

## Slaves and Masters Under Christ

Colossians 3:22-4:1

May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### Intro

Paul continues the household codes by speaking to another relationship that was common in Rome, that of a master and slave. Many have an immediate cringe reaction upon reading this section – does the Bible condone slavery? Does it make slavery ok? It's not hard to imagine a white slaveholder in the south 200 years ago using this passage as a weapon against his slaves to compel their subservience to him. But would he be *using* or *misusing* the passage?

All of scripture is relevant for our lives, so we'll get to application at the end we'll consider what this has to say to modern employee/employer relationships. But there is some scaffolding we need to build first to get to that point.

### Historical context in Rome:

Slavery was common in ancient Rome. To not speak to the those under the yoke of slavery or to masters would be to overlook a large segment of people.

1/3 to 1/2 of the people in the Roman Empire were slaves at this point. Some cities may have been closer to 85%.

The history is mixed from this period. Instances of abuse and dehumanizing behavior, while many slaves had a fairly high social status equal to their owners.

They could own property and ½ were freed by the time they turned 30, the majority of others were freed at some point.

They couldn't be recognized by dress or outward appearance, it wasn't based on race or ethnicity.

Yet, many were severely abused, viewed as mere tools and less than equal as fellow humans.

### American context:

300 years of slavery, race based, chattel (viewed as possessions)

Founded upon kidnapping – clearly prohibited in Old and New Testaments

**Exodus 21:16** "He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death.

**1 Timothy 1:9-10** realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers... and kidnappers ... and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching,

"kidnappers" is literally "man stealer" and was used of kidnapping someone into slavery

It involved a brutal dehumanizing of a people group and had lasting effects even after slavery was officially ended and we moved into a period of Jim Crow laws promoting segregation.

Isabel Wilkerson's historical book, *The Warmth of Other Suns* brilliantly described the generational economic and social effects of slavery and the great migration in which 6 million African Americans left the south from 1920 to 1970 to escape the segregation and racism of the south, only to find more barriers to their success in their new locations in Chicago, LA, and New England.

The effects of slavery in our own country are not ancient history.

Understandable that we read a passage about slaves and masters and wonder how it fits with justice. We might wonder, why doesn't the Bible simply call for the overthrow of slavery?

The Bible doesn't condone slavery but it did give instructions for how to respond if you were in that situation. Ultimately it provided the moral underpinnings that led to the overthrow of slavery.

Notice that this passage and others speak to slaves directly as followers of Jesus, not as property of their masters. It assumes they are in the gathering of believers.

**1 Corinthians 7:21-23** Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. <sup>22</sup> For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave.

Not called to passively sit in a bad situation – if they are able to become free they should do so. But to recognize that they could still serve Christ even if their earthly circumstance didn't change. The Word spoke to them with honor and dignity that they likely wouldn't experience elsewhere.

1. How can slaves live for Christ? (3:22-25)

a. Obey your earthly master but fear the Lord. (v. 22)

- i. Grudging, halfhearted obedience would be understandable. And yet they are urged to obey with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.
- ii. Reminds us that God cares about our attitudes not merely our actions.
- iii. **Titus 2:9-10** Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, <sup>10</sup> not pilfering, but showing all good faith so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.
  1. The gospel is the jewel and our behavior can point to the greatness of the jewel, even in and perhaps especially in difficult, unjust circumstances.
  2. Reminder for us. If we praise God when the stock market is up, our job is stable, our social tank is full because we're around lots of people we love, that's appropriate but also understandable to others. But, we if can still praise God when our retirement has plunged erasing 3 years of growth, we've been furloughed from work, and we're feeling the painful loneliness of isolation. . . that shows where our true treasure is.
    - a. In other words, is Jesus great or is it just your life that's great?
    - b. It could be both, but when life is not great it can point to the greatness of Jesus that we still trust Him.
    - c. My greatest problem is not financial or social, it's spiritual. My sin – my rebellion against God – has been forgiven by Jesus.

b. Work heartily for the Lord rather than men. (vv. 23-24)

- i. Their work had dignity – it was for the Lord.
  1. "You're not working for your master that doesn't value you. You're working for the Lord."
  2. A correct theology of work tells us that work has dignity because we are image bearers of God made to make things. So whether it is intellectual property, computer coding, food, sewing, lawn mowing – as you create you reflect the Creator.
  3. For the believer, there is an added motivation that our work can be "for the Lord" as we honor Him with excellency and attitude.
- ii. Look to your inheritance from Christ. (v. 24)
  1. Their labor would not result in a share of the company, ownership of a field, greater wealth to pass on to their children. But from the Lord they will receive an inheritance. So, it is the Lord whom they serve.

