world back together in Christ. His death on the cross not only made possible our personal salvation (Eph. 2:4-7), but also mended the breach between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:13-18). This unity between former enemies epitomizes the unifying work of God. Thus the church serves as a demonstration to the whole universe of the nature and ultimate success of God's cosmic plan (Eph. 3:9-10). But the church is not merely a unit of people who gather once a week to do religious activities together. Rather, the church is the community of all believers, doing everything they do in all the places of life, whether working together or separately. In every sphere of life, we have "the power at work within us [which] is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20). Notice that Paul uses the civic term "citizens" (Eph. 2:19) to describe Christians, rather than the religious term "worshippers." In fact, Ephesians gives virtually no instructions about what the church should do when it gathers, but several instructions about how its members should work, as we will see momentarily.

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## God's Grand Plan: A Practical Guide (Eph 4:1-6:24)

The second half of Ephesians begins with an exhortation to live out the vision of the first half of the letter: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1). Every Christian shares in this calling. Thus, our truest and deepest

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*vocation* (from the Latin word for “calling”) is to do our part to advance the multifaceted mission of God in the world. This calling shapes everything else we do in life, including our work, that which we sometimes call our “vocation.” Of course God may call us to specific jobs for expressing our fundamental calling to live for the praise of God’s glory (Eph. 1:12). Thus, as doctors and lawyers, as clerks and waiters, as actors and musicians, as parents and grandparents, we lead a life worthy of our calling to Christ and his activity in the world.

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## Working Hard for Good and for Giving (Eph 4:28)

Among the practical exhortations in Ephesians 4-6, two passages deal specifically with work-related concerns. The first has to do with the purpose of work: “Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy” (Eph. 4:28). Though pointed immediately at those who steal, Paul’s advice is relevant to all Christians. The Greek translated in the NRSV as “honestly” (*to agathon*) literally means “to the good.” God is always leading Christians to the good. The workplace is a crucial setting for us to do many of the good works that God has prepared for us (Eph. 2:10).

Through our work, we also earn sufficient resources to share with the needy, whether directly, through the church or by other means. Although a theology of work is not quite the same as a theology of charity, this verse explicitly links the two. The overall message is that the purpose of work is to do good both by what our work accomplishes directly and by what our work enables us to give to others outside of work.

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## Mutuality in Working for the Lord (Eph 5:21-6:9)

["Our Work and Our Character" by Dr. Timothy Keller \(Click to listen\)](#)

The second practical consideration is relationships. Our calling as Christians impacts our basic relationships, especially those in the family and the workplace. (Prior to the industrial age, households were equally places of family life and places of work.) Ephesians 5:21-6:9 underscores this point by including specific instructions for relationships within the household (wives/husbands, children/fathers, slaves/masters). Lists of this sort were common in the moral discourse of the Greco-Roman world and are represented in the New Testament (see, for example, Colossians 3:18-4:1; 1 Peter 2:13-3:12).<sup>[5]</sup>

[What the Bible has to say about work \(Click to listen\)](#)

We are particularly interested in Ephesians 6:5-9, a passage that addresses the relationship between slaves and masters. Paul addresses Christians who are masters, Christians who are slaves under Christian masters, and Christians who are slaves under non-believing masters. This text is very similar to a [parallel passage in Colossians](#) (Col. 3:22-4:1). The article, [Colossians and Work](#),<sup>[6]</sup> gives the historical background on slavery in the 1st century Roman Empire which would be helpful for understanding this section of Ephesians, as well. To summarize briefly, Roman slavery has both similarities and differences from paid work in the 21st century. The chief similarity is that both ancient slaves and contemporary workers serve under the authority of masters or supervisors. With regard to the work itself, both groups have a duty to meet the expectations of those in authority over their work. The chief difference is that ancient slaves (and those in modern times, as well) owe not only their work, but their lives to their masters. Slaves cannot quit, they have limited legal rights and remedies for mistreatment, they do not receive pay or compensation for their work, and they do not negotiate working conditions. In short, the scope for abuse of power by masters over slaves is far greater than that for supervisors over workers.

