

Intro

Let me share an interesting one that relates to today's message. I had a non-Christian co-worker who challenged me on the inconsistency of Christians.

He said something like, "The Bible affirms slavery, but you oppose it." He was insinuating something like, "Why would I become one of you when you don't even follow your own book? You go against your own book when it's convenient."

In other words, we pick and choose which of God's laws we honor.

Christians, how would you respond? Hard question, right?

Maybe you're visiting with us today and you wouldn't consider yourself a Christian. You're not sure about Christianity. You have some unresolved questions. Maybe you think Christians are inconsistent?

This morning we'll consider the issue of slavery in the New Testament and how to apply these passages to our life today.

READ PASSAGE (3:18-4:1)

Point 1: What about slavery?

(sources: primarily David Pao's *Colossians* commentary, Clinton Arnold's *Ephesians* commentary, and the *Dictionary of New Testament Background*)

how many?

Estimates suggest that 1/3 of the Roman population were slaves. So a good % of Colossae's population were slaves. Some of the Colossian believers were slaves. Some were masters. A slave and their master in the same local church. How do we relate now that we're Christians?

where did they come from?

The greatest source for slaves was prisoners of war. As Rome expanded the empire and conquered lands, they enslaved conquered peoples. It's reported that between 58 and 51 BC, Julius Caesar shipped nearly one million slaves from Gaul's prisoners of war (Western Europe including modern day France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Northern Italy, Germany).

Other sources included convicted criminals sentenced to slavery (e.g., mines), kidnapped people, rescued abandoned infants, people who sold themselves into slavery because of debt or poverty, and reproduction within the slave population.

So slavery was both voluntary and involuntary.

Note that Roman slavery was not racially-based. Any race could be enslaved.

what did they do?

Most slaves were laborers (manufacturing, agriculture) or domesticated slaves (served in the home in some capacity). Some slaves performed specialized tasks and possessed significant responsibility (e.g., doctors, teachers, architects, sea captains). One slave's experience was remarkably different than another.

how were they treated?

Slaves were treated poorly. They were bought and sold, punished according to the master's whim, violated sexually. Labor was compelled against their will (e.g., flogging). They had no legal existence. They couldn't be married. If they were married before being enslaved, they could be separated from their spouse at any time per the master's purpose.

Again, the experience differed depending on the sort of slave. Generally laborers (e.g., prisoners of war, convicted criminals) were treated much more harshly than domestic slaves. It wouldn't be wise to harm a valuable slave who contributed much to the household.

Here Paul's audience is Christian households indicating domestic slaves are in view.

how were they freed?

Manumission was the legal term for liberation. Some voluntary slaves were under contract for a time (seven years) and when their time was up their master released them. Other domestic slaves were rewarded for good work with sums of money which was used to purchase their freedom. Most slaves, especially laborers, never experienced freedom.

Freedom became the slave's life goal. Freedom made citizenship possible. However, once freed, they found themselves in a precarious situation: no property, no employment, no savings. So they often continued to work for their master as free people.

did Paul support slavery?

- 1) Paul didn't endorse the institution.
- 2) Paul taught Christians how to live as Christians within an existing institution.
- 3) Overthrowing empire-wide institutions fell outside the scope of Paul's mission.

Reforming slavery falls upon Christians who work in government, not pastors.

- 4) Paul's interaction with slavery is similar to Moses' interaction with divorce.

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"⁴ He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'?⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."⁷ They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." –
Matthew 19:3-9

Jesus answers the first question (19:3) with, no, it's not lawful to divorce your wife for any cause. He justifies his answer by appealing to creation. Divorce was never God's intent.

Jesus answers the second question (19:7) by saying that Moses allowed illegitimate divorce because of human sin, not God's design. Divorce was permitted because God was accommodating existing social structures. **Allowance wasn't approval.** God's laws to Israel didn't overthrow every evil practice (e.g., polygamy). Sometimes Moses' law regulated what God didn't approve.

Jesus then restates what God's moral will for divorce actually is (19:9).

So Paul can advise us how to live within a cultural institution God doesn't approve of. He's telling the Colossians how to do slavery well without in fact endorsing slavery. Just like Moses wasn't endorsing unlawful divorce.

American slavery

Christians in the South during the Civil War found the Bible to endorse slavery. William Wilberforce in late 18th century Britain found the Bible to require the end of slavery. What should we think? At the very least, the Bible forbids kidnapping.

*understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, **enslavers**, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, – 1 Timothy 1:9-10*

The ESV has a footnote on "enslavers" that says, "That is, those who take someone captive in order to sell him into slavery."

So Christians who reject Civil War slavery are thoroughly consistent. Paul says kidnapping people to enslave them is unlawful.

Point 2: Workers, serve your employers well because Jesus is your Master (3:22-25)

Our context

I don't think we have any slaves or master present this morning. So how do we apply and obey such teaching? We might not be slaves or masters, but some of us find ourselves under authority or possessing authority. We find ourselves working for an employer or employing people ourselves. That's how these principles transfer.

The specific case is Christians in the same local church who find themselves in a master-slave relationship. Like a Christian working for another Christian.

Tidbits

Master and Lord is the same Greek word. Slaves serve two masters. Jesus takes precedence over earthly masters. Masters have a Master that they report to: Jesus.

Lord represents Jesus (God the Son), not God the Father throughout. Colossians is all about the Lordship of Jesus (creator, sustainer, goal of creation, head of the church).

