

Colossians 3:22-4:1

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything

There are some people who suggest that these verses 3:18-4:1

- represent a complete break from all that went before, but I think they are mistaken
- earlier in chapter 3 of Colossians, we thought about the ‘Christian and Christ’
- the theme progressed to the ‘Christian and the church’
- not surprisingly it continues with the ‘Christian at home’
- and later considers the ‘Christian at work’

It all appears to be Paul’s more detailed exposition of verse 17

And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Father through him.

(Colossians 3:17)

The connection between home and work was much closer in New Testament times

- because slaves were considered to be part of the household
- it is a mistake to think that this was slavery on the Afro-Caribbean model
- for a considerable proportion of the society were slaves and included professional and trades-people
- such as teachers, doctors and craftsmen, as well as people who did more menial work
- if Paul’s teaching on wives submitting to their husbands sounded politically incorrect
- his teaching on slaves obeying their masters sounds just plain wrong
- and the question is, ‘can these teachings be applied to us today, a very different culture?’

The apparently innocuous question, ‘can these teachings be applied to a very different culture?’

- is in fact a question of fundamental importance
- not simply for this matter but as a general principle of biblical interpretation
- in short, do we seek to preserve the inner meaning of scriptural teaching or abolish it?
- Is this truly God’s design for society, is there a sense in which this teaching can be regarded as normative?
- why is Paul not opposing the evils of slavery and encouraging slaves to rise up in revolt?
- The answer is that Paul has already done the former (Col. 3:11): ‘Here there is no Greek or Jew,
- circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.’
- And Paul was not advocating insurgence but a different kind of revolution

In the community of the church, in our relationships with others, in the home or at work we must remember

whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

(Colossians 3:17)

Before, Paul had thanked God that he was not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman but now new ground rules are set

- Like the distinction between Jew and Gentile, the distinction between slave or free is ended in Christ
- Paul has opposed evils of racism, sexism and slavery, in a way quite unknown to the pagan world
- And now they must be lived out in the Christian community through:

- I CHANGED RELATIONSHIPS
- II CHANGED RESPONSIBILITIES
- III CHANGED RESULTS

I CHANGED RELATIONSHIPS

Deliverance for the captive is an essential part of Christian forgiveness (Col. 1:13-14)

- Paul has reminded the Colossians that in Christ there is neither slave nor free (3:11)
- Therefore, the Christian can never properly be in the possession of another human being
- for the Christian belongs to God but, having heard that teaching plainly, what does it mean in practice?

In 1 Corinthians, Paul tells slaves they are to secure their freedom if they could (1 Cor. 7:21)

- but what about other slaves, how were they to behave?
- For Paul, trying to change the order of the empire would have been impossible, even absurd
- For Christianity was no more about political rebellion against the existing order
- Than the Lord's Messiahship was about political rebellion against the Empire
- But that does not mean that Paul is fastening the yoke of slavery more firmly than ever
- The Gospel represented a vertical transformation with horizontal implications
- Or, put another way, when our relationship with Jesus changes – everything changes

The fundamental relationship in the life of the Christian is the relationship with Jesus

- if the believer's relationship with Jesus had been transformed
- and that believer was a slave, what would the slave's relationship with the master be like?
- Of course, in effect the Christian slave now has a much greater master
- the Lord Jesus said it was impossible to serve two masters (in that incident - God and money)
- but in Christ the master-slave relationship is transformed, for service is ultimately to a heavenly master

Such an understanding of the master-servant/slave relationship transforms the most menial responsibilities

- and gives dignity to all work - if, in former times, a slave had only done
- that which would gain favour or avoid punishment
- the earthly relationship has been transformed by the heavenly one
- the vertical relationship with Jesus transforms all horizontal relationships even at work
- slaves are reminded of the reward that will be theirs
- not from an earthly master but for serving faithfully in Christ's name
- on the other hand, those who do wrong will be punished

The enduring principle of this passage has now become plain enough

- when a person becomes a Christian the vertical relationship with Jesus transforms every other relationship
- Christians, whatever their work, must work in a particular way
- They do not only work their best when they are being watched, either to gain favour or avoid discipline,
- but work their best because as Christians ultimately it is Christ they are serving

Whether the job that a Christian does seems great or small (be it barrister, brain surgeon, or something ordinary)

- it is a great job because through it the Christian witnesses to a great Lord
- this is what motivates the believer to give honest, faithful and ungrudging work
- in short, a Christian worker ought to be the best worker on the job (known and respected for that)
- That said, it was not only slaves that had become Christians
- some masters also had become Christians, what were they to do?
- It was not only a matter of changed relationships but also of:

II CHANGED RESPONSIBILITIES

A Christian slave with a believing master or mistress was not to try to take advantage