We will begin by exploring this section of Ephesians as it applies to actual slaves. Then we will consider applications to the form of paid labor that dominates developed economies today.

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## Christian Slaves (Eph 6:6-8)

[Find encouragement for getting through the work week in the book of Ephesians \(Click to listen\)](#)

Ephesians encourages slaves to see themselves as “slaves of Christ” who “render service with enthusiasm” for the Lord rather than their human masters (Eph. 6:6-7). The fact that their work is for Christ will encourage them to work hard and well. Paul’s words are therefore a comfort when your master orders you to do good work. In that case, God will reward you (Eph. 6:8) even if the master doesn’t, as is typically the case with slaves (Luke 17:8).

But why would slaving away for an earthly master necessarily be “doing the will of God” (Eph. 6:6)? Surely a master could order a slave to do work that is far from the will of God: abusing another slave, cheating a customer, encroaching on someone else’s fields. Paul clarifies, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, *as you obey Christ*” (Eph. 6:5). Slaves can only do for their masters what could be done *for Christ*. If a master orders slaves to do evil work, then Paul’s words are dreadfully challenging, for the slave would have to refuse the master’s orders. This could lead to unpleasant consequences, to say the least. Nonetheless, Paul’s command is inescapable: “Render service...as to the Lord, and not to men and women” (Eph. 6:7). The Lord’s commands supersede the commands of any master. Indeed, what else could “singleness of heart” mean, if not to

set aside every order that conflicts with duty to Christ? “No one can serve two masters,” said Jesus (Matthew 6:24). The punishment for disobeying an earthly master may be fearsome, but it may be necessary to suffer it, in order to work “as to the Lord.”

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## Christian Masters (Eph 6:5-11)

It is a horrible thing for a master to force a slave to choose between obedience to the master and obedience to Christ. Therefore, Paul tells masters to “stop threatening” their slaves (Eph. 6:9). If you have ordered your slaves to do good work, threats should not be necessary. If you have ordered your slaves to do evil work, your threats are like threats against Christ. With Colossians, Ephesians agrees that masters should remember that they have a Master in heaven. But Ephesians underscores the fact that both slaves and masters “have the *same* Master” (Eph. 6:9). For this reason, Ephesians says that masters are to “do the same for your slaves” (Eph. 6:9), that is, to give orders to slaves as though you were giving the orders to (or for) Christ. With this in mind, no Christian master could order a slave to do evil work, or even excessive work. Though the earthly distinction of master and slave remains intact, their relationship has been altered with an unprecedented call to mutuality. Both parties are subject to Christ alone “in singleness of heart” (Eph. 6:5). Neither can lord it over the other, since only Christ is Lord (Eph. 6:7). Neither can shirk the duty of love to the other. This passage accepts the economic and cultural reality of slavery, but it contains fertile seeds of abolitionism. In Christ’s kingdom, “there is no longer slave or free” (Galatians 3:28).

Slavery continues to flourish in our world today, though it’s often called human trafficking or forced labor. The inner logic of Ephesians 6:5-9, as well as the broader story of Ephesians, motivates us to work for the end of slavery. Most of us, however, will not experience slavery in a personal way, either as slaves or as masters. Yet we do find ourselves in workplace relationships where someone has authority over another person. By analogy, Ephesians 6:5-9 teaches both bosses and employees to order, perform and reward only work that could be done by or for Christ. When we are ordered to do good work, the issue is simple, though not always easy — we do it to the best of our ability, regardless of the compensation or appreciation we receive from our bosses, customers, regulators or anyone else in authority over us.

