

Colossians 3:22-4:1

“Servants and Masters”

Sermon

Tim Black

1.

Introduction

1.

The issue

1.

In our passage today Paul teaches us the reciprocal duties of slaves and masters. We rarely experience slavery directly in America today, but because the relation between slaves and masters was uniquely economic we should recognize that Paul's exhortations still apply to our roles as employers and employees.

2.

Application

1.

So to help us better recognize how Paul's words apply, I want you to think of the most disagreeable, painful, loathsome job you have ever done. The one you would easily call slave labor. Maybe it was mowing the lawn, or cleaning the bottom of a dumpster. Diapers. My father said building trails for the Forest Service as a summer job taught him that he didn't want to do that the rest of his life. What was the worst job you ever had?

2.

I also want you to think of the job you have right now; the main form of service to others that occupied your time this past week, or this past year.

3.

Now in that job, you are in the position of a servant, and Paul's words to slaves apply to you.

4.

Context

1.

Onesimus.

1.

Length. Paul spends considerably more ink on the relations of slaves and masters than on those of husbands and wives or parents and children. This is likely because Paul's letter to the Colossians has a special concern for a slave named Onesimus, about whom we learn in more detail in the book of Philemon.

2.

Onesimus. Onesimus was from Colosse 4:9, and though his name means "useful" he had been a useless slave to his master Philemon, from whom he had unjustly escaped, but had become a Christian under Paul's teaching while Paul was in prison, and so Paul rightly calls him a brother in Christ, and now that he is a believer Paul commends him to Philemon as most useful in furthering Christian ministry. Paul exhorts Philemon, if Philemon considers Paul his equal, to consider Onesimus his equal as well. Paul does not command Philemon as if Philemon is his slave, but cleverly leaves Philemon

free to decide whether to treat Onesimus as a freedman or a slave.

3.

Paul's general response to slavery. You can see here part of Paul's general response to slavery. Paul does not wage war against slavery, but he gives us the gospel which can leaven society so that slavery more and more becomes nonexistent. The principles of Christianity will destroy, and have destroyed, most forms of slavery with which it comes into contact.

4.

Outline Even though today's passage is longer than the preceding ones addressing wives and husbands and children and parents, Paul follows the same outline with which we have become familiar:

1.

Addressees

2.

Command

3.

Reason

1.

Body

1.

Slaves 22

1.

Addressees: Slaves 22a

1.

Colossians 3:22 [Slaves](#),

2.

Identity of these slaves. Paul first addresses slaves. Who are these slaves? We have already noticed that these slaves are primarily household slaves, because Paul groups them with other household relations. We may also presume that Paul addresses Christian

slaves regardless of whether their masters are Christians, and that Paul addresses

Christian

masters regardless of whether their slaves are Christians.

3.

Institution of slavery. The institution of slavery in Colosse was no doubt colored by the composition of Greek cities and the requirements of Roman law

.

-

Greek cities. Regarding Greek cities, the ratio of slaves to free men in Athens was four to one—yes, four slaves to one free man—so it would not be surprising at all if a large number of believers in the early church were slaves. It's also fitting that the number of verses Paul devotes to slaves and masters is respectively four verses to one!

-

Roman law. Under Roman law, slaves were not considered to be persons, but property. Their masters could deprive them of food, clothing, sleep, property, health, and comfort, and could ridicule and beat them, even kill them, without being punished or even raising an eyebrow.

-

Economic. Slavery is primarily an economic relationship, because the master's chief purpose is to receive the slave's work, and to that end he provides the slave with food, clothing, and lodging. For this reason, the unique nature of the obligations that exist in this relationship is due to the fact that something is exchanged.

-

Forms of slavery. There are several ways people can become slaves, each leading to a somewhat different kind of slavery, and each being due to a different kind of sin.

-

First, a person may be unable or unwilling to work. Inability is not a sin but unwillingness is. The poor are often victims of both problems, and regardless are unable to pay all their bills. The forms of slavery that result from not working are that:

-

The man may voluntarily sell himself completely, or until his debt is paid off.

-

The man may be put in jail involuntarily until he pays his debt.

-

The man may become an indentured servant, meaning he contracts to serve for a temporary time, usually in return for travel, food, and housing expenses.

-

Indentured servitude in OT Israel was unique in that it would only last until the year of Jubilee, when the slave would be set free. Though a Hebrew who became a slave would be owned by his master in a formal sense, he was not to be treated ruthlessly, but as a hired servant. This means the master had an obligation to pay the servant, and that there were limits to what he could require of the servant. Ultimately, Hebrew slaves belonged to God, not to

their earthly masters.

