

## How to View Your Job

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Rich Nathan

April 13-14, 2002

Work: Christians in the Workplace

Genesis 2:15

Over the next five or six weeks, I want to tackle the subject of work from a biblical perspective. I want to do this for a number of reasons. I think that there is an incredible gulf in most people's minds between Christianity on the one hand, and work on the other. It's like that line from the poem, "East is east and West is west, and never the twain shall meet." For most people, work is work and church is church and never the twain shall meet.

There was a survey done by the George Barna Association regarding individual behavior in about twenty one different areas of life: entertainment, consumption, spending habits, leisure time, sexual habits, marital satisfaction, divorce – a range of lifestyle issues was surveyed by the Barna Group, and the very unhappy findings were that there was no significant difference between Christians and non-Christians in any lifestyle area, except in the area of religion – Bible reading, church going, and prayer.

George Barna, who is America's preeminent pollster regarding religious practice in America, said that if you followed a random group of people around for one year, according to his surveys, it would be virtually impossible to find out who the Christian was and who the non-Christian was except as it applies to religious practice – church going, Bible reading, and prayer. I pray that his findings are untrue. I fear that Barna's stats are accurate.

For many people, Monday mornings are a thousand years separated from Sunday mornings. What you do at church, how you relate at church, the worship, the message, is not at all related to what you experience out there. A very common perspective is that I've got pressures the church doesn't understand at all and never talks about.

Well, I want to talk about it, especially as it pertains to work. Let me be honest with you here and tell you that I don't want to spend my life as a pastor discussing with you some arcane theory that is of interest to maybe a handful of theologians or philosophers, or some fascinating interpretations of a verse that has relevance to only a few highly committed prayer warriors in our midst. I don't want to spend my life trying to persuade you to believe something that the bulk of you already believe, so that every week I just preach to the already convinced. My desire here at the Vineyard is for people to walk out of church every week saying, "I now see, in a fuller way, how Jesus Christ really is the Lord of my whole life, that he is not just the Lord of church and religion and singing and Bible reading, but also that he is the Lord of my whole life."

Whether we are talking about our marriages, or our child raising, or living as a single person with a roommate, or your sexual purity, or your work habits, or the way you handle your money and your checkbook, or your leisure time, or what you do to entertain yourself, or the problems you are having with a relationship. I now understand how Jesus is the Lord of this area and how the fact that Christ is the Lord impacts me. It makes a difference.

Years ago I had a picture of the way that many of us as workers relate to Jesus Christ. According to our survey last year, a high percentage of you said that you read the Bible four to five times a week, and not just at church. But, I got a picture of the way we workers sometimes relate to the Lord. You get up. You make a pot of coffee. You do your devotions, read your scripture passages for the day, take some time to pray, shower, get dressed, Jesus walks you out to your car, and then he stands on the curb and waves good-bye to you and you wave good-bye to him and you say, "I'll see you, Jesus, when I come home tonight and when I go to my small group meeting."

Some people, of course, say as they pull out of the church parking lot, "I'll see you, Jesus, next week at the Vineyard." You do better than that. You just take a 10-hour gap in your real relationship with Christ. He sort of jumps in and out of your life.

Well, I'm convinced that just because someone is converted to Christ - just because at some point a person knelt down and accepted the free gift of forgiveness offered to them by the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross and his glorious resurrection through a person's repentance and faith - just because a person is born from above by the power of the Holy Spirit, it certainly does not mean that Christ has conquered all areas of his life.

It's kind of analogous to the early European settlers, who landed on the East Coast of America. They set up their little towns and carved out a life along the Eastern Seaboard. But there were vast tracts of land on this continent that were left unexplored and unconquered. In the same way, even though Christ has landed in your life and he's carved out a little toe-hold in your heart, wouldn't you admit that there are vast tracts of territory in your life? Maybe it's the way you handle your anger and temper, your tendency towards self-pity and complaining, what comes out of your mouth by way of gossip, your relationship with your parents, the way you handle money. There are vast tracts that have not yet been conquered by Christ.