When we are ordered to do evil work, the situation is more complicated. On the one hand, Paul tells us to “obey your earthly masters... as you obey Christ.” We cannot lightly disobey those in earthly authority over us, any more than we can lightly disobey Christ. This has even caused some to question whether whistleblowing, work stoppages and complaints to regulatory authorities are even legitimate for Christian employees. At the very least, a difference of opinion or judgment is not by itself good enough cause to disobey a valid order at work. It is important not to confuse “I don’t want to do this work, and I don’t think it’s fair for my boss to tell me to do it” with “It is against God’s will for me to do

this work.” Paul’s instruction, “obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling,” suggests that we obey the orders of those in authority over us unless we have very strong reason to believe doing so would be wrong, and not merely unfair or excessively burdensome.

Yet Paul adds that we obey earthly masters as a way of “doing the will of God from the heart.” Surely, if we are ordered to do something clearly against God’s will — for example a violation of biblical commands or values — then our duty to our higher master (Christ) is to resist the ungodly order from a human boss. The crucial distinction is often whose interests would be served by disobeying the order. If disobeying would protect the interests of another person or the larger community, rather than just our own self-interest, then there is a stronger case for disobeying. In some cases, this could jeopardize our careers or even cost us our livelihoods. No wonder Paul says, “Be strong in the Lord,” and “put on the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:10, 11).

Yet surely we express compassion for those — including maybe ourselves at times — who face the choice of obeying a genuinely ungodly order or suffering personal loss such as getting fired. This is especially true in the case of workers near the bottom of the economic ladder, who may have few alternatives and no financial cushion. Workers are routinely ordered to perform a variety of petty evils, such as lying (“Tell her I’m not in the office”), cheating (“Put an extra bottle of wine on table 16’s tab — they’re too drunk to even notice”), and idolatry (“I expect you to act like this job is the most important thing in the world to you”). Do we have to resign over every one of them? Other times, workers may be ordered to do serious evils. “Threaten to drag her name through the mud if she won’t agree to our terms.” “Find an excuse to fire him before he uncovers any more falsified quality control records.” “Dump it in the river tonight when no one is around.” Yet the alternative of losing a job and seeing our family slide into poverty may be — or seem — even worse than following the ungodly order. Often it’s not clear which alternatives are more in accord with biblical values and which are less. We must acknowledge that the decisions can be very complex. When we are pressured to do something wrong, Christians need to depend on God’s power to stand firmer against evil than we ever believed we could. Yet we also need to bear Christ’s word of compassion and forgiveness when we find that Christians cannot overcome all the evils of the world’s workplaces.

When *we* are the ones in authority, then, we should order only work that Christ would order. We do not order subordinates to harm themselves or others in order to benefit ourselves. We do not order others to do what in good conscience we will not do. We do not threaten those who refuse our orders out of conscience or justice. Though we are bosses, we have bosses of our own, and Christians in authority still have a heightened duty to serve God by the way we command others. We are Christ’s slaves, and we have no authority to order or obey anyone else in opposition to Christ. For each of us, no matter our position in the workplace, our work is as a way of serving — or failing to serve — God.

## Conclusions (Ephesians)

Only a few verses of Ephesians deal precisely with the workplace and even these are directed at thieves, slaves and masters. But when we glimpse how God is restoring all of creation through Christ, and when we discover that our work plays an essential role in that plan, then our workplace becomes a primary context for us to do the good works that God has prepared for us. Ephesians does not tell us specifically what good works God has prepared for each of us in our work. We must look to other sources to discern that. But it does tell us that God calls us to do all of our work for the good. Relationships and attitudes in the workplace are transformed as we see ourselves and our coworkers mainly in terms of our relationship with Jesus Christ, the one true Lord.

Ephesians encourages us to take a new perspective about our lives, one in which our work is an outgrowth of God's own work of creating the world and redeeming it from sin. We work in response to God's call to follow Jesus in every aspect of our lives (Eph. 4:1). At work, we discover the opportunity to do many of the good works that God intends for us to do. Thus, in our offices, factories, schools, households, stores and every other place of work, we have the opportunity to "render service with enthusiasm" to the Lord (Eph. 6:7).

