

## **Slavery: Defined and Disarmed**

Colossians 3:22-4:1

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Colossians 3:18-4:1 says, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them. Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. 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. 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. But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven."

Let us pray. Father, we come before You now, asking that You would impart to us understanding by the Holy Spirit, that we would know what Your Word teaches and be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Give me the strength to preach Your Word faithfully, the wisdom to unfold Your truth in a way that would magnify You and encourage Your people. And I pray, Lord, that each one under the sound of the Word would be built up, strengthened, and would worship in the greatness of Your gospel and in the greatness of who You are. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

So, we have been looking at the Christian home for seven weeks or so now, and we have looked at wives, husbands, children, and parents. This whole section is all about the Christian home. And then we come to this next part of the text, which is verse 22, and we find some interesting characters in the home, one called a bondservant. It is interesting to note that when the New Testament deals with the home, it also has words for slaves and masters, and they were part of many households in the early church and in Rome itself.

When we come to these household rules, there are also rules for slaves in their household and masters in their household, which would be referring to the heads of the household as well. If you're not thinking what I'm thinking, then you will probably soon start thinking, "What are slaves doing in the house of Christians?" This is something that's foreign to us, something

that's removed for us. Our series on the family finished last week because these passages particularly don't apply to most people today. People often go from here to talk about workplace contexts, but in the text of Scripture, we are dealing with the home, the homes of believers at Colossae, and Paul is addressing those homes. In that address, he includes the idea of bond-servants and masters and their responsibilities to one another within the home.

So, we need to think about this problem of slavery so that we can understand what's going on here. Now, the population in ancient Rome was vast, but about one-fourth or a quarter, some even suggest a third, of the population of the Roman Empire were made up of slaves. Slavery in the Roman Empire was common. In fact, some have suggested that in Ephesus, there were probably about 250,000 free people and slaves. You could think about that ratio; that means in Ephesus, it is likely that there were more servants and slaves than there were people, almost double the amount some have even suggested.

Now, the slavery of the time of the Roman Empire was not the slavery that we know of in our history, particularly in about the 1840s and 1700s and 1800s, as we knew about the African slave trade in America. This is entirely different on many levels; it's different but at the same time, not also God's ideal. The basis of slavery in the Roman Empire was not ethnicity, as it was in the issues in America. It wasn't because of the color of your skin or the country from which you came from that you were destined to slavery per se or you were taken as a slave. The slaves that were common in the Roman Empire were people that were either captives of war, so the Roman Empire would go out and conquer people, and instead of wiping out everybody that they were conquering, they would often take prisoners of war back, and they would find themselves as household slaves or slaves even in the Empire itself.

But also, there was this idea of those that were poor and impoverished. There wasn't a welfare system, and so a lot of these people would basically have two options: either they sell themselves into slavery so they can live and be under the care of a master and of a household where they can be fed and looked after, or they would simply just be left on the streets to die. In fact, there were many children that were abandoned in Rome, and often what would happen is those children would be picked up and, quite sadly, sold into households where they would be raised, serving the family in their households. That's essentially what the society was like in that day.

Some people couldn't declare bankruptcy in those days as we do here. In fact, when you do declare bankruptcy here, you do lose a lot of privileges in terms of opening another business and whatever it may be. But over there,

instead of declaring bankruptcy, you'd literally sell yourself to the person that you owed money to, and you would work to pay off the debts that you owed. And so, when we're thinking of slavery, there were people that were captured and taken as slaves; however, when we're thinking of slavery in the Roman Empire, it's not one-for-one with what we know of in American slavery as it were a few hundred years ago, not at all. Quite different, actually, and there were many more reasons. In the American slavery of the African people, they were taken captive and put on ships for the purpose of being sold into slavery. That's vastly different than someone having a debt that they cannot pay going in. Also, the other thing is this: that in slavery in the early church, there was not, for all people, necessarily a lifelong slavery in the time of the early church in the Roman Empire. Meaning, a lot of slaves could pay their way out of slavery. Meaning, they did good work, their masters would give them some money, and they could pay their own way out. If they were a good slave, they could get out, potentially even after the age of 30 or whatever it may be.

Now, I'm not saying all this to justify slavery, and I don't want you to think that at all, and the Bible doesn't even justify slavery, nor does it even condone slavery. But the reason why I'm trying to help us understand this is that we don't want to think in terms of the slavery that we are familiar with from the nearer history toward us; we want to think about what was happening back in Rome. Now, slaves had a very low status in society; they had no rights; they were essentially the living properties of their owners; they had no real legal standing, and they weren't even really recognized as citizens of Rome. When they got their freedom, those things could change and did change for many, but they were basically owned by their masters. They would work different kinds of work; not all was, like I said, it's not even like the bondage of the Israelites in Egypt; that's vastly different as well. They had different work; some were accountants, some were bookkeepers, and others were scribes who would, you know, write things for the owners. Others would be like schoolmasters that would help instruct children and watch over family affairs. Some were doing domestic duties; others were property maintenance and all those kinds of things.