And I think that there are a lot of people who would be surprised by how much practical teaching there is in the Bible on the subject of work. Whether we are talking about business ethics, or how you select a job, or understanding how to deal with failure on the job, or what makes a business successful, or handling relational problems in the workplace, or being content, the Bible is as

comprehensive a manual as you will find anywhere concerning on-the-job counsel and employment advice.

The old Puritans, the people who brought Christianity to America, had a comprehensive view of life and work. But today there is a deafening silence in the church. Most people have never read a book, or been to a seminar, or listened to a tape that applies biblical principles to every day work issues. Many Christians feel purposeless in their jobs. Well, what we do is just a job. Lots of Christians would agree with Dolly Parton, "Working 9-5, what a way to earn a living. Barely getting by, it's all taking and no giving. They just use your mind and they never give you credit. It's enough to drive you crazy, if you let it."

How should the Christian look at his work? If you didn't just leave Jesus at home in the morning, or in the church parking lot waving good-bye to you; if Christ was with you in the workplace; if your work was an area that Christ, indeed, not only explored, but conquered, how would you think about your job and what happens to you over the course of an average week?

By way of introduction to this series on Christians in the Workplace, I want to talk today about understanding your work. Let's pray.

The framework that I want to employ today for your understanding of work is the basic three-fold lens through which the Christian ought to look at all of life - the three-fold lens of creation by God; the fall of men and women; and redemption through Jesus Christ: Creation, the Fall, Redemption.

Why do I have a need for relationships? Because I have been created for community. It is not good for man to be alone. We were created by God in his image, male and female. Our created nature is not to live isolated lives. In fact, isolation cuts across your created image. If you mostly are alone, if you have no deep relationships, you are slashing your created image as a member of community.

Why are my relationships so difficult? Why is there so much conflict? Why am I not getting along with so and so? Why is there misunderstanding? Why does her temperament rub me the wrong way? The Fall, all of creation, including our relationships are broken and imperfect. We bruise and hurt each other.

How can my relationships be improved in this fallen world? Redemption through Jesus Christ. The possibility of living in a reconciled community called the church. Creation, the Fall, Redemption, that's the way you think about life.

Why do you have sexual feelings? You were created to have them. Why does sex give you such a hard time? Why is it in your life so twisted and broken? The Fall. How do you get free from sexual addictions? Redemption in Jesus Christ.

Freedom comes as you learn how the work of Christ applies to the area of your sexuality.

Creation, the Fall, Redemption is the tri-focal lens through which we look at work. I want you to see this in Genesis 2. We find man in the Garden of Eden, man in paradise. And in Genesis 2:15, we read this, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." What we discover is that work is not the result of the Fall, that man in paradise wasn't living in a state of glorious inactivity. Paradise was not a perpetual vacation. Work was created before the Fall.

What a different perspective on work.

Studs Terkel, the Chicago columnist, wrote a book some years ago called "Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do." Listen to the opening paragraph of Studs Terkel's introduction. Here's what he writes:

*This book being about work is, by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents...about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all) about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the working wounded among the great many of us.*

Work was created by God. Is that the way the average person thinks about work?

Recently I was reading some quotes from a McDonald's Shift Supervisor who said that basically he spends his day amusing himself by ticking off his supervisor and making fun of co-workers who are trying to do a good job. He said, "Just for laughs, I dumped a bunch of ketchup packets on the ground through the drive-thru so that I watched car tires roll over them and spray ketchup on the car. Then as the drivers go by, I flick pennies at their cars. I love getting their orders wrong because they can't do anything about it. Sometimes I take some of the old buns and flip them around like frozen Frisbees. Then at the end of the day, I like to slide across the freshly mopped floor. About the only way to get back at me, [he said] if you really want to tick a McDonald's worker off, just take some ketchup and spread it over one of the trays and pour some salt in it. That really upsets McDonald's workers."