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## Philippians and Work

*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

Philippians 2:11b-12

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## Introduction to Philippians

Work requires effort. Whether we do deals or drive trucks, raise children or write articles, sell shoes or care for the disabled and aged, our work requires personal effort. If we don't get up in the morning and get going, our work won't get done. What motivates you to get out of bed each morning? What keeps you going throughout the day? What energizes you so that you can do your work with faithfulness and even excellence?

There are a wide variety of answers to these questions. Some might point to economic necessity: "I get up and go to work because I need the money." Other answers might refer to our interest in our work: "I work because I love my job." Still other answers might be less inspiring: "What gets me up and keeps me going all day? Caffeine!"

Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi provides a different sort of answer to the question where we find strength to do our work. Paul says that our work is not the result of *our own* effort, but that *God's* work in us is what gives us our energy. What we do in life, including on the job, is an expression of God's saving work in Christ. Moreover, we find the strength for this effort by the power of God within us. Christ's work is to serve people (Mark 10:35), and God empowers us to serve alongside him.

Almost all scholars agree that the Apostle Paul wrote the letter we know as Philippians sometime between 54 and 62 A.D.[7] There is no unanimity about the place from which Paul wrote, though we know it was written during one of his several imprisonments (Phil. 1:7).[8] It is clear that Paul wrote this personal letter to the church in Philippi, a community he planted during an earlier visit there (Phil. 1:5; Acts 16:11-40). He wrote in order to strengthen his relationship with the Philippian church, to update them on his personal situation, to thank them for their support of his ministry, to equip them to confront threats to their faith, to help them get along better, and, in general, to assist them in living out their faith.

Philippians uses the word "work" (*ergon* and cognates) several times (Phil. 1:6, 2:12-13, 2:30, 4:3). Paul uses it to describe God's work of salvation and the human tasks that flow from God's saving work. He doesn't directly address issues in the secular workplace, but what he says about work has important applications there.

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## God's Work in Us (Phil 1:1-26)

In the context of his opening prayer for the Philippians (Phil. 1:3-11), Paul shares his conviction of God's work in and among the Philippian believers: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). The "work" Paul refers to is the work of new birth in Christ, which leads to salvation. Paul himself had a hand in that work by preaching the Gospel to them. He continues that work as their teacher and apostle, and he says it is "fruitful *labor* for me" (Phil. 1:22). Yet the underlying worker is not Paul but God, for God is "the one who began a good work among you" (Phil. 1:6). "This is God's doing" (Phil. 1:28).

The NRSV speaks of God's work "among you," while most English translations speak of God's work "in you." Both are apropos, and the Greek phrase *en humin* can be rendered either way. God's good work begins *in* individual lives. Yet it is to be lived out *among* believers in their fellowship together. The main point of verse 6 is not to restrict God's work either to individuals or the community as a whole, but rather to underscore the fact that all of their work is God's work. Moreover, this work isn't completed when individuals "get saved" or when churches get planted. God continues working in and among us until his work is complete, which happens "by the day of Jesus Christ." Only when Christ returns will God's work be finished.

Paul's job is evangelist and apostle. There are marks of success and ambition in his profession, as in any other. How many converts you win, how much funding you raise, how many people praise you as their spiritual mentor, how your numbers compare to other evangelists — these can be points of pride and ambition. Paul admits that these motivations exist in his profession, but insists that the only proper motivation is love (Phil. 1:15-16). The implication is that this is true in every other profession as well. We are all tempted to work for the marks of success, including recognition, security and money, which can lead to "selfish ambition" (*eritias*, perhaps more precisely translated as "unfair self-promotion"). [9] They are not entirely bad, for they often come as we accomplish the legitimate purposes of our jobs (Phil. 1:18). Getting the work done is important, even if our motivation is not perfect. Yet in the long run (Phil. 3:7-14), motivation is even more important, and the only Christ-like motivation is love.

