

Colossians 3:17-25

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[0 : 00] Many years ago I ran a little course in my home, in my old church, for people wanting to find out how they could serve God more effectively.!

Do you ever feel like work or family or other commitments to stop you serving the Lord Jesus Christ? Well, Paul has something very different to say.

He's told us in this letter that actually in the Lord Jesus Christ all things are being reconciled to God. Chapter 1 verse 20. All things are being put back in their right place in a creation that's being torn apart by human rebellion against God.

And if all things are being reconciled in Christ, if all things are put back in their right place, then isn't work part of all things? Or do you have work in a separate category?

Isn't family part of all things? Or does family live in a different category? See, Paul's great thrust in this letter is that Jesus Christ is all we need. Because in Jesus Christ we have new life and God is fulfilling his purposes of putting everything right again.

[1 : 26] So he's told us back in chapter 2 verse 13, if you've trusted in the Lord Jesus, you've been raised with Christ. You have a new life. You're a new person. Your identity is in Christ.

Chapter 3 verse 4. So we can sum up Paul's message so far by saying if you're a Christian, you are a new person. We've been freed from our old ways to be the people God has destined us to be, the people God created us to be in the first place.

And that means, because that comes through Christ, it means Christ gives us the power to live this new life. Christ is also the pattern for this new life. The way he lived is what we're being transformed into.

Chapter 3 verse 10. Paul says we're being renewed in knowledge, in the image of our creator. That means we'll be like Christ. Christ provides the power. Christ is the pattern. Christ is also the purpose.

All things are made by him and for him. And that's why Paul says what he says in chapter 3 verse 17, that first verse I read. Whatever you do in word or deed, if you're a believer, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

[2 : 36] Now what does it mean to do things in the name of the Lord Jesus? Well think about an ambassador. An ambassador speaks in the name of the government that sent him, or the name of the nation.

How come? Well he's been empowered to do that, and he's representing that nation to further their purposes, to please those who sent him. And so it is for us to do things in the name of the Lord Jesus.

It means our actions are empowered by him, and they're under his authority and for his pleasure and purposes. Now what does that, that sounds very spiritual, doesn't it?

I have a neighbor two doors down, I'm reading the Bible with every couple of weeks, and he always likes to say, I'm a practical person, I'm a surveyor. I want to know what this means in practice. And we do need to know what that means in practice, don't we?

And that's why Paul tells us, in verses 18 to chapter 4 verse 1, he spells out what this everyday spirituality looks like. In the very practical, very nitty gritty world, of our work and our family life.

[3 : 38] Because after all, no one sees us more closely than our families or our work colleagues, do they? And so being a Christian makes a difference there. Now at this point, having heard the reading, you may be thinking, well hang on, I'm not married, so this doesn't have anything to do with me, or I'm not working, I've retired, or I'm unemployed, so can I switch off now?

Well let me say three things briefly about that. But don't switch off, firstly. Because the underlying principle here applies to all of us. The underlying principle is this. Because Christians have new life

in Christ, we must live out our new life, by his power, and for his pleasure.

We must live out that new life, by his power, and for his pleasure. Whatever point in life you're in. The second thing to say is that when these verses talk about work, it's not just talking about paid employment.

In fact, the slaves to whom Paul was writing weren't paid. Work isn't just what you're paid to do. Work can be cleaning your house, helping your neighbour, serving a charity shop, anything you do with your time, really.

So it can be done for Christ's pleasure, with Christ's power. The third thing to say is that even if you are a Christian, even if you're not married, then what Paul says here about marriage is something we can use to pray for our friends who are married.

[5 : 00] And what he says about children and parents applies to all of us at some level, because all of us have parents, or had parents. So what does it mean for us to live out a new life that Christ has given us, by his power, for his pleasure?

