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Bridgeway Church
Colossians #20
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Sermon Summary #20

“You are Serving the Lord Christ” Colossians 3:20-4:1

This may well turn out to be the strangest sermon you’ve ever heard! I say that because of the difficulty in making a connection between Paul’s instructions for how parents are to raise their children, how children are to obey their parents, and how slaves and masters are to relate to one another. Adding to the oddity of this message is the obvious fact that Paul is talking about a form of slavery that simply doesn’t exist in our cultural context today. Whereas, tragically, it may be found in other societies, here in America we have a more difficult time understanding and making application of what Paul says about slaves and masters.

This raises an interesting question. I believe, like you (I trust), that “all Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16a). Although Paul originally had in mind the OT when he wrote this to young Timothy, his statement surely extends to all Scripture, inclusive of the NT and his own writings (see 2 Peter 3:15-16).

But how can a passage giving instructions to slaves and masters be “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 1:16b)? What can this passage possibly say to us in the twenty-first century when slavery no longer exists in the U.S. and everyone acknowledges that it is a moral reproach? Are there ethical ideals that can be gleaned from Paul’s instructions to slaves and masters in the first century that are relevant, even binding, on us in the twenty-first? In other words, once we’ve conceded that Paul is addressing a situation that no longer obtains in our society, are there moral principles in his counsel that we might discern in the text and apply to circumstances that bear some degree of resemblance to the slave-master relationship?

There’s no easy answer to that question. When I first preached through Colossians in the early 1980’s I rather naively suggested that the slave/master relationship in the first century was comparable to the employee/employer relationship today. But the correspondence between the two is far from exact, making application in this instance a more difficult task than interpretation. Still, there appear to be certain principles in Paul’s instruction that apply to a number of contexts today, the workplace being one.

Household Codes in the NT

It’s important that you understand what is happening in Colossians 3. In various places in the NT, primarily in the letters of Paul, we come across what are called “*household codes*.” These were quite common in the ancient world. They consisted of the duties and responsibilities of the various members of a family. There are several of these “household codes” in the NT: Ephesians 5:22-6:9; 1 Peter 2:13-3:7; and here in Colossians 3:18-4:1 (some would also point to 1 Tim 2:8-15; 5:1-2; 6:1-2; and Titus 2:1-10).

Here in Colossians 3, Paul began in v. 18 with his instruction for wives and how they should relate to their husbands. He then turns in v. 19 to husbands and how they should relate to their wives. Now we see in v. 20 that he turns his attention to children and their relationship to their parents. In v. 21 Paul addresses fathers in particular and how they should raise their kids. Then, in Colossians vv. 22-25 he speaks to slaves and how they should obey their masters. Finally, in 4:1 he addresses himself to masters and how they must treat their slaves with justice. You have to admit it makes for odd reading. And that is why it also makes for odd preaching. So I will do my best to explain what is happening in this section of Colossians and how it applies to us today.

Children relating to their Parents (3:20)

To the children, Paul says: “obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord” (Col. 3:20). Given the fact that Paul addresses these “children” directly indicates that they are old enough to understand and respond to his exhortation. One can only assume that they are young enough to still be living at home and are under the authority

and oversight of their parents. Paul appears to have the Christian family in view, for he says that such obedience is well pleasing “in” (not “to”) the Lord; in the context of the relationship among Christian believers in a family.

When Paul says their responsibility extends to “all things” he’s reminding us that children are not the judges of what they should or should not obey in terms of parental precepts. In the parallel passage in Ephesians Paul declares that obedience to one’s parents “is right” (Eph. 6:1). He doesn’t contemplate the situation where parental orders may be contrary to Scripture, but surely the law of Christ must take precedence. There is something to learn from the fact that disobedience to one’s parents is included among the pagan vices that indicates a refusal to acknowledge and honor God (Rom. 1:30). Paul also mentions disobedience to one’s parents as a mark of the last days when wickedness will abound (2 Tim. 3:2). Needless to say, this is no small matter!

Parents relating to their Children (3:21)

But parents beware: the obedience your children must render to you in no way excuses or justifies insensitivity, brutality, or an overbearing authoritarianism that crushes their spirit. “Fathers,” says Paul, “do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged” (Col. 3:21). Although “fathers” are here singled out as being primarily responsible for discipline (but note that this Greek word means “parents” in Hebrews 11:23), in homes where there is no father (due to divorce or death) the mother assumes that role. Of course, she also must be a partner with her husband and the two of them, ideally, of one mind when it comes to establishing the moral and spiritual guidelines by which the family will be shaped.

To “provoke” or “exasperate” refers to the result of undue severity in the exercise of discipline. Firmness is necessary, but should always be tempered with purity of motive and a loving spirit, lest “they become discouraged” (the NASV says, “that they may not lose heart”).