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## Do Your Work in a Worthy Manner (Phil 1:27-2:11)

Since our work is actually God's work in us, our work should be worthy, as God's work is. But apparently we have the ability to hinder God's work in us, for Paul exhorts, "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27). His topic is life in general, and there is no reason to believe he means to exclude work from this exhortation. He gives three particular commands:

1. "Be of the same mind" (Phil. 2:2)
2. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3)
3. "Look not to your own interests, but the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4)

Again, we can work according to these commands only because our work is actually God's work in us, but this time he says it in a beautiful passage often called the "hymn of Christ" (Phil. 2:6-11). Jesus, he says, "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave, and being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8-9). Therefore God's work in us — specifically Christ's work in us — is always done humbly with others, for the benefit of others, even if it requires sacrifice.

### BE OF THE SAME MIND (PHIL. 2:2)

The first of the three commands, "be of the same mind," is given to Christians as a body. We shouldn't expect it to apply in the secular workplace. In fact, we don't always want to have the same mind as everyone around us at work (Romans 12:2). But in many workplaces, there is more than one Christian. We should strive to have the same mind as other Christians where we work. Sadly, this can be very difficult. In church, we segregate ourselves into communities in which we generally agree about biblical, theological, moral, spiritual and even cultural matters. At work we don't have that luxury. We

share the workplace with other Christians with whom we disagree about such matters. It may even be hard to recognize others who claim to be Christians as Christians, according to our judgments.

This is a scandalous impediment to both our witness as Christians and our effectiveness as co-workers. What do our non-Christian colleagues think of our Lord — and us — if we get along worse with each other than with non-believers? At the very least, we ought to try to identify other Christians in our workplaces and learn about their beliefs and practices. We may not agree, even about matters of great importance, yet it is a far better witness to show mutual respect than to treat others who call themselves Christians with contempt or bickering. If nothing else, we should set aside our differences enough to do excellent work together, if we really believe that our work truly matters to God.

Having the same mind as Christ means “having the same love” as Christ (Phil. 2:2). Christ loved us to the point of death (Phil. 2:8) and we are to have the same love he had (Phil. 2:5). This gives us something in common not only with other believers but with non-believers in our workplaces: we love them! Everyone at work can agree with us that we should do work that benefits them. If a Christian says, “My job is to serve you,” who would disagree with that?

DO NOTHING FROM SELFISH AMBITION OR CONCEIT (PHIL. 2:3)

Regarding others as better than ourselves is the mind-set of those who have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:3). Our humility is meant to be offered to all the people around us, and not just to Christians. For Jesus’ death on the cross — the ultimate act of humility — was for sinners, and not for the righteous (Luke 5:32, Romans 5:8, 1 Timothy 1:15).

Workplaces offer unlimited opportunities for humble service. You can be generous in giving credit to others for success and stingy in passing out blame for failure. You can listen to what someone else is saying instead of thinking ahead to your reply. You can try another person’s idea instead of insisting on your own way. You can give up your envy at another person’s success or promotion or higher salary, or, failing that, you can take your envy to God in prayer instead of to your buddies at lunch.

Conversely, workplaces offer unlimited opportunities for selfish ambition. As we have seen, ambition — even competition — is not necessarily bad (Romans 15:20, 1 Corinthians 9:24, 1 Timothy 2:5), but unfairly advancing your own agenda is. It forces you to adopt an inaccurate, inflated assessment of yourself (“conceit”), which puts you into an ever more remote fantasyland where you can be effective neither in work nor in faith. There are two antidotes. First, make sure that your success depends on and contributes to others’ success. This generally means operating in genuine teamwork with others in your workplace. Second, continually seek accurate feedback about yourself and your performance. You may find that your performance is actually excellent, but if you learn that from accurate sources, it is not conceit. The simple act of accepting feedback from others is a form of humility, since you subordinate your self-image to their image of you. Needless to say, this is helpful only if you find



accurate sources of feedback. Submitting your self-image to people who would abuse or delude you is not true humility. Even as he submitted his body to abuse on the cross, Jesus maintained an accurate assessment of himself (Luke 23:43).