Well, it means our relationships are renewed. Our relationships are renewed in the home and in the workplace. Let's look at the home first. Pleasing Christ at home. That's what true spirituality means. It means pleasing Christ at home. And so we get these instructions, don't we? Verse 18. Wives, submit your husbands as is fitting in the Lord. Now at this point, alarm bells are going off in lots of people's minds, saying, hang on, this doesn't sound very progressive, this doesn't sound very good. Isn't this just like the Taliban stopping girls going to school? Is Paul keeping women chained up in the kitchen? Is that what Paul wants to do? Well, no. That is not what he means.

Let me explain that for a few reasons. Firstly, he says submit. He doesn't say obey. He tells children and slaves to obey. He doesn't tell wives to obey their husbands. That's one thing to say. The second thing to say, we won't look at this in detail because we don't have time, but in Ephesians chapter 5, where Paul expands on this teaching, he uses the model of the Lord Jesus Christ and Christ's relationship with the church.

[6 : 23] In fact, if we look at Christ himself, for example, Christ is fully God and yet submitted to his Father's will, willingly, to die on the cross. He's still equal with God, still equally God, still worthy of worship and love.

But submitting did not mean he was less valuable or less important. And so does in marriage. When a wife submits, it doesn't mean she's less valuable or less important.

So what does this mean? It means a wife's attitude to her husband should be one of respecting and following his lead. Why? Why we ask?

Well, Paul tells us. Because this is fitting in the Lord, he says, verse 18. It's fitting in the Lord. It's what pleases the Lord. It's what's right according to his ways and his patterns.

Remember, Christ died to rescue us, to deliver us from the domain of darkness, as Paul puts it in chapter 1. To bring us in the kingdom of the Son. So it's fitting that we live in the way of our new existence, the new country we've lived in, for example, we can put it like that.

[7 : 29] We used to be over here, slaves in the land of darkness. Through Christ's death and the cross and resurrection, we've been brought into his kingdom and his country. So it's fitting we live in the new ways of his world, not the old ways of the ruined world he's rescued us from, the slavery he's rescued us from.

So this is truly progressive thinking. Living for the future. Living for the kingdom that Christ has, not the ways of the world around us. And if it still seems wrong to us, we need to think, where do we get our best advice in teaching about marriage?

Is it from the books in Waterstones? The agony aunt columns in the magazines? Or from the word of the living God who designed us all and made us all? So in Christ, God is renewing our relationships.

So we can please him in the home. And that puts a demand on husbands as well. Look at verse 19. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Now it goes against a lot of things that we see in the movies, doesn't it?

The commands to love your wife. People talk about falling in love, don't they? Well, as one more amusing person than me once put it, love is not something you fall into like a ditch.

[8 : 43] If you fall into a ditch by accident, you can't fall in love by accident. Love here is commanded. The word Paul uses in the original language is interesting. It's not the sentimental word for brotherly affection.

It's not the sensuous word for erotic love. Rather, it's a sacrificial word. In fact, in Ephesians 5, when Paul unpacks this further, he uses Christ as the model.

He says this, Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. It's not sentimental. It's not sensuous. It's sacrificial.

As Christ renews our relationships, that's what husbands are to do for their wives, for sacrifice themselves for them. So, husband-wife relationships are renewed. But there are also parent-child relationships.

Also parent-child relationships. Look at verse 20. Children, obey your parents in everything. At which point, I can imagine my children turning around and saying, Why? Why?

[9 : 45] Paul gives the answer. For this pleases the Lord. The Lord Jesus died for us, given us new life. What greater motive can there be for anything other than to please Him?

And notice, this is true freedom. We live in a world where people think doing what they want is freedom. I want to be free to do what I want. If we stop and think for a moment, see, that's not freedom, is it?

That's just slavery. Look at a child who always gets what he or she wants. Absolute pain to be around, isn't he or she? Because she's selfish. That's the slavery Christ died to rescue us from. See, true freedom is found in pleasing Him, not ourselves. In being able to please Him. Look at the responsibility of parents as well, particularly fathers get pulled up here. Verse 21. Fathers, do not provoke your children lest they become discouraged.