Do you think that guy goes to work every day saying, "Work has been created by God?"

And because work was created by God, being a worker is part of our created design. Just think, God himself is a worker. Jesus says in John 5:17, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." Part of our imaging of God is to work. And that is why unemployment, or underemployment

is so painful. There is something fundamental to our created design as human beings that we get the opportunity to work.

I remember after I was fired from my first job as an attorney. I worked at a law firm here in town for just a couple of months. I was fresh out of law school and I got fired. The story is too long to go into, but one of its major components is that I did not wish to read through Hustler and Penthouse magazines to prepare for a liable case in which the law firm was representing none other than Larry Flynt. It wasn't a great job for a young Christian attorney.

But when I couldn't find any other work, I became so depressed that I tore our entire bathroom out right down to the floor joists and the ceiling rafters and wall beams. I mean, I took it all out – all the old plaster and lap. I carried it out of the house. I put up new dry wall, new ceramic tile, a new sink, new cabinets – everything. Anybody who knows me and knows how much I don't like to do work on the house would say, "Rich, you must have been really depressed."

But I couldn't just sit around. We are, by design, made to work.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, back in the early 90's, a former member of the Politburo in Moscow said that the Soviet system for seventy years destroyed people's spirituality. That's the word he used. He was a communist. He said the Soviet system for seventy years destroyed people's spirituality by robbing them of the incentive to work. Any system, any do-gooder plan that robs people of the incentive to work destroys their created image. You were made to work.

And do you know that work is such a fundamental part of this universe that you don't get done working even in the new heavens and the new earth? I don't know what your view of eternity is. For many people, it is an endless choir where all we do is sing all day. And for those of us who don't have particularly good voices, if singing was all we did in heaven, we could turn it into hell.

Isaiah 65 talks about the new heavens and the new earth. Rather than glorious inactivity, perpetual vacation, Isaiah says that the new heavens and the new earth involve building houses. "They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain..."

There is going to be work to do. See, because we are by design workers, Christians do not experience the week as TGIF – Thank God it's Friday. Because we were created to work, the Christian view of work is TGIM – Thank God it's Monday. Is that your view of work?

Part of the reason why we don't say "Thank God it's Monday" is because we find ourselves so separated from God very often in our work. As a result of Greek influence in the early church, there grew to be this dualism between sacred work on the one hand and secular work on the other. There was in the Middle Ages in the church a hierarchy that many evangelicals, many from our church tradition, really still have.

The highest level of work is martyr, or missionary. Those are the absolute heroes. And then you come down to a second tier and that's the full-time Christian worker – the pastor, the evangelist, and the Christian youth worker. And then the lowest tier is everyone else – the car salesman, the attorney, the teacher, the IT group leader, and the personnel manager. Everyone else is in the third tier.

Dorothy Sayres, who is a writer and professor in England, a dear friend of C. S. Lewis, once gave a lecture in 1942 titled, "Why Work," in which she said the following: "In nothing has the church so lost its hold on reality as in her failure to understand or respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments and is astonished to find as a result the secular work of the world has turned to purely selfish and destructive ends and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion. But is it astonishing? How can anyone remain interested in religion, which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of a life?"

Do you know that there is no sharp line of demarcation between work on the one hand and worship on the other? In fact, if you look at Genesis 2:15 where it says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it," the word for "work" is the common Hebrew word for worship – *avodah*. And the word for "taking care" is the common Hebrew word for obey – *somrah*. To work and to take care of the Garden blurred in the Hebrew mind with to worship and to obey God. See, in the Hebrew mind the worker was functioning in his particular realm of life as a priest. The service that a priest rendered in the temple to God was called *avodah*. The work that a farmer rendered was called the same thing – *avodah*.