LOOK NOT TO YOUR OWN INTERESTS, BUT THE INTERESTS OF OTHERS (PHIL. 2:4)

Of the three commands, this may be the hardest to reconcile with our roles in the workplace. We go to work — at least in part — in order to meet our needs. How then can it make sense to avoid looking to our own interests? Paul does not say. But we should remember that he is speaking to a community of people, to whom he says, “let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). Perhaps he expects that if each person looks not to his or her individual needs, but to the needs of the whole community, every person’s needs will be met. This is consistent with the body analogy that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12 and elsewhere. The eye does not meet its need for transportation, but relies on the foot for that. So each organ acts for the good of the body, yet finds its own needs met.

Under ideal circumstances, this might work for a very close-knit group, perhaps a church of equally highly committed members. But is it even meant to apply to the non-church workplace? Does Paul mean to tell us to look to the interests of our co-workers, customers, bosses, subordinates, suppliers and the myriad of others around us instead of our own interests? Again, we must turn to Phil. 2:8, where Paul depicts Jesus on the cross as our model, looking to the interests of sinners instead of his own. He lived out this principle in the world at large, not the church, and so must we. And Paul is clear the consequences for us include suffering and loss, maybe even death. “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.” There is no natural reading of Phil. 2 that lets us off the hook of looking to the interests of others at work instead to our own.

For an application of this passage, see "Price to Turn" at [Country Supply Study Guide](#) by clicking [here](#).

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## Following Christ as Ordinary Christians (Phil 2:19- 3:21)

In fact, Philippians gives us three examples — Paul, Epaphroditus and Timothy — to show us that all Christians are meant to follow Christ’s model. “Join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us,” Paul tells us (Phil. 3:17). He depicts each of these examples in a framework based on the hymn of Jesus in chapter two.

Person	Sent to a difficult place	In obedience/ slavery	Taking grave risks	For the benefit of others
Jesus	found in human form (2:7)	taking the form of a slave (2:7)	obedient to the point of death (2:8)	emptied himself (2:7)
Paul	live in the flesh (1:22)	servant of Jesus Christ (1:1)	my imprisonment (1:7), becoming like Christ in death (3:10)	for your progress and joy (1:25)
Timothy	send Timothy to you soon (2:19)	like a son with a father (2:22)	not specified in Phil., but see Romans 6:21	will be genuinely concerned for your welfare (2:20)
Epaphroditus	send you Epaphroditus (2:25)	your messenger (2:25)	came close to death (2:30)	to minister to my need (2:25)

The message is clear. We are called to do as Jesus did. We cannot hide behind the excuse that Jesus is the only son of God, who serves others so we won't have to. Nor are Paul, Epaphroditus and Timothy supermen whose exploits we can't hope to duplicate. Instead, as we go to work we are to put ourselves into the same framework of sending, obedience, risk and service to others:

Person	Sent to a difficult place	In obedience/ slavery	Taking grave risks	For the benefit of others
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Workplace Christians	go to non-Christian workplaces	work under the authority of others	risk career limitation for our motivation to love as Christ loves	are called by God to put others interests ahead of their own
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Are we allowed to temper the command to serve others *instead of* ourselves with a little common sense? Could we, say, look first to the interests of others whom we can trust? Could we look to the interests of others *in addition* to our own interests? Is it okay to work for the common good in situations where we can expect to benefit proportionally, but look out for ourselves when the system is stacked against us? Paul doesn't say.

What should we do if we find ourselves unable or unwilling to live quite so daringly? Paul says only this: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil. 4:6). You can only get through the difficult decisions and demanding actions required to look to the interests of others instead of your own by constant prayer, supplication and thanksgiving to God. This is not meant as abstract theology, but as practical advice for daily life and work.

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## Everyday Applications (Phil 4:1-23)

Paul describes three everyday situations that have direct relevance for the workplace.