-

Second, a person can become a slave by being a prisoner of war, presumably due to his own country's sin, as was the case with the Canaanites.

-

Third, a person can become a slave through the sin of man-stealing, which is clearly a sin on the part of the captor, and is condemned in Deut. 24:7. It is by this form of slavery the Africans became slaves in America.

-

Fourth, a person can become a slave by committing a crime and being put in prison. This slavery is due to the slave's sin.

-

Interestingly, Paul wrote Colossians from prison, as well as the book of Philemon (Col. 4:18; Philemon 1). Epaphras, who founded the church in Colosse, was also in prison with Paul. Paul knew what it meant for his life and activity to be unjustly bound and commanded when he wrote these words to Christian slaves, and to Christian masters.

-

Which kind of slavery is Paul addressing? Most likely he is addressing slaves who are owned completely and perpetually by their masters.

-

You are not a slave, but you might be an employee. In what way is Paul addressing you in this passage? Essentially, Paul transforms slaves into employees, and employees into servants of God

.

-

Command: Obey 22b

1.

Colossians 3:22 obey in everything those who are your earthly masters,

-

Paul works this transformation first by commanding slaves to “obey in everything those who are your earthly masters.”

He does not say that slavery is always unjust. Even when slavery is unjust, he still commands slaves to obey their masters. A slave who converts to Christianity does not immediately receive a license to be set free, just as a prisoner who converts must still serve his sentence. Otherwise we would see a phenomenal number of false conversions and a tremendous social upheaval. Paul does not even advocate the “nonviolent resistance” of the Civil Rights Movement.

Rather, he commands

nonviolent obedience

. Resistance is rebellion.

-

While Paul commands obedience, ultimately he also

considers slavery to be an evil. As we've seen, it is almost always the result of a sin. He reminds slaves of their obligation to obey and tells them the right method to escape the yoke of slavery in **1 Cor. 7**. That method is to obey the law, and pay the required price to buy your freedom :

-

1 Corinthians 7:20-23 20 Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. 21 Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. **But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.**

22 For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free

when called is a slave of Christ. 23 You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

-

Extent: All things 22c

-

Paul tells slaves the extent to which they must obey their masters—they must obey “**in all things.**”

This indicates they are not merely employees who spend

part

of their day, and part of their life, serving their employer, but are slaves who spend

all

of their day, and all of their life, serving their master. As such they are obligated to obey their

master in all things.

-

What this means for you today is that you must obey your employer in all things that specifically are part of his business and your job. When you're on his clock, your time is his. Your time is not yours to do as you please.

-

Who to obey: those who are your “Lords” according to the flesh 22d

-

Paul specifies who you are to obey as “those who are your earthly masters

,” which in the Greek is more literally “
those who are your ‘lords’ according to the
flesh.

” Throughout this passage, the Greek word
behind the English words “
Lord

” and “
master

” is just one word—the word
kurios

. Paul uses
kurios

7 times in this passage, drawing a
connection between our earthly “
lords

” and the Lord Jesus Christ. “Curious,” isn’t
it?! Here he says our masters on earth are
only masters in a limited sense—even if they
have complete control over the flesh of our
bodies, they do not own our souls. They are
our “

lords according to the flesh,

” but are not the Lord of our soul. This

means that as a Christian slave, and a Christian employee, your lowly earthly service is rendered in obedience to a far higher call.

-

Manner 22e-23. Because we set our minds on things above, not on earthly things, we should render obedience in a way that far outstrips the ways of this world.

-

Motive: Sincerity and fearing the Lord 22e

-

Not eye-service, as people-pleasers

-

Paul tells us what it means to have
Christian motives as an employee:

-

Colossians 3:22 not by way of
eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with
sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

-

Paul warns us not merely to render “
eye-service, as people-pleasers.

” “Eye-service” is serving your
employer only when he is looking at you.

Do you really

want

to serve your employer when he’s

not

watching? You should! There is a
German proverb that says,

“The master’s eye does more than
both his hands.” An English proverb has

a similar point: “The master’s eye
makes the horse fat.” The point is

explained by the story of “A fat man
riding upon a lean horse, [who] was

asked how it came to pass that himself

was so fat and his horse was so lean.

He answered, Because I feed

myself, but my servant feeds my horse.”