Now, there was hope for slaves in that they could buy their freedom, as I mentioned, and that was not the case with slavery several hundred years ago. They were literally captured and taken for that purpose alone, for life, and so it's a vastly different thing in terms of ethnicity. It wasn't a race issue or racism, but it was built into the society and in the Roman culture, not only in Rome but universally. If any of us lived in any time of the history of the Bible and even after that, we would be living in countries and in a world in which slavery was considered a normal part of normal life. Like I said, it doesn't mean that it is condoned, doesn't mean that it is right. What is considered normal, as we know today, doesn't mean that

it's right and accurate. This obviously raises a problem, and when I say a problem, it is because many people reject the Christian faith because of the lack of what it says against slavery. Now, we're going to make a case to show that the Bible doesn't support slavery, but a lot of people look at these texts of Scriptures and say, "Why didn't Paul just say, 'Masters, free all your slaves'? Why did he encourage that relationship to be had in the lives of Christians? If owning the property of another person is a sinful act, it's not a right thing to be done. Why is this happening under the apostle's nose, and he is not putting his finger on it and saying, 'This is not how you should treat human beings'?"

These are important questions because atheists and many people reject the Christian faith on this ground. A lot of people have problems with the Bible, charging it as an immoral book because of the issue of slavery and that it doesn't speak up against it as clearly. Now, in all fairness, that is somewhat a problem, meaning, of course, I would like the Bible to say much more against it, but this is what God has given us to say. There are reasons for it, and we have to work through those things and understand that the Bible doesn't condone it, and there were reasons for why that is the case. But of course, all of us would like the Bible to say certain things to be able to deal with certain objections more easily so that we can feel that we can work through these things easier.

But we have to realize that the Bible is clear on these matters, but we still have these texts of Scripture here that teach that these relationships between masters and servants were real relationships that were happening in the life of the people at Colossae. And so the criticism is there, but it is not valid criticism. Let's look at what the Bible says just briefly as to slavery and how the Bible responds to the issue of slavery.

Firstly, the Bible, what it's doing here, is not condoning slavery but it regulates the practice of slavery and basically poisons the root of slavery at the roots. It lays the ax to the root of the tree. Slavery doesn't exist apart from the concept of oppression. The idea of owning another human being, who is made in the image of God, is an oppressive concept. This is not a right thing to do. Now, what Paul does here is that he poisons the roots of slavery, and it dies a slow death. We can see that it is through Christian truth and principle that slavery was ultimately abolished and overturned.

Now, how does the Bible do this? Well, it condemns manstealing and kidnapping. In 1 Timothy 1:10, Paul is talking about those that are lawless and disobedient, the ungodly and the profane, and he puts the murderers of fathers, murderers of mothers, manslayers, fornicators, sodomites, and kidnappers. That's the word manstealers, or the idea of even this can be translated as slave traders. He puts them in here with the sinful, with the

ungodly, with those that are practicing something that the Bible says in verse 10 is contrary to sound doctrine. According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust. And so, Paul basically cuts out a major form by which people come into slavery, and that is the idea of kidnapping people. That is the idea of taking them captive as manstealers, and he basically reduces that major source by saying this is a grave sin.

Secondly, the New Testament encourages slaves to get their freedom and encourages people not to enter into slavery. In 1 Corinthians 7, the Bible teaches, "If you can be made free, use it rather," when he addresses slaves. He says, "If you can be made free, go and be made free." But he also says in the same text in verse number 24, "You were bought at a price; therefore, do not become the slaves of men." So here, Paul says no slave trading, and here also, Paul says if you're a slave and you can get your freedom, go and get your freedom. And if you're not a slave, don't become a slave of men. And you can see all this regulating and all this encouragement to avoid this entirely. Also, the scripture teaches about the equality of those who are in Christ Jesus, two things which oppose the concept of slavery. It says that we are of one blood; He's made of one blood all the nations. It talks about that we'll be made in the image of God. Not only that, He says, for in Christ Jesus, there is no bond, there is no slave, there is no free, but all are one in Christ Jesus. So He reduces the very heart of slavery, which is the oppression of a master over a servant, and says you and your servant are one in Christ Jesus in the same household. And He reduces the actual attitude of slavery down to brotherhood, or should I say, He exalts it to brotherhood, which undermines and cuts the root of oppression in slavery.