2. Imagine how sweet that would have sounded in the ears of a slave. You are a child of the King. You have an inheritance and it is rock solid.
  3. The culture in the church should continually remind people that the words said to Jesus at His baptism are now true of us who are united to Christ, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”
- iii. Serving Christ AS they labor.
1. Not saying, “after you clock out remember that you service Christ as you teach SS, lead music, volunteer at the foodbank, etc.” Rather, while you are working in the field you are serving Christ, while you are designing buildings you are serving Christ, while you administer an IV you are serving Christ – do your work heartily.
- c. Trust in God’s impartial **justice**. (v. 25)
- i. Is this a warning or an encouragement?
    1. Could serve as both! Could see the encouragement that their abusive masters will get away with nothing. Every beating, every harsh word, every denial of justice will be seen and catalogued and punished without partiality.
  - ii. Imagine the powerlessness they would have felt.
    1. Imagine the powerlessness of a slave in the American south. Who do they go to when their master is unjust? To whom can they appeal? Who will give them justice and not another beating or a shrug of the shoulders?
    2. It’s not an excuse to avoid justice now. Governments are responsible to provide justice as one of their key duties to their citizens. But the reality is we will not always get justice in this life.
    3. This point keeps coming up in the Psalms that many of us have been reading as part of the “psalm a day through May” reading plan.
      - a. After describing the attacks of violent men, Psalm 58 ends with this affirmation:
      - b. **Psalm 58:11b** “Surely there is a God who judges on earth!”
      - c. **Psalm 59:2-4** Deliver me from those who do iniquity And save me from men of bloodshed. <sup>3</sup> For behold, they have set an ambush for my life; Fierce men launch an attack against me, Not for my transgression nor for my sin, O LORD, <sup>4</sup> For no guilt of *mine*, they run and set themselves against me. Arouse Yourself to help me, and see!
2. How can **masters** live for Christ? (4:1)
- a. Grant **justice** and fairness (v. 1a)
    - i. Imagine the slaves listening in on this instruction, knowing that this is what the Lord was commanding their masters.
      1. It would be a bit like the experience of sitting with my kids listening to myself preach about the duty of a father not to exasperate his children. They know that I’m hearing those things and accountable to those things.
    - ii. A few verses later he mentions a slave by name – Onesimus (4:9). We know about Onesimus from another book in the NT – Philemon. Philemon was written at the same time as Colossians and was directed to Philemon in the Colossian church. Listen to some of the instructions given to Philemon about Onesimus, his slave who Paul had met in prison and led to faith in Christ. The instruction goes beyond even “justice and fairness” to love and acceptance as a fellow brother.

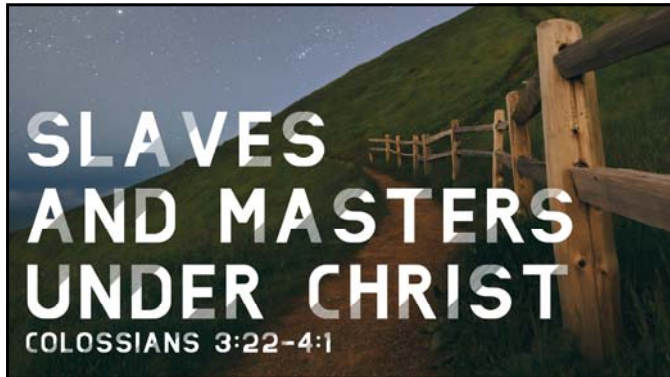
1. **Philemon 1:5** because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints;
  - a. He reminds Philemon of the love he has toward Jesus and all the saints (v. 5) – puts this relationship under the heading of love.
1. **Philemon 1:8-9** Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you *to do* what is proper,<sup>9</sup> yet for love's sake I rather appeal *to you*-- since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus--
  - a. He could order him to do what is proper but instead appeals to him for love's sake (v. 8-9)
1. **Philemon 1:10-11** I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,<sup>11</sup> who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.
  - a. Onesimus is now part of the family, Paul has “begotten him” and he is sending him back as his very heart (v. 10, 12)
1. **Philemon 1:15-17** For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever,<sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.<sup>17</sup> If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would* me.
  - a. He is sending him back no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother (v. 16)
  - b. Accept him as you would me (v. 17)

b. Remember your **Master** in heaven (v. 1b)

- i. Their authority is bound, delegated, and accountable.
- ii. It isn't the unlimited authority many masters thought they held in which they could treat slaves however they wished because the law had no punishment for them.
- iii. They would be held accountable for every act of injustice and mistreatment by their Master in heaven.

3. From slaves and masters to employees and employers

- a. Work heartily as for the Lord not merely when people are watching.
  - i. Kids, you can practice this now when your parents give you chores to do. Do you work hard only when they are watching?
  - ii. Teens starting your first jobs, you can stand out by working hard when no one is watching. Be the worker who keeps your phone put away and works with a good attitude because you're working not just for the paycheck but for Christ.
  - iii. Adults, work heartily even from home when no one is looking over your shoulder!
    1. **1 Peter 2:18-19** Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable.<sup>19</sup> For this *finds* favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.
    2. Even an unreasonable boss is no excuse to work poorly or have a bad attitude, although it might be a good reason to find a new job.
- b. Lead with fairness and justice.
  - i. If you're in a leadership role, don't let it go to your head. Remember your “master in heaven.”



1

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