-

It's not hard at our own workplaces, at school, or when you drive by a construction site to notice the ones who are not working hard at their jobs. They're sitting, they're talking, they're playing, but they are not working. But when you are being paid for your time, not working, or working slowly or carelessly, constitutes stealing.

-

Another form of “eye-service” is the deception involved in false advertising, and even our own boasting beyond what is really true. We put on a show before the eyes of men, but do not serve “with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

”

-

**But with sincerity of heart,
fearing the Lord**

-

But a Christian, one who is united to Christ, one who has put on the new man, should serve “

with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

”

Paul lifts the servant's gaze from the things of this earth to the things of heaven, and sets his earthly service on a far higher plane. Our most disgusting and difficult work is in fact a sacred, loftily serene religious duty to the ultimate Master of all things.

-

It is not first and foremost a man's actions that change

when he becomes a Christian,
but his heart. He
does not submit to a new set
of human regulations—“

do not handle, do not taste,
do not touch,

” or diet or meditate or
discipline his body in yoga—but
he submits to a higher
Master with all of his being.

Christian slaves

“are not only to bend their
backs but their wills.”

1

You’re willing to serve your
master, because you are

willing to serve your Lord. You
serve your master
wholeheartedly, with an
undivided heart, because Jesus
has called you to serve.

-

Illustration.

-

The worst job I've ever had may have been when I was on a Christian service project to repair part of the Union Gospel Mission in Portland, OR. We tore out walls from its basement

and carried and dragged trash
from the floor mixed with muck
and slime and what I feared
were the diseases of 50 years
of homeless men out to
the street to be hauled away.
But as we worked we sang
praises to the Lord and knew
that we were serving Him.
“He also brought [us] up
out of a horrible pit, Out of the
miry clay....He has put a
new song in [our] mouth, a
song of praise to our God.
” (

Psalm 40:2-3

) Even if you go back to work in a horrible pit tomorrow, take with you that song of praise to our God. Commit your work to the Lord, and like a servant whose ear is pierced to show he desires to remain in his master's household forever, say “

I delight to do Your will, O my God, And Your law is within my heart.

” (

Psalm 40:8

) Hebrews 10 says Christ
said these words as He
sacrificed His life for you.
Will you not say them as you
sacrifice your life for Him?

-

Spiritual endpoints: Your soul and the Lord 23

-

Origin

-

Paul summarizes,

-

23 Whatever you do,
work heartily, as for the Lord
and not for men,

-

The word “**work**”
here is stronger than the word
“**do**.”

It means to work with effort,
with energy. This means you
should bend not only your
will, but your back as well.

-

Goal

-

“**Heartily**” is more
literally “ **from the**
soul ”
.

It means to work with
cheerfulness and interest.
Ultimately your work is

an integral part of the
relationship between your
soul and God. Your
physical labor is a medium
through which you live
your spiritual life.

-

While men can be selfish, capricious, and cruel, the Lord is a perfect Master, fully worthy of all obedience, and fully repaying your every sacrifice. “What does it profit a man if he gains the world but loses his soul?” But

Christ says “

Everyone who has left
houses or brothers or
sisters or father or mother
or children or lands, for
my name's sake, will
receive a hundredfold
and will inherit eternal life.

” (

Matthew 19:29

)

1.

**Reason: God's
coming justice 24-25**

1.

Your reward 24

-

And so to slaves and employees laboring in the dark and dreary evils of this world Paul holds out the imperishable encouragement of our final reward in heaven. He says you must serve

-

24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

-

What a tremendous

hope for the hopeless
slave who receives for all
his effort only blows
and meager food and
filthy lodging. He will
receive the inheritance.
He
will
receive the reward. In
the kingdom of God and
the service of Christ the
slave is no longer a

slave, but a son, no longer a servant, but a friend, no longer a subordinate, but a brother. No earthly master affords his slaves an inheritance—he only gives the inheritance to his sons. But “
from the Lord you [
slaves
] will receive the

inheritance!

” You have now come into no earthly household, but you have come into the household of God.

You do not deserve anything from Him, but He repays your service with everything He has. He even gave His only Son; His life for

yours. What a reason
to give your life for His!

-

We may fail to get
recognition for our work,
the fruit of satisfaction
from it, or pay for it.

We may receive no
respect, appreciation, or

gratitude. But with Christ as our Lord, there already awaits for us an inheritance beyond even what we deserve as His servants. We will be ashamed at how far short we have fallen of the glory of God when we see how glorious is the inheritance stored up

for the saints. God “has
qualified you to share
in the
” glorious “
inheritance of the
saints in light.