Even the passage in Colossians, if you'd like to turn back there, undermines the attitudes that are central towards slavery that are worth our consideration. Firstly, what we need to understand is in Colossians chapter number one, Paul addresses those that are in Christ Jesus, which are in Colossae. And what he's simply saying when he addresses this church is he's addressing them as one body, as those that are in Christ in Colossae, and therefore recognizing that everybody in the church – slave, master, husband, wife, child, parent – those who are in Christ Jesus are one.

Secondly, another thing he does: he not only brings about this equality in this passage, but also he addresses matters in the presence of slaves. He addresses masters in the presence of slaves. This is a very interesting thing. Here, Paul is writing to the churches, and those churches are to read this epistle publicly. And in the presence of slaves, he is telling masters how they ought to behave themselves in the presence of slaves. And you think about that; that would not be appropriate in a slave-master relationship. But here, in the church, before the presence of all the people, which the

church itself can carry out discipline for disobedience to the Word of God, he is simply saying, "Masters, you are to treat your servants, your slaves, fairly and justly."

There's accountability that he brings into the relationship, which was never had before. The other thing he reminds masters about is that they are also slaves. Look at chapter 4, verse 1: he says, "Masters, give your bond-servants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven." And he says to the slaves, "You also have a Master, not the earthly one, but the One who is in heaven." And so, what Paul does is he basically says to the masters and to the slaves, "You're both slaves of Jesus Christ; He is the Master of all." Once again, bringing in that equality, once again bringing in, should I say, that humility, whereby whatever the social relationship may be, it is all under God and under Christ.

And he reminds masters of their limitations, and that's an important thing: treat them justly and fairly, limiting their rule, limiting their authority in such a way that they have to be consistent with the biblical principle and biblical truth. And in so doing that, by laying responsibilities on masters, once again, he's breaking that foundation where they were free to do whatever they want to their slaves in the Roman Empire.

He tells slaves to do things unto the Lord, not necessarily toward their masters. He says in chapter 3, verse 22, "Bond-servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye-service as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men." And he's simply saying your ultimate service as slaves is to Jesus Christ; your obedience to your earthly master is ultimately toward your heavenly Master. The relationship that really counts is the relationship that you have toward God.

He reminds slaves also that their masters are according to the flesh, their earthly masters, as contrasted to their true and heavenly Master, who is Jesus Christ, the Lord in heaven. Now, as I said, the concept of slavery is undermined here by Paul in all these ways, which would lead to the slow death of slavery and to the way in which slavery is finally undone. But the question then essentially still begs: why isn't the New Testament clearer on these social issues? You know, here is a societal issue that exists in Rome with masters and servants and slaves, and so why doesn't Paul just set out to deal with the social issue? Why doesn't Paul just set out to deal with the Roman Empire? Why doesn't Paul just set out to deal with the government? Why doesn't he encourage the overthrow of slavery in the church?

Well, the first thing we have to realize is that the Scriptures are not written primarily to deal with social issues. The Scriptures are written and

are concerned primarily with men's relationship to God above the social relationships that exist. That is seen clearly from the passage that we've been seeing: that you have this Master in heaven, this relationship matters most, and this is the Christian's priority. It doesn't deal with the world's conditions as much as it deals with the Christian's response. Think about the idea of persecution. Nowhere in the New Testament does Paul even condemn persecution in terms of just outright saying it is wrong; therefore, go to Caesar and go to the magistrates and tell them this is wrong according to the Word of God. In fact, he tells the Christians to rejoice in your sufferings.

Anyone can look at that and say, "See, Paul's regulation of how we should respond to suffering means that he is condoning suffering." No, not at all. He's not condoning persecution. He's not condoning persecution because he encourages a good biblical response to it. But his silence doesn't necessarily mean he's condoning it; it just means that the Scriptures aren't setting out to deal with social issues. It's dealing primarily with the Christian's response to the world around them. This is very important for us because we don't live in Rome; we live in Australia. Our social issues are different; our government structures are different, and therefore our response, nevertheless, should be the same. What I mean by "the same" is the biblical response that God is still concerned about with us: how we respond spiritually to whatever social issues that oppress us in the society to which we belong. That's a very important point to note.

