

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

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Colossians 3:22-4:1 Serving the Lord.

Some commentators complain that Paul does not *protest* against slavery in these (or other) verses in the New Testament. They are upset and embarrassed that the apostle seems to simply 'go along' with the status quo instead of crying out for social change. And yet properly understood, Paul's words here to Christian slaves and masters are revolutionary and would pave the way, in time, for the institution of slavery to be abolished. And when this came, it would be Christians such as William Wilberforce who would bring the change.

In this section of the letter however, Paul is speaking about the way that a Christian's relationship with Jesus Christ changes all their other relationships. The believer's life is now centred on Christ. But Paul is showing how this primary relationship changes all others. So we have already seen how the Christian's new life in Christ changes the way that believing husbands and wives relate to one another. It also changes the way that parents and children relate to one another.

Our new life in Christ will be worked out, at least in part, by the new ways that we relate to other people in everyday life. And that would also have been seen, in Paul's day, in the way that Christian slaves and masters related to one another. Now the fact that Paul *addresses* slaves at all is quite revolutionary. And so is the *way* he speaks to them. For the Christian slave of course is considered to be an heir of salvation just as much as any other believer. He or she is treated with the same respect by Paul as the person who is free. The slave is equal with the free person before God. They have as much worth in God's eyes as anyone else. And as far as Paul is concerned, slaves have rights just as masters have an obligation and responsibility to care for them.

So the way that Paul addresses slaves in this letter must have been quite amazing. Indeed as many point out, Paul writes more words to the Christian slaves than to any other group in this part of the letter.

In the course of time, the institution of slavery *would* be abolished (at least officially). And God knew that when he inspired Paul to write these words. But the principles Paul establishes here are relevant for people in the *workplace* in every generation. So what is said to slaves and masters here can be applied quite legitimately to employees and employers in the modern workplace. And so the Scripture is showing us how we are to relate to others in the new life God has given us.

So let's think first about **Paul's word to slaves**. **Read verses 22-24**. If we could enter into the first century society Paul is writing to, we would understand how astonishing these words are. The mere fact that Paul addresses the slaves in such a tone is astonishing. For slaves were considered by many to be almost subhuman. No one paid any attention to them. They had no rights. They were just commodities. They were considered to be part of the assets of the owner, who in law, could do with their slaves as they pleased. The slaves only function was to serve the master in any way the master wanted. Their feelings or welfare were not considered to be relevant or important.

But Paul speaks to them. And God speaks to them. And Paul speaks more words to them than to anyone else. He speaks to them *before* addressing their masters. And he speaks to them with dignity. Of course Paul is addressing slaves who have become Christians and are part of the church at Colosse. So whatever Paul has said before this in the letter about the privileges of the Christian – all these things applies equally to them as well as to their masters - if their masters are Christians.

They were loved by God and had been rescued from the terrible dominion of darkness. They had been brought into the kingdom of the Son God loves. They had been given redemption and the forgiveness of sins. They had been reconciled to God through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. And Paul's prayers for the church were just as much for the slaves as for any free person or master. The believing slave had been given new life in the Lord Jesus. They must therefore continue to follow the Lord and live in him. And when Christ who was their life appeared, they too would appear with him in glory.

And they were one in the Lord with all other believers. We read verse 11 a few weeks ago. [Read 3:11](#). That's a remarkable verse for any slave to read and ponder. In Christ they were 'one' with everyone else. Equal in status. Equal in worth and dignity. Equally loved by God. And although in that society the 'free' person would not mix with the slave, nevertheless in the Lord Jesus, there was no barrier. They could worship God in the same way and approach the Lord in the same way and through the same name as everyone else.