This is crucial: an overly obsessive and exacting posture in parenting leads to emotional and spiritual irritation in the child. An inflexible, judgmental, and demanding temperament creates despondency in a child’s heart. Faced daily with this harshness, children often simply give up, convinced that nothing they ever do will be quite right or good enough to please their parents. When it comes to motivating your children, the threat of punishment, while often necessary, is less successful than the promise of reward.

Parenting is undoubtedly the most difficult, yet rewarding, endeavor any of us will ever experience. We need the wisdom of the Word and the patience of Job and the kindness of Christ and the authority of the Father and the power of the Spirit, and, well, just about all the help we can get!

What follows is certainly not an exhaustive list of what makes for raising godly children. Most of it comes from a combination of experience, insights from those who know far more than I do about the subject, personal failures (and a few instances of success), common sense, and the Bible. Needless to say, perspectives on parenting abound, both inside and outside the Church. I heard recently that Amazon.com has 55,614 books on parenting!

- (1) Evangelize your children from an early age, but don’t browbeat them or try to extract a confession of faith so that others will think highly of you for having children who are believers.
- (2) Don’t let your use of technology and social media rob you of face-to-face personal time with your kids. Turn off TV, the internet, your smart phone, and engage them in one-on-one conversation.
- (3) Develop a strategy for educating your kids in the truth of God’s Word (Deut. 6:4-9; Psalm 78:1-8).
- (4) Aim to impart to them wisdom for life and not merely knowledge (Prov. 2:1-10).
- (5) Make every effort and sacrifice to be present at as many events / games / performances as is possible.
- (6) The greatest thing you can do for your children is to model for them your love for God.
- (7) Be diligent to display a Christ-like love for your wife / for your husband. Never speak ill of him/her or criticize him/her in their presence.

- (8) Let them see your daily devotion to the study of Scripture.
- (9) Don't be afraid or hesitant to repent quickly and ask the forgiveness of your child when you make an error in judgment or discipline (Col. 3:12-13).
- (10) Talk often and openly with them about the temptations and pressures they face in today's culture.
- (11) Never ever draw comparisons between your kids and their peers, especially in relation to success in academics, athletics, or physical attractiveness.
- (12) Beware of two extremes: not disciplining and over-disciplining. Don't confuse love with over-indulgence. Consider the error of both Eli (1 Samuel 2:29) and Adrian Peterson!
- (13) Never discipline when your anger is evident.
- (14) Make family meals more than just about eating: ask questions, share your life, encourage them to share theirs.
- (15) Teach them financial responsibility and wisdom at an early age.
- (16) Don't bail them out of difficulties or from the consequences of their own bad decisions unless it puts their physical and spiritual welfare at stake.
- (17) Strive for visible and vocal unity with your spouse on matters of discipline and rules of behavior. If your spouse has already made a decision concerning a request from a child, even if it is one with which you disagree, insist that the kids abide by it. Talk about the difference of opinion with your spouse in private.
- (18) Plan and come to a decision early regarding their schooling / private vs. public vs. home-schooling.
- (19) Pray with them daily. Pray for them openly, where they can hear you.
- (20) Don't be afraid to cause your child short-term discomfort in order to spare them long-term disaster. Parenting means establishing healthy boundaries for your children, holding them accountable for their choices, shaping their minds and wills, and applying firm but fair discipline.
- (21) Don't make the mistake of thinking that because your child is cute and cuddly that he/she is not fallen, selfish, and spiritually dead. See Prov. 22:6, 15.
- (22) Never underestimate the life-giving power or, conversely, the death-inducing destruction in the tone of your voice and the look in your eyes when communicating with your kids.
- (23) "Do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (Col. 3:21). In the parallel passage in Eph. 6:4 Paul expands a bit: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). How do parents "provoke" their children?
 - (a) First, by setting standards of achievement and behavior that it is impossible for them to meet and then belittling them when they inevitably fail.
 - (b) We provoke them to anger when we fail to honor our promises to them. Hypocrisy is the primary culprit.
 - (c) We provoke them to anger when we shame them in front of their peers with biting criticism.
 - (d) We provoke them to anger when they meet our expectations or fulfill the goals we set for them and then do not hear words of praise and affirmation. They can often be provoked and harmed by the mere absence of encouragement and affirmation.

(e) We provoke them to anger when the discipline we impose is disproportionate to the offense they've committed. When they realize that no matter what they do they will never be treated fairly, their hearts turn hard and resentful.

(24) Distinguish between family rules and the Bible. Make sure they understand the difference, for example, between "You must clean up your room before you go to school in the morning" and "You must always speak truthfully and not lie." If you don't differentiate between the two you will likely raise up a legalist who cannot tell the difference between what the Bible commands and what culture does.