Do you know that the same thing is true in the New Testament in Greek? The word for "work" – *latreia*, is the same word that the New Testament writers used for "worship." Work for the biblical Christian becomes a way for us to worship God. It's not that we have worship on the one hand and work on the other, nor that we turn work into the object of our worship, by way of the idolatry of careerism, where we try to find all of our meaning and value through our work. Work for the biblical Christian is a vehicle for worship. I do this work under the lordship of Christ unto the Lord and all day long in my work, I'm looking around for God. To work and to take care of my little corner of the world is my act of worship and obedience to God.

Do you get it? You don't get it.

Let me take this in a slightly different direction. What is your view of paradise? When you hear the word "paradise," what comes into your minds? White sand beaches? A royal blue sea? You floating on a raft in the sun having a little bell to ring so that you call some cabana boy on the beach, who wades out into the sea with your drink and turns you over so that you don't get too bad of a sunburn?

What's your view of paradise? If your view of paradise is just glorious inactivity and doesn't include work, you are not thinking like a biblical Christian. Listen. Here's precisely the problem with many Christian retirees. It is not "Thank God it's Friday," it's "Thank God I'm sixty to sixty five years old and now I get to spend the rest of my life in glorious inactivity." Where is retirement in the Bible? I mean, praise God for that season in life where you don't have to work forty to fifty hours a week just to put food on the table. But retirement? Inactivity? A biblical Christian says, "forget that!"

Where in the Bible do you see people retired? Moses? He was 120 and still going strong for the Lord. Joseph was 110.

One of my all-time Christian heroes is a man named Charles Simeon. I have silhouettes of Charles Simeon preaching hanging in my office. Simeon preached at a church attached to Cambridge University in England from the 1780's – 1830's. He was the spiritual advisor behind that group of English Christians who ended the slave trade. Simeon was the pastor of some of the guys in Parliament, like William Wilberforce, and he spiritually guided the movement that ended slavery in the British Empire. I love Charles Simeon and I look forward to spending time with him in the Kingdom of God.

When Charles Simeon was forty seven years old, his health broke and he became weak and had health problems which lasted for thirteen years, until he was sixty. One day, on a visit to Scotland as he crossed over the border into Scotland, the sickness lifted. There was this miraculous intervention of God. He felt suddenly better like the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment.

In any case, Simeon felt the Lord speaking to him and the Lord said to him, "You have been promising yourself an active life up until age sixty and then a Sabbath evening [what we would call retirement]. So I laid you aside because you entertained the notion of resting from all of your labor. Now you've arrived at that period of time where you thought you were going to rest, but instead I have determined in this last hour of your life to double, triple, and quadruple your strength."

Simeon went on to pastor very effectively for another twenty years.

Retirement? Raymond Lull spent the last years of his life from age seventy nine on learning Arabic and was eventually martyred in North Africa when he stood in a crowd at a marketplace and preached Jesus boldly among the Muslims.

Retirement? I love Pastor John Piper's line. He says, "Senior Citizen Discounts are not for the purpose of vacation, they are for the purpose of you doing short-term missions."

We were created to work, whether you draw a paycheck or not. Older folks, you were created to be workers.

Parents, you are doing damage to your child's spiritual health, if childhood is just a period of glorious inactivity. If the only thing your child has picked up in your home is how to be served, how to have mom clean his room, and do his laundry, and do his homework projects, you are denying the created image of God in your child. Your child has been created to be a worker. Give him something to do.

Well, if work was a part of paradise, if we were created to work, if we are called to work, then why is work so miserable for many of us? Why is our experience of work so unhappy?

Again, from Studs Terkel's book, listen to some of these quotes:

"I'm a machine," says the spot welder.

"I'm caged," says the bank teller.

"I'm a mule," says the steel worker.

"A monkey can do what I do," says the receptionist.

"I'm less than a farm implement," says the migrant worker.

"I'm an object," says the fashion model.

Blue collars and white collars use the same phrase, "I'm a robot."

"There's nothing to talk about," the young accountant despairs.