- But to work and to do a good job to the best of his or her ability
- But the master or mistress also had a new responsibility
- for the slave was now not merely a slave but a brother/sister in Christ (Gal. 3:28)
- and although, in New Testament times, many slaves were educated and responsible
- they were also people with no rights, in the sense that we would understand rights
- but for the Christian master a slave did not need to have legal rights
- in order to be given the proper treatment, not exploited but to be valued and looked after
- the slave was a freeman in the Lord; the master was a slave to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:22)

In his detailed exposition of his own teaching,

- Paul does not omit the duty of masters towards their slaves
- they must deal with them in a way that is just and equitable
- they must have what is right and fair
- duty is not all on the side of the slaves
- masters also have obligations
- Christian masters are accountable for how they treat their slaves
- For both earthly master and slave have the same heavenly master
- The master-slave relationship has been transformed by the Gospel

Here again, the enduring principle of this passage has now become plain enough

- A Christian working for a Christian employer or supervisor
- Ought not to use the situation to take advantage
- But, for any employer, a Christian should work at the job to the very best of his or her ability

A Christian employer or supervisor also has responsibilities towards the employee

- The Christian employee is a brother/sister in Christ (Gal. 3:28)
- But any employee, Christian or not, must be treated properly and not exploited
- The employee must be dealt with in a way that is right and fair
- There are reciprocal responsibilities and duties

Historically, the Methodist movement has had close associations with Trade Unionism

- the pioneers of the Trade Union movement, the Tolpuddle martyrs, six Dorset farm labourers
- who joined together to fight for a living wage are rightly remembered
- if their employers had followed the New Testament things would have been different
- but every coin has two sides and both employers and employees can behave wrongly

The New Testament does not advocate political revolution to demolish slavery

- but neither does it give an endorsement to slavery
- instead it takes away the whole foundation of slavery so that the edifice falls
- for in Christ there is neither slave nor free
- the Gospel is about changed relationships, it is about changed responsibilities and:

III CHANGED RESULTS

On the circle of gossip in Colossae and in the cities where New Testament Christians lived

- there could be all kinds of conversations

‘My wife has become one of those Christians.’ ‘What is she like now then?’

- ‘Well, it’s made a great and positive difference to our marriage.
- ‘Although, on the one hand, she is very devout and meets with her friends regularly.
- On the other hand, things at home are much improved.
- We used to argue about the smallest things – it was a constant battle of wills
- Sometimes I even felt that I could not trust her, but it does not seem to be like that anymore,
- And she seems to have such inner peace, joy and love.’

‘I heard that my cousin Daphne’s husband has become a Jesus-person too

- No one knew whether he used to knock her about or not but they used to have these terrible rows
- Awfully embarrassing if you were there. All Daphne says is that since he’s been with the Christians
- He has been so kind and loving to her it’s like being with a new man.’

‘It’s funny you should say all that because my son has become one of those Christians too

- you have children, you will know what they can be like in those growing up years
- he used to be insolent and difficult, we didn’t know where he was, what he was doing or who he was with
- now, he still spends some time with his “Christian” friends,
- but he is cheerful, helpful and responsive.’

‘The father of one of his friends, you know him, Apollo, used to have the most fearful temper

- he was domineering with his children and used to beat his slaves quite scandalously
- he’s part of the Christian group too – “church” they call it – they don’t have a temple or special building
- they have an assembly in a larger house, on the terrace if the weather is fine
- well, apparently, according to them, Apollo has had a “Damascus Road experience”
- strange because I did not know that even fancied going to Syria – I thought he was going to Lycia
- that’s the other way completely, but whatever happened, wherever it happened, he’s certainly different’

‘Did you know that one of our oldest slaves, a teacher, has become a Christian too?’

- ‘No, a teacher has become a Christian, really – how is that going?’ ‘Well, I have to say, it’s pretty good.
- He’s educated but he used to be difficult – almost awkward – always had his nose in some book or other
- mainly for his benefit as far as we could tell. Made us wonder if he spent more time reading literature
- Than on teaching the children – that’s what they used to say, anyway. Now the children love his classes,
- And he seems happy and enthusiastic in his teaching, and our eldest has just got her Alpha levels!’

‘I ought to stop by and listen to one of those Christian preachers in the market-place next week.’

- ‘You should, I listened to one every lunchtime last week’. ‘Really? What kind of things do they say?’
- ‘They say that there is only one God, that he came in person in Jesus
- That Jesus loved his people enough to die for them and rose again from the dead.’
- ‘Where is he now?’ ‘According to them he is in heaven but is coming back.
- They say that believing in him and serving him are the most important things and that old distinctions
- Like whether you are Jew or a Greek; a man or a woman; a slave or freeman are unimportant.’
- ‘They want to be careful: if they start living it as well as saying it that could start a revolution!’