(25) Even should you do everything as thoroughly and lovingly as is humanly possible, don't ever forget that neither the father nor the mother is ultimately responsible for the decision your children make concerning the gospel or for the life choices that come when they reach adulthood. Otherwise you will take credit for what God has done should they pursue a godly life, or you will suffer false guilt by taking blame for something not finally under your control.

Bondservants/Slaves and their Responsibility to a Master (3:22-4:1)

Let me say right from the start that I find using this terminology of "slave" and "master" rather offensive. And the reason is that our concept of "slavery" today is quite different from what existed in the time of Paul when he wrote this instruction. Let me explain.

Immediately upon hearing the word "slaves" we run into a problem. People today can't think of that word without associating it with the racial slavery that was so prevalent in the early years of America until the Civil War. The enslavement of black people in this country is such a reprehensible and nauseating chapter in our history that steps have been taken by English translators of the Bible to remove it entirely. That is why you see here in the ESV the word "bondservants." Few people will flinch when they hear that term, but "slaves" is another matter.

But we must remember two things. First, the slavery that existed in the ancient world, especially in Paul's day, *rarely if ever had anything to do with race*. The color of one's skin was irrelevant when it came to the issue of slavery in the first century. Slavery was almost entirely the result of *military conquest or economic indebtedness*. A conquered people could be enslaved by their enemies and forced to work in service to them. More often when an individual incurred massive amounts of debt that couldn't be repaid they were put into slavery to their debtors until such time as their labor paid off the amount they owed.

Some were slaves because they were born of slaves. But in general, they were well-treated. Yes, there were instances of brutality and oppression, but many of the sort of people Paul addresses were educated and professionally trained and were often paid for their services. They could even purchase their freedom.

The second thing to remember is that slavery in the ancient world rarely if ever suggested the moral or intellectual inferiority of the enslaved. Slaves were often quite well educated and extremely competent. There was never the thought that one was subjected to slavery because they lacked human dignity or worth or were in some sense of an inferior quality of person. So please put out of your mind altogether any link between Paul's use of the word here in Colossians and the race-based slavery that provoked our Civil War here in America.

But let's not paint too rosy a picture! Slavery was still, in most cases, *involuntary* and their legal rights and economic choices were greatly limited in comparison with those who were free.

The question I am most often asked is this: Why didn't Moses in the OT and Paul and other NT writers insist on the immediate abolishment of all forms of slavery? That's a good question. Here is my answer.

First, in the OT, the Mosaic Law regulated slavery in such a way that it was immensely more humane than the way it existed in surrounding pagan nations. Moses insisted that slaves be set free every seventh year (Exod. 21:2). The Law of Moses also commanded the death penalty for manstealing (Exod. 21:16), and generally sought to limit the institution in protection of the slave. Further, in the OT, as in the NT, slavery was generally not organized by race but by circumstance and economics (foreigners, debtors, etc.).

Second, in order to understand the Bible, we must recognize what is known as *progressive revelation*. This simply means that God does not always reveal his full and final will to us all at once, but instead he does so gradually, incrementally, over a long period of time. The content of God's revealed will in a very real sense grows. It develops from early seed form into the full flower in the NT. So, we must be careful that we don't pull a single verse out of its context and then assume that this is what God intended for all of human history.

Third, when God did reveal himself and his will to his people, he often would accommodate his revelation to particular cultural and historical contexts. That is certainly the case with the revelation of God's will that we know as the Old Testament or the Mosaic Law. It was designed to help God's covenant people, Israel, live in the midst of a perverse and wicked world. God's instruction to Israel was thus often adapted to this reality to enable them to survive amidst the pagan nations that surrounded them.

Fourth, this means that often times God's revealed will served to *regulate and restrain immoral behavior rather than immediately and instantaneously abolish it*. God tolerated or permitted polygamy in Israel, but never endorsed it as the ideal toward which people should strive. God tolerated and permitted divorce for a variety of reasons in the OT, but did not endorse it. That is why when Jesus was asked about the grounds for divorce, he said: "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:8).

What this means is that Scripture is known to regulate undesirable relationships without condoning them as permanent ideals (see Matt. 19:8; 1 Cor. 6:1-8). Paul's recommendation for how slaves and masters relate to each other does not assume the goodness of the institution.

Fifth, we must always recognize the difference between what is *described* in Scripture and what is *prescribed* in Scripture. In other words, often times certain practices are simply described or portrayed as occurring without any suggestion that what is described is good. We must never think that everything recorded in Scripture is designed to tell us how to behave or how to believe. We read in the book of Job of the counsel of his friends, most of which was in error about the nature of God. Simply because the Spirit records for us in Scripture the beliefs of Job's counselors does not mean we are to believe what they said about God. The author of the book simply describes their beliefs without endorsing them.