Why is our experience of work so far from paradise? Because here's the second lens through which you need to work – the lens of the Fall. When our first parents sinned against God by deliberately disobeying his commandment in the Garden, when our first parents rejected God's Word and aligned themselves instead with God's enemy, the serpent, God cursed them and through them, he cursed us.

One of the most prominent areas where we experience the curse in is in our work. Look at Genesis 3:17 with me. *To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field."*



Here are three curses. First of all, there is the curse on the work place: Cursed is the ground because of you.” The ground is the environment that we work in.

**INSERT VIDEO CLIP** (portrays a very negative attitude about work, from the movie Office Space)

We wonder why our work environment is so negative. It seems like we Christians are always swimming upstream in an environment of gossip, or negativity, or sexually-laden humor. We struggle under terrible management. We have bosses that are incompetent or indecisive or insecure or are tyrants. Or our coworkers are lazy.

When I was in college, I worked doing various repairs on campus buildings around our university. One work crew that I worked with was the laziest bunch of malingerers that you can imagine. Their refrain all day long was, “Let’s slow down. You’re going to make us look bad. Stop working. Why don’t you sit down?” These guys didn’t put in two good hours of work a day and yet they complained all day long about how hard their jobs were.

Our work environments are cursed. Doctors just want to do medicine, but they find themselves in this environment of government red tape and HMO’s that try to chisel them, and Medicare and Medicaid that don’t even allow them to make back their costs and push them to put sick patients out of the hospital. What’s going on here? The work place is cursed.

Your work results are cursed. We read in verse 18, “It will produce thorns and thistles for you.” You work and work and yet you don’t see the results of your labor. There always seems to be these countervailing forces hindering your full productivity.

The book of Ecclesiastes describes this situation very well. There was an inbuilt futility to so much of work. I mean, you work and you think you’ve accomplished something and then you have to do the same thing all over again. Haven’t you noticed that? The kitchen floor remains clean for about forty five seconds. A minute later it is dirty again. The dog runs over your freshly washed floor. Your desk never stays clear. You clean it off and there is another load of work dumped on it. You answer twenty five e-mails and there are fifty more. You respond to five phone messages, and there are seven more. You put out three fires and six more spring up.

There’s a futility built into work. Because of the curse on work, frequently success is not proportionate to our work or talent. Ecclesiastes 9 says, “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or favor to the learned, but time and chance happen to them all.” Thorns and thistles.

So often, a person fails at work because of circumstances totally beyond his control. A family member gets sick. A trusted friend or a partner walks away with clients. An accountant embezzles. A supplier shuts down.

There is a curse on the work place. There is a curse on your work results. And there is a curse on you as a worker. Genesis 3:19, *By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.*

We bring into our workplace the curse. We are bearers ourselves of the curse. Not only do our environment and our work conspire against us, but we ourselves conspire against our ultimate joy.

Friends, I say this with all affection, but you come to the workplace with a whole set of your own problems. Some of you struggle with authority. You really don't like to have anyone tell you what to do. Some of you struggle with poor work habits, with laziness. You struggle with the tendency to procrastinate. Perhaps you envy the success of a coworker. You desire recognition. You feel entitled to some pats on the back. You struggle with workaholism or competitiveness. Or you are trying to find all your meaning in life through your career. You worship your own success. You believe you are a self-made person.

Friend, you are cursed. And I am cursed.

People ask, "Why is it when I felt called to this particular career, to this particular workplace, I felt like God was directing me to take this job. Why is it that it has turned out to be so hard, so unsatisfactory?"

Your work is cursed. What did you expect? Unsoiled paradise? No thorns or thistles? No sweat of your brow?

So is that it? Is life just like a Woody Allen movie – it's miserable or horrible and then you die?

No, there's a third lens through which the biblical Christian looks at work – the lens of redemption. Creation. We were created. We were designed to work. All of us, young, old, middle aged or single, we've got to be productive. It's part of our image bearing. But whatever we do, whether paid or unpaid, in the home or in the office, as volunteers or for a check, it's never going to be perfect.