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## Resolving Conflict (Phil 4:2-9)

Paul asks the Philippians to help two women among them, Euodia and Syntyche, come to peace with each other (Phil. 4:2-9). Although our instinctive reflex is to suppress and deny conflict, Paul lovingly brings it into the open where it can be resolved. The women's conflict is not specified, but they are both believers who Paul says "have struggled beside me in the work of the Gospel" (4:3). Conflict occurs even between the most faithful Christians, as we all know. Stop nurturing resentment, he tells them, and think about what is honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and praiseworthy in the other person (Phil. 4:8). "The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:7), seems to begin with appreciating the good points of those around us, even (or especially) when we are in conflict with them. After all, they are people Christ died for. We should also look carefully at ourselves and find God's reserves of gentleness, prayer, supplication, thanksgiving, and letting go of worry (Phil. 4:6) inside ourselves.

The application to today's workplace is clear, though seldom easy. When our urge is to ignore and hide conflict with others at work, we must instead acknowledge and talk (not gossip) about it. When we would rather keep it to ourselves, we should ask people of wisdom for help — in humility, not in hopes of gaining an upper hand. When we would rather build a case *against* our rival, we should instead build a case *for* them, at least doing them the justice of acknowledging whatever their good points are. And when we think we don't have the energy to engage the other person, but would rather just write off the relationship, we must let God's power and patience substitute for our own. In this we seek to imitate our Lord, who "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:7) of personal agendas and so received the power of God (Phil. 2:9) to live out God's will in the world. If we do these things, then our conflict can be resolved in terms of what the true issues are, rather than our projections, fears and resentments. Usually this leads to a restored working relationship and a kind of mutual respect, if not friendship. Even in the unusual cases where no reconciliation is possible, we can expect a surprising "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). It is God's sign that even a broken relationship is not beyond the hope of God's goodness.

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## Supporting Each Other in Work (Phil 4:10-11, 15-16)

Paul thanks the Philippians for their support for him, both personal (Phil. 1:30) and financial (Phil. 4:10-11, 15-16). Throughout the New Testament, we see Paul always striving to work in partnership with other Christians, including Barnabas (Acts 13:2), Silas (Acts 15:40), Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), and Prisca and Aquila (Romans 16:3). His letters typically end with greetings to people he has worked closely with, and are often from Paul and a co-worker, as Philippians is from Paul and Timothy (Phil. 1:1). In this he is following his own advice of imitating Jesus, who did almost everything in partnership with his disciples and others.

As we noted in Phil. 2, Christians in the secular workplace don't always have the luxury working alongside believers. But that doesn't mean we can't support one another. We could gather with others in our professions or institutions to share mutual support in the specific challenges and opportunities we face in our jobs. The "Mom-to-Mom" program<sup>[10]</sup> is a practical example of mutual support in the work place. Mothers gather weekly to learn, share ideas, and support each other in the job of parenting young children. Ideally, every Christian would have that kind of support for their work. In the absence of a formal program, we could talk about our work in our usual Christian communities, including worship and sermons, Bible studies, small groups, church retreats, classes and the rest. But how often do we? Paul went to great lengths to build community with the others in his calling, even employing messengers to make long sea voyages (Phil. 2:19, 25) to share ideas, news, fellowship and resources.

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## Handling Poverty and Plenty (Phil 4:12-13, 18)

Finally, Paul discusses how to handle both poverty and plenty. This has direct workplace relevance because work makes the difference between poverty and plenty for us, or at least for those of us who are paid for our work. Again, Paul's advice is simple, yet hard to follow. Don't idolize your work in expectation that it will always provide plenty for you. Instead, do your work because of the benefit it brings to others, and learn to be content with however much or little it provides for you. Tough advice, indeed. Some professions — teachers, health workers, customer service people and parents, to name a few — may be used to working overtime without extra pay to help people in need. Others expect to be amply rewarded for the service they perform. Imagine a senior executive or investment banker working without a contract or bonus target saying, "I take care of the customers, employees and shareholders, and am happy to receive whatever they choose to give me at the end of the year." It's not common, but a few people do it.