Someone might still object and say, "Okay, even if we agree that we are dealing in most cases with a less egregious form of slavery, and that perhaps God is accommodating his revelation within a historical context, I still don't understand why the Bible doesn't say *more* against slavery and simply abolish it altogether." That's a perfectly legitimate question, and I have two answers.

First, the authors of the NT, including Paul, were hesitant to call for immediate action to overthrow unjust cultural structures lest they be the cause of civil and social unrest. The early church was an oppressed people, living largely under Roman rule and law. Therefore, they chose not to advocate social upheaval that might potentially smear the reputation of the gospel. So it is clear that Paul is adapting to a temporary and ultimately repugnant social construct.

Second, the authors of the NT, and Paul in particular, did go to great lengths to articulate principles that would eventually undermine and abolish any and all forms of slavery. His strategy was to teach a theological perspective that sowed the seeds for the end of slavery; a spiritual atmosphere, if you will, incompatible with slavery and thus one in which slavery would eventually die out.

The clearest example of this is the short book of Philemon. Philemon owned a slave by the name of Onesimus. Onesimus ran away and made his way to Rome where he became a Christian and came into contact and relationship with Paul. If the Bible were in any sense pro-slavery, it would make sense for Paul to order Onesimus to return to Philemon and make restitution to his master and to obey him. But instead Paul asks Philemon to *receive him back "no longer as a bondservant (slave) but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother; . . . so . . . receive him as you would receive me"* (Philemon 16-17).

In other words, don't look at Onesimus as your slave. Look on him as your brother in Christ. Slavery as a cultural and social institution was still in place, but Christians should no longer treat one another on that basis but as equal brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul's point is that the logic of the gospel stands opposed to any and all forms of slavery. That is

why he envisions and actually encourages slaves to obtain their freedom if the opportunity arises. Here is what he said in 1 Corinthians 7.

“Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men” (1 Cor. 7:21-23).

Principles in Practice

Let’s begin by observing how Paul envisions the service slaves are to render to their masters. They are to obey them in **“everything”** (language similar to what we saw in v. 20 with regard to children and their parents). It goes without saying, of course, that this assumes the master does not require his servant to sin or to deny Jesus.

His work is not to be done **“by way of eye-service”** (v. 22b), an interesting phrase that translates one word in the Greek text. Paul has in mind an approach to one’s work designed either to attract attention or to avoid punishment (or both). Perhaps he has in mind work discharged only when one’s master (employer?) is present and observant, together with the tendency to trifle and piddle when he’s absent, hoping that one’s sloth won’t be detected.

A television commercial from several years ago beautifully illustrates what Paul has in mind. It portrayed an office where several employees took advantage of the boss’s absence: they played games, took naps, and generally shirked their responsibilities. They received advanced warning of his return to the office from the smell of an obviously unpleasant after-shave, providing them with time and opportunity to resume their duties and give the impression of having been diligently at work all along. When the boss switched to Mennen’s Skin Bracer, he returned unannounced and caught them in the act.

The point is this: Christians are to fulfill their responsibilities (whatever they may be and to whomever they are obligated) based on **principle, not pragmatism**. We work regardless of who may be present, conscious that another eye is upon us. Or as Paul says, **“you are serving the Lord Christ”** (v. 24b). He is always watching. And whatever wage you may or may not receive from another human, remember that “from the Lord” you “will receive the inheritance as your reward” (v. 24a; it’s important to remember that under Roman law a slave could never inherit anything).

We labor and serve and discharge our obligations ultimately to please Christ, not people (v. 22b). We must avoid a merely perfunctory and mechanical performance, and do all things “with sincerity of heart.” Reverence (or, fear) for the Lord, says Paul, must govern our actions. Yes, **even work is worship!**

As difficult as it may be, we must labor in God’s grace to look beyond mere earthly payment or praise as the motivation for our efforts. There is something inherently spiritual in all that a Christian does, whether that be the digging of a ditch, the preaching of a sermon, or the changing of a diaper. It is for Christ that we work. It is from Christ that the reward will come.

Is v. 25 addressed to slaves or masters? Probably both. Together they should remember that God takes no note of cultural achievement or fame or fortune when it comes to assessing right and wrong. Class distinctions are irrelevant.

Finally, Paul is quick to point out that if slaves have duties, so also have masters: they must treat their servants “justly and fairly” (Col. 4:1). They may have the upper hand in this life, but Christ is their Master too! Therefore, let them treat their servants with the same consideration and equity they themselves hope to receive from the Lord Jesus.

Conclusion

Simply put: all of life, whether in work or family or ministry, be it immensely significant or utterly mundane, all of life, I repeat, is subject to the sovereignty and governed by the lordship and ultimately lived to the glory of Jesus our Lord! Whatever our lot in life, wherever we may live, for whomever we may work, to whomever we owe allegiance, let us never forget that we do it all for Christ.