At this point, my children have some words to say to me. The idea behind provoking is a sense of setting up a challenge that the child cannot live up to and therefore gets discouraged and feels like a failure.

[10 : 52] And that can happen in a number of ways, can't it? There's that sort of stereotypical competitive dad who has to win. A friend of mine told the story of how he actually almost knocked his nine-year-old daughter out playing tennis once because he wanted to prove he could serve faster than she could.

Oh dear. I'm not that good at sports, that doesn't worry me. But, there's always that temptation for fathers to want to dominate and control. It's a male temptation particularly, isn't it?

And that can frustrate and discourage children. Or in some cases, fathers can build their hope and identity on a child's success. What? You didn't get 10 out of 10 in the spelling test.

That's appalling. You didn't get straight A's and A stars and GCSEs. That's awful. Imagine what's the father doing. He's hoping the child can have the success that he didn't have.

Or the success perhaps he did have. But now puts his identity on the child achieving it as well. And what happens? Setting targets that the child cannot achieve so the child gets discouraged.

[11 : 55] Paul says, don't live like that. Don't live like that. Christ is your life. He's told us that back in the start of chapter 3. Your children aren't your life. Your children are entrusted to you as a gift by God.

They're not your property to dominate. They're yours to foster and encourage. So Christ is to be served and pleased in the home. As Christ renews our family relationships and changes our motives so loving one another is a means of serving Christ.

And that same principle applies in the workplace as well. God is renewing our workplaces so we can please Christ at work as he changes our motives to what we do. Look at verse 22 shall we? Slaves obey everything those who are earthly masters but not by way of eye service as people pleasers but with sincerity of heart fearing the Lord. Now of course for some people at this point who want to say hang on the Bible's condoning slavery.

That shows the Bible's out of date. Jesus we can just pick and choose what we like about Bible teaching. Well I don't have time to deal with that fully but let me just say that is a nonsense.

[13 : 07] Paul was sitting there in the Roman Empire with slavery was a huge institution. You cannot knock down a huge institution with a hammer. Can you imagine knocking down the shard with a hammer?

Wouldn't work. What Paul does here is not try and knock down the institution with his hammer.

What he does is dig deep down and plant depth charges dynamite with a long fuse.

And he likes the fuse in this letter in the New Testament the fuse is lit. And eventually the explosion undermines the whole foundations of slavery.

Now how does Paul do that? He does it by showing how in Christ the whole slave-master relationship is changed. The primary identity for people is no longer their economic position be it one of power or servitude.

Their primary identity is being in Christ. And so now slaves and masters are to relate to each other not directly as superior to inferior but as both relating primarily to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[14:13] It's also worth saying that slavery in the Roman world at this time is not like slavery in the southern states of America in the 19th century. It's very different. Slaves could have, some slaves were badly treated, some were very well treated, had very responsible jobs.

So let's look at what Paul says about how Christ redefines relationships in the workplace. He's summed it up with two lines if you like. Employees are working for the Lord employers are working under the Lord.

Employees are working for the Lord employers are working under the Lord. See slaves or employees today are ultimately truly serving the Lord Jesus.

to the last words of verse 24 there. You are serving the Lord Christ. It could be a command, it could just be a description. It could be either way in the original language. But the point is you have a greater master as we work.

We have a greater master. And having a greater master means you have a greater motivation. Look at verse 22 again. Slaves obey in everything those who are your earthly masters.

[15:21] Not by way of eye service, as people pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Don't just work when they're watching. Don't just do the things they can see.

Don't just try and create a good impression so you get promoted. Rather, work diligently. Don't just turn up early at work and leave your jacket on the back of the chair so you can go away and have a long lunch break and leave your jacket there at night so everyone thinks you're working really hard. But work with sincerity of heart. Fearing the Lord. Because ultimately your boss is only your earthly master. You have someone much bigger, someone much greater you're serving. Charles Spurgeon, a great 19th century preacher here in London, told the story of how he once went to see a little servant girl who had become a Christian.