It doesn't mean that Paul condones it. I think we have several examples of this in the Bible, like polygamy. Clearly, the Bible says that there's one man, one woman; you have this one-flesh relationship. But you see polygamy going all the way through the Old Testament. Even in the New Testament, it says that the elders ought to be husbands of one wife. But we don't really have an open statement saying "no" because of the hardness of their hearts. Like polygamy, like divorce, these things were not to be so, but God worked in such a way as to educate His people, so as to regulate these things and ultimately end up in their destruction.

Now, what's important to also realize is that if everyone were to release their slaves overnight, it would be a massive social problem. Number one, not only that, it would be a problem for the slaves themselves. Where will they go? They have no family, they have no food, they have nothing to do. What are they going to do? Well, they were, in fact, hired workers who were sometimes in a worse place than slaves, meaning they just go and sell themselves to work for the day and then come back, but they didn't know if they were going to get enough money for food that day. Sometimes they go a week without work and just die. So we have to realize the context is entirely different, and it's not necessarily an evil thing to regulate this. It's not an evil thing to regulate this. In fact, in the current context, it was

servicing to help those people in those households, as opposed to despising them and letting them out.

So it's important to realize that Paul doesn't deal, and the Bible doesn't set out to deal with these issues. In fact, the Bible presents itself to us as a book that is teaching us how to live in this day as we work our way towards the glorious day in heaven. In fact, Colossians itself tells us in chapter 3 at the beginning, it says, "If you then were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is our life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory." What is the Bible showing here? That the Christian is one who has his life hidden with Christ in God. His social status does not make him what he is; his identity is wrapped up and swallowed in God. And therefore, the Bible presents Christians as pilgrims, as sojourners, as people that aren't primarily concerned about the things that are happening here below but are concerned with the things that are above.

This does not mean that the Christian Church should not in any way engage with issues that are surrounding us, especially in a democracy. We do have citizen rights, but we must not forget the fact that the church's job and the nature of the church is not to revolutionize society. God has called out His people for Himself, that they might proclaim His word, His gospel, and His truth to the lost and dying world. Whether it's the oppression of Rome or whether it's in the context of a democracy, or whether it's in China or wherever it's in the persecuted Middle East, whatever it may be, the church's call is clear and simple, and it's not the revolutionizing of a society. It is the preaching of a gospel that God has called His people to.

The mission of the Christian Church is to pervade society by gospel persuasion, not by political protest. You see, the world was turned upside down by the Apostles, not because they were protesting, but because they were preaching, because they were holding fast to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and people's hearts were being turned. It wasn't about revolution; it was about regeneration. And it was the results of regeneration, it was a result of the power of the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit of God working in the lives of sinners, that there was a great army, the church, that was risen up, and it revolutionized, yes, a society, but it was all because of the seeds of the gospel that was sown to the hearts of men.

You see, the abolishment of slavery in America came 20 years after the second great awakening, and I think there's a case to be made for that. It is when the gospel prevailed, when the gospel was prevailing, and people were turning to God, turning to Christ, that from those families were men



and women that were raised up in society, people that became politicians and whatever it may be, as a result of God's working in the awakening, that eventually overthrew slavery, overthrew and abolished slavery through biblical principles. But the Christian Church didn't change their message during the times of slavery; they were preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world.

Alexander McLaren says this: "The gospel meddles directly with no political or social arrangements but lays down principles which will profoundly affect these and leaves them to soak in the general mind." And I think we have to never forget that as we live in this world.

So the purpose of this passage is not to deal with the overthrowing of slavery but rather to show how people are to behave with one another, which we will look at next week and apply to all of Christian living. Also, but just for now, let us consider some applications in closing as to what I've considered as a general introduction on the issue of slavery.

Firstly, we as the Christian Church live in a culture that is constantly shifting and constantly changing, but thank God for the scriptures that remain the same. You see, we live in a day in which we don't know what's going to be tomorrow. We don't know how long freedom of speech will last, how long democracy will last, how long before our country comes into a certain socialism, or when atheism takes goes to its full nth degree and begins to reign in our society. What will that mean for the Christian Church? You know, I thank God He doesn't say, "Go out and protest on the streets for a democracy," because that's not how God wants the Christian Church to respond in a country like China, right?

And what the Bible teaches us, though, is that we have to consider our context here. This is what this passage reflects and sheds some light on us regarding that. We have to be wise in how we respond to social issues that affect the way in which we live. We must be careful, we must be careful of our context and wise because the day may come where we might have to declare that Caesar is Lord, and therefore, how then shall we respond in that day? You know, often a lot of Christians struggle with the idea of the persecuted church, and the difference between compromise and standing is a very fine line, very difficult. Where Christians are hiding and meeting in secret, some Christians think, "Well, you know, they should just die for their faith and have a public meeting in the open." That's ridiculous. Can we charge them with being ashamed of the gospel because they don't stand on the corners and do that? These things are important. We felt some of this pressure during Covid, and how should the church respond? There were a lot of different views on how those things should happen, but all I'm simply trying to say is this: we need wisdom to know how to apply God's

Word in our context, in our democratic context. But even if that shifts to a different kind of context for us, we still have to have the wisdom of God to know how to apply ourselves.

