



## **Colossians 3:22–4:1**

22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Anyone who does wrong will be

repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favouritism. 4 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

## **Reflection**

Some passages of Scripture give us pause. Like yesterday's one, which spoke about the way husbands and wives relate to each other, or some parts of the Old Testament that seem to call down the harshest of punishment on relatively minor offences. There's no question that some parts of the Bible are very confronting to the modern reader. But when you think about it, what's far more surprising is that a text, in some parts now as old as 3,500 years, isn't so out of date that it's unreadable. I

think one of the strongest proofs that the Bible is the word of God is exactly how relevant and insightful it remains even two thousand years after it was finished and almost four thousand years since its first words were written. And yet today's passage, like yesterday's one, without some historical background and Biblical context, is one of those passages that at best raises a few eyebrows and at worst, results in anger and condemnation being called down on God's words. Today's passage, on the surface at least, appears to condone slavery. I'll read it, and then I hope we can come to understand it in the appropriate light.

22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to cur-

ry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favouritism. 4 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

It's important to begin with some Biblical and historical context. The Bible nowhere commends slavery; however, the Bible does deal in realities and it was also given to humankind in a time and place in

history. And in the specific time and place in history that these verses were written around one third of the population were slaves. In the first century slavery was very different. It wasn't viewed by society as a moral evil; merely a necessary part of life. And slavery was as ingrained into the social fabric of the first century as, say, our household mortgage system is today. The entire Roman economy was built around the slave classes, which also represented a crude form of social welfare. Slaves were often far better off than free people – with many people choosing slavery over poverty. Some Christians even sold themselves into slavery so that they could give the money to the poor. The situation was far from clear cut and very much the norm in ancient life.

And so how do we approach a text addressed to first century slaves and their masters now two thousand years later? How are we to read and apply the passage in front of us today, given that we are not first century slaves or masters living in a culture very removed to our own?

I think there are two points of intersection between first century slavery and today. Firstly, texts like this one changed the dynamic of master/slave relationships forever in the Roman empire. The gospel of Jesus Christ transformed master/slave relationships, freeing slaves from the inside, and dramatically improving their lot in the ancient world. And so, one response to passages like the one before us today is to acknowledge that Christians today are also called to free slaves and improve

their lot in the modern world. So, the first point of intersection is this: as Christians, we need to be passionate about bringing an end to slavery in the modern world, just as Christians like William Wilberforce were instrumental in bringing an end to the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the 18th and early 19th centuries.

But the second point of intersection between this ancient text and today I think comes in the area of our work. Half-jokingly, you may have even found yourself using the language of slavery to describe your work. I don't know about you, but Lauren and I have often think of our mortgage in terms of a ball and chain, some people refer to their salary package as 'golden handcuffs' and the phrase 'she's really cracking the whip this week' isn't at all uncommon

in the workplace. But all jokes aside, the closest point of reference we have to first century slavery, the closest equivalent for us in the 21st century, is indentured service in the workplace. For slaves in the first century – who represented one third of the population and the engine room of the Roman economy – this passage taught them how God would have them relate to their masters at work. I think this passage teaches us about how God would have us relate to people in our workplace. And in particular those who have been put in a position of authority over us. Not slave and master, but employee and employer, and vice-versa.

Which all of a sudden transports this text from obscurity to possibly one of the most important texts for modern life. Let me ex-



plain what I mean. Have you ever stopped to think that your average Christian spends around 2% of their waking hours in church and most of the rest of them at work? When we're not sleeping, we spend most of our time working. And yet so often our teaching in church concentrates on the 2% of our waking hours that we spend in church to the neglect of the single greatest pre-occupation of our lives – our work.

So what does this text teach us about the place of work in the Christian life? A couple of days ago Paul taught us that,

whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus,

Today's message is exactly the same, al-

though in it Paul narrows his focus to our workplaces.

obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Very little interpretation is needed. Paul's meaning is abundantly clear. The difficulty from our perspective is in the doing. Colossians 3:23–24 is a verse of Scripture I return to often for motivation and also for

accountability in my work,

23 Whatever you do, work at it  
with all your heart, as working for  
the Lord, not for human masters,  
24 since you know that you will re-  
ceive an inheritance from the Lord  
as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you  
are serving.

For many of us listening to this message  
work at the moment is not a happy place.  
Work can be all-consuming. You feel like  
you're letting your family down over and  
over again. The politics at work can be vi-  
cious. You might right now at the moment  
be furtively scanning [seek.com.au](http://seek.com.au) or be  
in-and-out of clandestine meetings with  
recruiters. Or perhaps your job is on the  
line, budget cuts, restructures or take-

overs; talk of redundancies in the air. At the very beginning of the Bible we meet with the paradox of humankind being made to thrive on our work, and one of sin's most devastating effects being the frustration of our work. But into this frustration Paul speaks these words,

obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Meditate over these words this morning as you apply them to your context. Pray for God's help, and strength, and that you would understand his good intentions for you in the workplace in which he has placed you. Is it to do good in our world? Is it to lead your colleagues to Christ? Is it to be an agent of renewal and an avenue of his common grace in order that our society might be blessed through your labour? Pray for obedience, wisdom, clarity and blessing in your workplace today. In Jesus' name. Because it is the Lord Christ you are serving at your work.