The ESV “bondservants” indicates “someone in the Roman Empire officially bound under contract to serve his master for seven years... When the contract expired, the person was freed, given his wage that had been saved by the master, and officially declared a freedman (ESV preface).”

Scope

“in everything” (3:22) = all your duties.

Again, it’s qualified by the fact that our ultimate allegiance belongs to Jesus, our Master. If your boss tells you to sin (e.g., lie, cover up, forge documents, etc.), obey Jesus instead of your boss.

Wrong manner

“not by way of eye-service, as people pleasers” (3:22)

What’s “eye-service”? That meaning doesn’t jump off the page. “eye-service” means doing something in front of the boss’ eye to call attention to yourself. Something you’re only doing for appearance, not because you have a strong work ethic. After a favorable impression that isn’t accurate. Concerned with appearances, not reality. A form of deception.

Playing on your phone when the boss isn’t around. Then picking up a broom when the boss walks in. The boss is coming. Let’s make it look like we’re working.

“people-pleasers” = seeking to please the boss by false impressions.

“not for men” (3:23) = not for the approval of men. Not to look good in the eyes of men. These aren’t Christian motivations.

Right manner

but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. (3:22)

Sincere rather than false like “eye-service.” Not pretending to be a good worker when you’re not. Instead, pure motivations that stem from a fear of God. The “people-pleaser” seeks favorable impressions for personal gain. The God-fearer is concerned with God’s evaluation instead of man’s. The God-fearer is concerned with honoring God instead of making self look good. It’s a God-centered work ethic.

As Christians we fear God in the sense of respect and honor. We treat Jesus as our Master.

Christians don’t fear God in that we’re afraid God is hovering over us looking to find fault so he can strike us down. We trust God is merciful, patient. Having trusted in Jesus, we know we have peace with God, forgiveness of sins, a cleansed conscience. We live from peace and forgiveness, not for peace and forgiveness.

Respecting God, we don’t treat sin casually. Self-examination. Confessing sin. Pleading for help with temptation. Accepting forgiveness.

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (3:23)

Whatever you do = restating everything. “work heartily” literally means “work from the soul.” Soul and heart are synonymous. Internal motivations. Do your work for God rather than men. That’s a Godward life.

So instead of pretending to work hard to impress the boss, work in the presence of Jesus. Trusting his commands are good, seek to bring him glory and receive his approval instead of seeking to create a false impression.

The future motivates the present

Paul uses the future to validate his instruction.

knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. – 3:24

“you will” indicates a future time, meaning the return of Christ. When Jesus returns, his people will be resurrected and welcomed into the new heavens and new earth. Then they will receive their reward: an eternal inheritance. A place without sin and death and pain where God is present, filling his people with everlasting joy in him. The kingdom of God itself is the reward.

Elsewhere the Bible speaks of individual rewards unique to the individual accrued according to our faithfulness in this life. Here Paul’s just talking about the heavenly city itself.

Live from future reward, not for future reward, in this case.

For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. – 3:25

The wrongdoer is the non-Christian. Believers, live unto Jesus because Jesus will repay the wrong done to you (e.g., harsh masters). Jesus will both reward and punish when he returns. If the wrongdoer repents, Jesus will have taken the punishment in their place.

Work for God, not men, because there’s eternal reward and eternal justice.

Reminder not to be a sluggard

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish and will not even bring it back to his mouth. – Proverbs 19:24

Reminder that we need God to work in us what we don’t have of ourselves

I prayed for God’s help to live this our over and over and over again during my time at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. Not because of horrific bosses. But because of work that I lacked interest in. Because the work was hard given my natural giftings. I assure you I didn’t always have a good attitude. It was a fight for faith.

In situations where obedience is hard and even unnatural, we remember our duty. We don’t make excuses. We fight temptation. And we call on God to work the impossible inside us.

Non-Christians

There's two ways to live:

- 1) For man's approval or God's approval
- 2) For personal glory or God's glory

Paul says our motivations have eternal consequences. Jesus died to rescue us from our sin. From our law-breaking and from the misguided motivations of our hearts.

Paul says there's an eternal inheritance that awaits those who fear God.

Paul says there's eternal punishment for those who don't.

Turn from rebellion to trust in Jesus' death and resurrection. He'll patiently help you navigate life well.

Point 3: Employers, treat your employees well because Jesus is your Master (4:1)

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. – 4:1

Because masters have a greater Master (Jesus), they have a responsibility to bondservants. Likewise, Christian employers have an obligation to their employees.

The future realities noted in 3:24-25 ground the master's conduct too.

Paul is concerned with justice and fairness.

Justice = what's right and proper. To ensure that bondservants are treated justly (e.g., promises kept, treating them as people created in God's image instead of property, being considerate of their family relationships).

Fairness = treated fairly. Giving someone their due rights.

Masters, deal well with your bondservants because God is your master.

Treating people well

People are more than tools we use to accomplish our purposes. This speaks to employers and pastors/elders too. Pastors/elders need volunteers for the church to run, but pastors/elders can't "use and abuse" people to the point where they're overworked and unable to attend to their spiritual health and duties outside the church.

Nothing particular in mind. Just a reminder. Elsewhere I've seen people run ragged and damaged in the church. Tools to serve the pastor's purpose without concern for the person's good.

Conclusion

Allegiance to Jesus informs human relationships. Husband-wife. Father-children. Master-bondservant.

In other words, the Bible touches every part of our existence.