Paul says simply this:

I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, or having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.... I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied. (Phil. 4:12-13, 18)

The point is not how much or how little we are paid — within reason — but whether we are motivated by the benefit our work does for others or only for our self-interest. Yet that motivation itself should move us to resist institutions, practices and systems that result in extremes of either too much plenty or too much poverty.

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## Conclusions (Philippians)

Though Paul does not address the workplace distinctly in Philippians, his vision of God's work in us lays a foundation for our considerations of faith and work. Our jobs provide a major context in which we are to live out the good work God has begun in us. We are to seek the same mind as other Christians in our places of life and work. We are to act as though others are better than ourselves. We are to look to the interests of others instead of our own. Without directly addressing work, Paul seems to demand the impossible from us in the workplace! But what we do in the workplace is not just our effort. It is God's work in and through us. Because God's power is unlimited, Paul can say boldly, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

## Key Verses and Themes in Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians

<p><b>Galatians 2:19b-20</b> I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.</p>	Living in Christ by faith
<p><b>Galatians 5:1</b> For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.</p>	Freedom in Christ, not slavery
<p><b>Galatians 5:6</b> For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.</p>	Faith working through love
<p><b>Galatians 5:13</b> For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.</p>	Freedom to become “slaves” through love.
<p><b>Galatians 5:16</b> Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.</p>	Live by the Spirit, not the flesh
<p><b>Galatians 5:22-23a</b> The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.</p>	The fruit of the Spirit
<p><b>Galatians 6:10</b> So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.</p>	Working for the good of all and the household of faith

<p><b>Ephesians 1:9-10</b> [God] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.</p>	<p>Everything — including our work on earth — is a part of God’s plan.</p>
<p><b>Ephesians 2:8-10</b> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.</p>	<p>Although your salvation comes only by grace through faith, you are nonetheless created in Christ Jesus to do good works.</p>
<p><b>Ephesians 4:28</b> Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.</p>	<p>Work hard so that you can share with those in need.</p>
<p><b>Ephesians 6:5-8</b> Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.</p>	<p>If ordered to do good work, work eagerly as if for the Lord. If ordered to do evil work, refuse, since evil work cannot be done “to the Lord.”</p>
<p><b>Ephesians 6:9</b> And, masters, do the same to [your slaves]. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.</p>	<p>If you are in a position of authority, do not order your subordinates to do anything contrary to God’s commands.</p>
<p><b>Philippians 1:6</b> I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>God will complete the work he has begun in us.</p>

<p><b>Philippians 2:2</b> Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.</p>	<p>Christians must not let divisions prevent them from bearing witness and working effectively in the world</p>
<p><b>Philippians 2:3</b> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.</p>	<p>Take advantage of the unlimited opportunities in the workplace to treat others as wiser or smarter or better than yourself</p>
<p><b>Philippians 2:4</b> Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.</p>	<p>We should meet the needs of the community around us instead of our own. If others do the same, then our needs will be met, although there is no guarantee that they will do so.</p>
<p><b>Philippians 4:12-13, 18</b> I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.... I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied.</p>	<p>The way to be freed from idolatry of the rewards we seek from work (money, power, status, etc.) is to be motivated by the benefit our work has for others and to be content with whatever rewards may come.</p>

## ENDNOTES

- [1] See Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 41 (Waco, TX: Word, 1990), lxxiii-lxxxvii.
- [2] See, for example, Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: State University of New York, 1988).



- [3] See “Colossians and Philemon at Work” at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).
- [4] For discussion of these issues and their implications, see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 42 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), xlvii-lxxiv; “Ephesians, Letter to the” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).
- [5] See “Household Codes” and “Haustafeln” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
- [6] *Colossians and Work* at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).
- [7] Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, revised and expanded by Ralph P. Martin, Word Biblical Commentary (New Testament), vol. 43 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004, orig. 1983), xxvii-xxix, xxxix-l.
- [8] See “4.3. Place and Date” of “Philippians, Letter to the” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter Varsity Press, 1993)
- [9] *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon* (Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1995), G2052.
- [10] See [www.momtocom.org](http://www.momtocom.org).