But in terms of how they as Christians were now to serve their earthly masters, Paul has some quite specific words. Let's read them again. [Read verses 22-24](#). Over and over, Paul tells them that their real master is the Lord Jesus Christ. And in the Bible that is always considered the greatest privilege. That we can serve the Lord Jesus is the highest privilege. And the slave is to realise that it is really Christ they are serving day by day, and not any human master. So Paul talks here about their *attitude* as they serve these earthly masters. They are to work diligently. They are to work hard. They are not to adopt an attitude of doing the bare minimum to get by and avoiding punishment. Nor are they merely to *pretend* to be good workers when the master's eye is on them. They are in reality to be good workers.

People in the workplace today can have this same attitude can't they. They determine to do the bare minimum to get by and avoid criticism or the sack. As a grass cutting, Park's Department colleague of mine used to say in my student days – "We dodge along". But that is not to be the attitude of the Christian worker. He or she is not to simply 'dodge along'. Instead, they are to genuinely work hard at all times. They are to work with all their heart. Why? Because their real master is the Lord Jesus Christ whom they love. And actually, his eye is *always* on us. In our new life in Christ we are to please and serve the Lord Jesus by doing our earthly work conscientiously. Work with sincerity says Paul because you are really serving the Lord of lords.

This is Christ's will for us in the workplace. We don't know how the Colossians' earthly masters treated them, but we do know how their heavenly Master treated them. He treated them well. Indeed, he loved them. He died for them. And because they loved him, they were to express that love for Christ by working hard in their earthly master's house.

And yes, that attitude would be different. Other slaves would notice the difference and take note. Perhaps even the masters would notice the difference. It would be a good witness to Christ. And yet the main incentive in working well is simply to please the Master, Jesus Christ.

And in verse 24, Paul speaks about the Lord's reward for good service. [Read verse 24 again](#). The significance of this is that Roman law didn't allow a slave to *receive* an inheritance from their master. But Paul reminds them that they would receive an inheritance with their heavenly Master - and Paul talks of that in terms of a reward.

Now we mustn't misunderstand what Paul is saying here. Paul is not saying that our place in heaven or our salvation from the wrath to come is a *reward* for faithful service or good living. That flies in the face of the gospel of grace. It is only by God's grace that we are saved, through faith. Salvation is not by good works. It is only by grace that we receive an inheritance in heaven. Peter tells us how this inheritance is kept for us in heaven, it is eternal and will never perish spoil or fade.

And the Christian slave is saved by grace just as every Christian is saved by grace. But Paul talks here about the *reward* that Christ will give every one of his people for faithful service. Now God is under no *obligation* to give his children rewards. What we do for him is only our duty – and actually we fail to do our duty. But such is the generosity of the Lord and his love for his children, that the New Testament clearly speaks about rewards in heaven which the Master will graciously give his people for faithful service. And that's what the Christian slaves are being reminded about here.

Their earthly master would probably not reward them. After all, the slave is only doing his duty. But the heavenly Master will certainly give rewards for faithful service. His eyes are always on us. It's him we serve in our work. And Jesus will take note of how we work, and he shall be pleased to reward us one day in heaven.

And then verse 25. [Read verses 25](#). Everyone agrees that this verse is deliberately vague. It could remind the Christian slave that if anyone mistreated them – perhaps a master or another servant, then the Lord will see that and take the appropriate action at the right time. But it could also remind the Christian slave that if *they* did wrong, they must not think that being a Christian will somehow exempt them from punishment.

But the word *favouritism* is important. [Read verse 25 again](#). There is no favouritism with God. Perhaps the slave naturally thought that God had selected the masters as his 'favoured ones'. Well, maybe on the earth, they were in a more privileged position. But that does not mean God treats the earthly master with special favour. At the final judgement there will be no favouritism. All people are equal before God. They are equal in worth and equal in responsibility for how they have lived before their creator.

Now the application of these words for us can be quite revolutionary because they remind us that whatever work we do, we do it for the Lord. It also reminds us that he will reward us for our work. Sometimes we can unhelpfully think of *servicing the Lord* only in terms of doing church work or mission work. But that is not so. We do serve the Lord of course as we serve in his church and reach out to others in a mission setting. And yet some Christians are called to serve the Lord by being motor mechanics or mothers or butchers or hair dressers. And they serve the Lord too as they do their daily work.