And yet, the cross of Jesus Christ and the power of the resurrection offer for us the hope that our work can be redeemed. N. T. Wright, the great biblical scholar, comments that it's interesting after the apostle Paul gets done teaching on the resurrection of Jesus, the order of the resurrection, the nature of the resurrection body, he concludes by saying in 1 Cor. 15, *Therefore my dear brothers and*

*sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

His conclusion to his teaching on the resurrection is not, “therefore, brothers and sisters, we will live forever in eternity, floating around on a cloud.” His conclusion to his teaching on the resurrection is “Therefore, you know that your work is not in vain.”

Do you understand it? The way that work is redeemed is that your purpose in work as a Christian changes. You are no longer working for just a paycheck or to put food on the table. You are no longer working to gain a sense of your own personal fulfillment or inner satisfaction. You are no longer working just for your boss. Work is redeemed when you begin to work in your job for the Lord.

I’m working for the Lord. I want my job today to be an act of worship. That’s what the apostle Paul says in Colossians 3. *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.*

Do you want to feel better about your work? Change your boss. Stop working for your boss and start working for the Lord. The goal is not to squeeze as much money out of your job as you can, to maximize your profits and your bottom line. That is not the ultimate goal. The goal is to serve the purpose of Jesus here.

Do you know the story behind the most massive investigation of business corruption in American history? The story behind Enron and the Arthur Anderson Corporation? Do you know how that came to public attention?

I have a friend in Houston who said that a female auditor who was a Christian worked on the Enron books and got increasingly concerned by what appeared to her egregious breaches of acceptable accounting practices. She went to her Bible study leaders in her small group, and she shared confidentially, “Here’s what’s going on in my job working for a multi-billion dollar corporation. What should I do?”

They said, “Blow the whistle.” You, Christian, are called to a life of integrity, to serve the Lord and the Lord’s purposes in your workplace. One Christian woman, who chose to stand up for integrity, for truth-telling, for God’s will in the workplace, lit the fuse that blew up a multi-billion dollar corporation and a multi-billion dollar auditing firm.

I love people who see their jobs as serving the Lord.

How do you redeem your work? Your purpose at work changes. And you change. So much of what’s wrong with work is inside of us. I want to finish by reading to you from Colossians 3. Just listen to these verses and we are going

to apply them to the workplace. Paul writes this: *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.*

What if you were not clothed with a sense of entitlement, over-sensitivity to every perceived slight by your boss or coworkers? What if you repented of your complaining spirit and, instead, you went to work full of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience?

*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against each other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

What if you actually forgave every person at your job for everything they have done against you? What if you held no grudges? What if you were forbearing? What if you forgave as the Lord forgave you?

*And over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of God rule in your hearts...*

What if you went to work full of the peace of Jesus Christ? What if you were a peacemaker and you had a peaceful disposition? And be thankful. What if you were actually grateful and got down on your knees to God and said, "Thank you for my job. Thank God it's Monday and I get to carry Jesus Christ into my workplace."?

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. What if your mind was transformed by God's Word? What if you let your mind dwell on the word of God all day long?

*Whatever you do whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.* What if all through the day you are looking around for Christ? Use me, Jesus Christ. Bring your kingdom into this place through me. May I be an instrument of your will.

What if you changed? What if you were a different person? Do you think your work would change? Let's pray.

## **How to View Your Job**

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Rich Nathan

April 13-14, 2002

Work: Christians in the Workplace

Genesis 2:15

### **I. Work Is Created (Genesis 2:15)**

- A. Work Is Not The Result Of The Fall
- B. Work Is Not Divided Sacred and Secular
- C. Paradise Is Not Glorious Inactivity

### **II. Work Is Fallen (Genesis 3:17-19)**

- A. Cursed Work Environment
- B. Cursed Work Results
- C. Cursed Workers

### **III. Work Can Be Redeemed (1 Cor. 15:58)**

- A. A New Purpose (Col. 3:23,24)
- B. A New You (Col. 3:12-17)