The Bible doesn't set out to tell us how government should operate; rather, it tells us how we should behave in light of the most corrupted societies and governments that there may be. I'm not saying that there aren't principles that do apply, but I just think we need to consider our context. Secondly, as a church, we must never lose sight of our mission. If anything, gospel preaching has been on the decline for many years now, and I wonder whether or not that has a lot to do with the increase of a social gospel – a gospel that is thought that if we can change the structures up here, then everything will work out well down there.

The history of the church teaches us otherwise. In fact, when the church and state were in power and were married together as one, that was a time of darkness for the Christian Church. It wasn't a time of necessarily prospering, and the power that came with religion and the power that came with government were often used in an evil manner so that those kings could get what they wanted using the name of God. I think it's important for us to realize that our mission as the church, we must never lose sight of. We must not be a people that think that the way to change the nation is politically. We must realize that unless the people hear the message of salvation and unless people bow and submit themselves to the gospel of Jesus, there is no hope for this land.

It is through the means of the preaching of the gospel and through revival that God will bring awakening to this country, which, yes, will in turn change the whole flavor of the society. But, my friends, the means is still the same, and the Christian Church must not lose sight of this. I'm not saying individuals in the church may be called to these kinds of things, but the church's duty is to proclaim Christ and Him crucified as the only hope of the nations. And as soon as we think that there may be another way in which we can change the society in which we live, my friends, we are wrong.

We are wrong. Even the politicians that do these things, they do these for their own selfish ends. You know, we need people in politics that are believers in Jesus Christ, true Christians that love God, that love His Word. And we don't need people that are just going to submit themselves for the votes necessarily because their corruption will come out another way. And I think it's important as the church we realize that our mission is to proclaim Christ and Him crucified. And, sadly, to the detriment of the church today, the modern church today, there is more money, more time, more effort that goes into the political and social affairs of this world than there is that goes into the prayer for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ

and for the advancement of the gospel throughout this world.

And I think there are lessons that we can learn here by the silence of Paul in regards to the political issue, even though we know that he was not for slavery and the Scripture is not for slavery. But let the church keep the main thing the main thing, lest we have a compromise and invite something into our midst that will lead to our compromise. Let us work towards raising godly seed. Let us work to living out the Christian life in a way that pleases God, showing that by our lights we will affect others around us, which will in turn affect the society in which we live.

So, I want us to have a refreshed and renewed confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ in the face of social issues. Not in the face of social issues we have to fight on the social level, although in a democracy we have more right to do that as citizens, but as the Christian Church, how are we to respond together corporately? Well, we are not to spend all that time and effort doing that, but we must realize that our call is to go and preach the gospel and make disciples of the nations.

And what we must also remember by looking at this passage of scripture is that the social status and relationships should never affect the way in which we treat one another. You know, slaves and masters should treat one another with respect as unto the Lord. That applies even to us today. In the Christian Church, you're made up of people of all kinds. We have rich, we have poor, we have people that have no jobs, people that do have jobs, people that are more comfortable, even different ethnic backgrounds. We have all these different things that exist in the Church of Jesus Christ, but one thing remains true: that we are brothers in Christ Jesus, sisters in Christ Jesus, and we must never lose sight of that.

What Paul is doing here is exalting the brotherhood of believers even in the face of the most degradation, in the greatest degradation in the society and that separation. I think we see that in what was read from Philemon. What Paul says to Philemon is, "I want you to receive this runaway slave called Onesimus. He's run away from you, but he came to me in Rome and I met him and I preached the gospel to him, and he's now converted and he's come to Christ, and he says he shouldn't have run away from you, but now he's come to Jesus Christ. I'm sending him back to you," and he says to Philemon, "I want you to receive him no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a brother in Christ."

And this is the attitude of the Christian towards any social differences that we might share here in this congregation: that the person sitting next to you, behind you, and in front of you is a brother in Jesus Christ, and we must see to it to exalt the brotherhood of the believers rather than the social

distinctions that exist and will continue to exist until the return of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God is more than social status, and the gospel reduces slavery to brotherhood. And so, we must always remember that we are brethren and that you and I are all slaves of Jesus Christ. So let us serve our one Master in the light of our differences that we share together. Let us pray.