Some of the work we do for the Lord is 'paid', and some is not. And when we enter so called 'retirement' we are still in the Lord's service. For whatever work we do, we do it for the Lord. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. In caring for that person - you are serving the Lord. Doing the dusting or the hoovering you are serving the Lord. Doing that portrait or researching that subject – it's all working for the Lord. And so we are to do it all with sincerity of heart and out of reverence for Christ. It's him we are serving. And he will take note of all that we do, and we will be rewarded for how we have done it. How we have done these accounts, how we have looked after those children or served that customer. We are to excel in it all for his sake. And one day the Lord will reward us for what we have done.

But we serve him in this earthly way for only a relatively short time. One day we will be with him, and we shall understand that it has all been, in some way, a preparation for far greater work with far greater privileges which he has prepared us for in eternity.

Paul's word to slaves. But then secondly and more briefly **Paul's word to masters.** [Read 4:1](#). Again these words must have come across as quite revolutionary to Paul's society. Indeed some viewed them as being a threat to the whole stability and economy of the Roman empire. Basically Paul is telling the masters that they *do* have responsibility to care for their slaves and that God will hold them accountable.

As we have said before, in Roman law, a master could treat his slave in any way he chose. In himself, the slave was considered to be nothing and had nothing. The slave was his master's property

and the master had absolute authority over his slave to do with him or her as he pleased. When the slave was too frail to work they might well be left to themselves in weakness or sickness. Their children might well grow up completely uncared for. The old often died in extreme poverty and were sometimes abandoned by the roadside.

So Paul's words to the Christians who were masters are revolutionary. [Read 4:1](#). Paul is telling them that they could *not*, as Christian believers, simply treat their slaves as they liked. Perhaps the law of the land did not place any restrictions on how they treated their slaves, but God did. The Lord was watching, and he would hold every master to account for the way they treated their servants.

As the Christian master worked out his new life in the Lord Jesus Christ he had to care for his slaves – out of reverence for Christ. He had to provide for his servants. He had to be just and fair with his servants. He had to recognise that they were human beings, just like him. Indeed if the slave he owned was a Christian, that slave was now a brother in Christ, and the master should remember that this Christian was also a child of God and dearly loved. He or she was someone for whom Christ died and would one day take to glory.

Therefore the Christian master had to treat his servants well, for the Lord's sake. Indeed Paul reminds the master that they had a Master in heaven. The implication of that is twofold. First, the master is being prompted to remember the way God had treated him in Christ. For he had been shown great mercy, compassion, kindness, generosity and patience by his heavenly Master. Should he not therefore treat his earthly servant in a similar way? But secondly, the implication of Paul's word is that if the master illtreated his servant, then the Lord would hold him accountable for this mistreatment.

And these words have always been legitimately applied to Christian employees and to Christian bosses, and to the way that they should treat their workers well for the sake of Christ. We are familiar I think with the way the Cadburys – John and George treated their factory workers in the early twentieth century - the working conditions they created, the little Bourneville village that was built for the workers, the pension plans and unemployment benefits they made for their workers, as well as the care and fair treatment they received from their Christian masters. By this sort of behaviour, the Christian employer or the Christian boss will honour the Lord and testify to the Lord's goodness.

And it also applies to anyone whom the Lord may give us 'charge over' in any way. Treat them well for Jesus' sake. Remember how the Lord has treated you. And treat the other person to the best of your ability as someone made in the image of God and therefore precious. And if that other person is a Christian believer, remember he is your brother or sister. Love them in the Lord for they are one with you and joint heirs of the great salvation of God.

And so our relationship with the Lord Jesus has to be worked out in the nitty gritty of everyday life. And so we end by going back again to the summary statement in verse 17. [Read 3:17](#).