And he said to her, what difference does it make now you believe in Jesus? And she said, now I sweep under the mats. That's absolutely right. She got it. You've got a greater master, a greater motivation to pleasing him.

And also there's a greater value to our work. There's a greater value to our work. Look at what he says in verse 23. Whatever you do, work heartily. Literally, work out of your soul as for the Lord and not for men.

[16:38] I remember my old job when I worked in a big company. If your section head or your immediate line manager asked you to do something, you get it done. If a question came down from the vice president or a director, you go, okay, right, I'm really going to do this.

This is obviously very important if he or she has asked for it. While someone even more important than the vice president or the head of the council is asking for your work. It's the Lord Jesus, the King of the universe.

So work heartily as working for the Lord. George Herbert, a great 17th century English poet, has this line in one of his poems, The Elixir, which I always found very helpful as a worker.

This, this truth, is the famous stone that turneth all to gold. For that which God doth touch and own cannot for less be sold.

That which God doth touch and own cannot for less be sold. In other words, that spreadsheet you're working on, those envelopes you're packing to send out the next mail shots, that room you're going to have to sweep later on at home because it's a mess, those things can feel very dreary and very unimportant.

[17:47] And yet Christ is redeeming everything. And those things can be done for him. They're of value. This is the precious stone that turneth all to gold.

That which God doth touch and own cannot for less be sold. See, also this applies to us if we're doing work we're not paid for. Whether it's setting up each week for Ealing Lunchtime Talks, thank you for those who do, or serving in our churches, cleaning them, or whatever you do.

There's this lie in our culture, isn't it, that it's only what you get paid for is of any value. It's a hard thing to say at home, mums, to hear it here, isn't it? Yet the truth is, anything which is done in Christ's name, that is, with his power, for his pleasure, is gold.

It's gold. As Christians, we have a greater master, a greater motivation, a greater value for our work, and a fourthly a greater incentive. Look at verse 24. Work heartily, ask for the Lord, not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

Slaves in the Roman Empire couldn't inherit anything. So Paul's saying to them, don't worry, you're going to inherit something that cannot be taken away, something that will not perish. Management consultants talk a lot about incentivising employees.

[19 : 06] They go to great lengths in management consultancy and restructuring companies to make sure employees are incentivised, to use the great word they use. What greater incentive can there be?

There is a reward for all Christ's people. They will never perish, spoil, or fade. But remember in all this as well, Paul says, there's a warning here.

Slaves can't just, or employees can't just strive off doing nothing, can't shirk their responsibility. Look at verse 25. for the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

Yes, the Lord values their work, the Lord values your work, my work. But it doesn't mean he's uncritically on our side. We can't cut corners, the Lord sees what we do.

who do. So this is how Christ renews relationships in the workplace. Employees are working for the Lord, employers are working under the Lord. Let's very briefly look at verse 1 of chapter 4.

[20 : 03] Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven. So in the Roman Empire, slave masters could essentially get away with what they wanted to do. They could treat their possessions as just that, possessions, their slaves.

Paul says, no, in Christ, remember you have another master. Who will judge your work. And of course that has application for those of us who lead teams and manage people. Are we looking after them in a way the Lord looks after us?

Let's get back to where we started, shall we? My friend Sally, he said she didn't have time to serve the Lord because work was taking up too much energy. That's completely wrong, wasn't it?

That's completely wrong. In Christ we are new people. All things are reconciled to him. So the family, our homes are a place we can live to please the Lord.

Our workplaces are a place we can live to please the Lord. And we can do that in Christ's power for his pleasure. This last week I was speaking to a lady in our church who's a teacher.

[21 : 11] And she worked very very hard in her first year of teaching. But she said it's interesting the number of pupils who said to her in lunch times when she's helping them. Miss, are you a Christian? She would say yes.

The reason they can see it is because she's doing extra work for them because she loves Jesus and knows the workplace is where she's serving him. I thank God for that example.

Let me pray for a second.