” (
Col. 1:12

) We will only be
able to say, “

**We are unworthy
servants; we have only**

done what was our duty.

” (

Luke 17:10

)

-

Evildoers’

repayment 25

-

In addition to the
incredible reward
awaiting the obedient
slave, we have a
reason to obey our
earthly masters

because of God's
justice in the end.

-

25 For the
wrongdoer will be paid
back for the wrong he
has done, and there
is no partiality.

-

A slave who does wrong will be punished by the Lord, even if he escapes the punishment of his master. The greatness

of a master's cruelty in no way justifies the disobedience of a slave. Even if the institution of slavery is wrong, the slave is still obligated to obey his master. Two wrongs do not make a right. A slave ought not to wrong his master. In

this Paul condemns the crimes enslaved nations and classes have committed, those deeds which have been honored and sung, all peasants' revolts, and the strikes of modern labor unions. A man does not receive the right

to break God's laws
because he is
ill-treated.

-

But neither does
God show partiality
toward masters. **Lev.**
19:15

says “

You shall not be partial
to the poor or defer
to the great.

” Masters can in fact
wrong their slaves.
Contrary to Roman law,
slaves
are

people with rights
that must be

maintained. They may not be beaten without mercy, deprived of food and clothing and housing, deprived of their wives and children. For these reasons

Deut. 23:15 forbids Israelites to return a slave who escaped

from his
non-Israelite master,
because that master
would abuse his slave,
but the people of God
live by a higher
standard.

-

Masters 4:1

1.

Addressees:

Masters 1a

1.

Colossians **4:1** **Ma**
sters,

2.

**Command: Give
what is right and fair
1b**

1.

Lastly, Paul briefly

addresses masters
and commands them
to

-

Colossians **4:1** **tr**
eat your slaves
justly and fairly,

—

“Justly and fairly”

means to give them
the appreciation and
payment they
deserve for their

labor. A Christian's slave would not necessarily be a Christian slave, so Paul must mean a master may not withhold wages from his slaves, even if they are from a different country,

language, or religion.

In the church the distinctions of “barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free” no longer prevent a person from equal membership in the community and equal treatment as

humans, and so as they have learned from the example of the Christian church, Christians should treat all men “justly and fairly.”

” Being equally Christians becomes the paradigm for

being equally
human, and for
relating to all men. A
Christian's slaves
are no longer
slaves, deserving
nothing, but
employees,
deserving wages.
Treat your

employees “
justly and fairly
,” even if they
prove themselves
the most savage
scum, which is what
the Scythians
were. Hear the
words of Job, “
13 If I have

rejected the cause of
my manservant or
my maidservant,
when they brought a
complaint against
me, 14 what then
shall I do when
God rises up? When
he makes inquiry,
what shall I answer

him? 15 Did not he
who made me in the
womb make him?

”

(

Job 31:13-15

)

-

**Reason:
Knowing you have
a Master in heaven
1c**

1.

The reason is
simple.

-

Colossians 4:1
knowing that you
also have a Master
in heaven.

—

Ultimately you do
not own your
slaves. You do not
own your

employees. God owns them as His creatures, whom He made in His image. And God owns Christians specially as their Redeemer, and comprehensively

as their Lord.
Ruthless masters
are opposed to
God's redeeming
Lordship.

-

Leviticus 25:42

For they are my
servants, whom
I brought out of the
land of Egypt; they
shall not be sold as
slaves.

-

1 Corinthians

6:19-20 You

are not your own,

20 for you were

bought with a

price.

—

1 Corinthians
7:23 23 You were
bought with a
price; do not
become slaves of
men.

—

How do you
treat your
employees?

Treat them how
your Master in
heaven treats
you.

—

Conclusion

1.

Will you heed
the call of your
Master in
heaven? He calls
you to serve. To
take up your

cross and follow
Him, even when it
hurts your body
or your pride.
Will you serve
Him? Will you
serve your
employer? Will

you serve your
fellow believers?
In the kingdom of
heaven, it is not
the greatest
master, but the
most miserable
slave, who most

truly knows his
Lord Jesus
Christ.

1.

Mark 10:43-45

43 But it shall not
be so among
you. But whoever
would be great
among you must
be your
servant, 44 and

whoever would
be first among
you must be
slave of all. 45
For even the Son
of Man came not
to be served but
to serve, and to

give his life as a
ransom for many.

1Maclaren, 347.