

Relationships Between Slaves and Masters

Colossians 3:22-4:1

Colossians 3:22-4:1 - *“Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye service, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. ²³ And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵ But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality. ^{4:1} Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”*

Background Notes

In our background notes, we need to say something about slavery. In both verses, 3:22 and 4:1, “servant” or “slaves” are mentioned. During the 1st century, when the letter to the Colossians was written, the average household had slaves. But today we wonder why the Bible doesn’t say that slaves should be set free, or that they should run away, or the Christian master should release his slaves. Here are five points about the New Testament’s approach to slavery, which was part of the social structure of the 1st century Roman Empire:

1. Although slavery is not prohibited in the New Testament, neither is it promoted.
2. Christian slaves were not to revolt, but Christian masters were not prevented from releasing their slaves. In fact, in his letter to the Christian master, Philemon, it’s fairly obvious that Paul was suggesting that Philemon release Onesimus, his runaway slave. Paul didn’t demand it, but it’s hard to miss the point that he was suggesting it.
3. While the institution of slavery was not condemned in the New Testament, the abuses of it are strongly condemned. In Colossians 4:1 slaves were not to be considered as mere property. They were to be treated with respect, as fellow human beings.
4. When Christian masters followed the New Testament directives regarding slaves, the master-slave relationship was often better than the employer-employee relationship is today. The Christian master was under obligation to the Lord to take good care of his slaves - and the slaves’ family members as well.
5. It was the outworking of the Christian principles of the New Testament that finally led to the abolition of slavery in the Roman Empire, and eventually in our own country as well. The New Testament approach to the problem of slavery is not revolution, or the overthrow of the Roman Empire, but it is a gradual outworking of Christian principles - starting in the Christian home.

Doctrinal Point

We must submit to God's authority structures.

If we are to make Christ supreme and all-sufficient in our lives, we must submit to God's authority structures. They are God's authority structures because, according to Romans 13:1, all authority ultimately finds its source in God. Even when that authority is misused or abused - or even at times directed against God Himself - it's under the control and permission of God. God has allowed it. Even Satan's limited and temporary authority derives from God - or it wouldn't exist. All authority has its source in God.

God has chosen to channel His authority down to us in four different structures – the home, the church, the state, and the area of labor. Colossians 3 deals with two of these areas – the home and the workplace (labor). In our last session we were discussed authority structures in the home (v18-21). The area of labor is covered in verses 22 through the first verse of chapter 4. The slave/master relationship was not the same as an employer/employee relationship, but it falls under the area of labor or workplace, and therefore could be applied to the employer/employee relationship today.

Verse 22 says that servants, or slaves, were to obey their masters in all things “*according to the flesh*” – in other words, in this line of authority – although not necessarily in the area of the church. For example, a Christian slave might have been an elder or a church leader in Colossae, whereas the master might not be one of the leaders. In the authority structure of the church, the master would be subordinate to the Christian slave – but in the area of labor, the Christian slave was to submit to the Christian master.

What does “*not with eye service as men-pleasers*” (v22) mean? The idea is not just when the master is watching. Do you only do a good job when the boss is watching, but other times you waste company time? That's not the right behavior for a Christian!

Verses 23-24 seem to be saying that the slave was actually serving Christ when he was submitting to his master - even though that master might not be a Christian. “*And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.*” How could Paul say that, if the Christian slave was serving a non-Christian master? He could say it because of God's authority structure, and because all lines of authority come down from God. When we submit properly in these lines of authority, we are serving the Lord.

Once again, we assume here that the master was not asking the slave to do something wrong, such as to lie or to commit fornication. Remember how Joseph did the right thing when he was a slave? Even though Joseph was subordinate to Potiphar and his wife, he did not submit to her seductive temptation (Genesis 39). No - he did the right thing. He obeyed God. We are always to obey the higher authority - God's authority (Acts 5:29).

So if the phone rings at work, and your boss says to tell them he's out of town, you don't lie. You do the right thing. You don't have to say that your boss told you to lie; you could say he/she is not available. In some cases that might mean you'll lose your job, but still you always do the right thing. As long as that authority is not telling you to do something that is wrong, you should submit.

The word "*inheritance*" is used here in verse 24 because slaves, of course, would not get any earthly inheritance. But they would receive an inheritance in Heaven if they properly submitted to the earthly authority structures. And you will, too! You may not be programmed for an earthly inheritance, but if you submit properly to the authority structures that God has set up, you will receive an inheritance - a reward!

Verse 25 is a warning: "*But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.*" If Christian slaves were to steal or cheat, they could expect consequences - not only on this earth, but ultimately at the judgment seat of Christ. The same applies to us in this area of labor. If we cheat, or steal, or do a half-hearted job, or permanently "borrow" tools or things from the office, we can expect to be judged - if not here on earth, certainly at the judgment seat of Christ.

And verse 25 says "*without partiality.*" God does not play favorites. At the judgment seat of Christ you won't be able to excuse yourself by saying that you were only a slave, or only a technician, or you didn't get paid much. No - no partiality! So we are to do the right thing within these authority structures.

Masters are addressed in chapter 4. They were to give their slave "*what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven*"(v1). As the boss in the authority structure of labor, they were to be just and fair with their workers. If you're the boss and you have people working under you, this verse applies to you as well. Be just and fair in pay, in workload, and in privileges. Remember, you too have a Master! The Lord is our Master, and we will give an account to Him. He is also our great Model to follow.

Practical Application

Let's not "play favorites."

God does not play favorites (v25), and we're to follow His example. This applies to all four lines of authority. You'll likely find yourself having authority over people in one or more of those lines – as a parent, as a church leader, or a ministry leader, as a boss or manager, maybe as a government official. Don't play favorites! Be fair and just.

Don't play favorites with your kids. Don't play favorites with your employees. Don't play favorites with the people under your authority. Be just and fair.

We need to follow the example of our Lord Jesus. He is our great Master who is always fair and just. So when it comes to any of these lines - whether it's pay, or workload, or time off, or privileges, or penalties - be just and fair. Let's not play favorites!