

Colossians 3:22-4:1

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[0 : 00] I'm Tim with me, if you will, to Colossians 3, and we've slowed right down. We're just going to look this evening at verse 22, chapter 4, verse 1.

There's an outline on your sheet, which might help, or might not.

One of the two men that brought this letter from Paul in Rome to the gathering of believers in Colossae was a man named Anasimus. Anasimus was a slave, a slave who'd run away from his master in Colossae.

And somehow Anasimus had come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Through meeting Paul in his prison in Rome. I can only imagine that Anasimus himself had been a prisoner.

And Anasimus has now gone back to Colossae with this letter to return to his master. His master's name was Philemon. And there is good reason to think that when this letter, which we call Colossians, was first read and first heard by those believers gathered in that town, they were in Philemon's house.

[1 : 32] Anasimus had carried another letter from Paul for Philemon himself. But that's another story. You can read that in the New Testament. And I think I find it rather moving that when this letter of Colossians was read on that first occasion, among the listeners was Anasimus, the slave who'd run away, and Philemon, the slave owner.

But that only sharpens, doesn't it, the awkwardness that we feel about chapter 3, verse 22, chapter 4, verse 1.

Our discomfort when the reader calls us to hear these words as the word of God. The Bible's treatment of the subject of slavery isn't the only place, is it, where the Bible offends modern moral sensibilities of pretty much everyone in our society.

But the issue of slavery is one of the best known. And for many Bible believers, I think it is the most embarrassing. And it's the one that is frequently cited as the case that proves the kind of cultural relativity of the Bible that we now see is totally unacceptable.

It's morally unacceptable. The institution of slavery which the Bible writers accepted. Some might even say they endorsed it.

[3 : 00] And as they were culturally bound to the culture of their day and their place. And so the argument goes, isn't it, that they didn't understand the moral evil of slavery.

We have come to understand that more recently. They didn't understand the moral evil of patriarchy. And the cultural limitations of the Bible with regards to the place of women in the family and in church and in society.

But we now, we understand that. But they didn't. Even more recently, we have come to see the truth about sexuality. While the Bible writers, they have the cultural limitations of the Bible's unenlightened sexual immorality.

The Bible's disapproval of homosexuality can now be seen as a consequence of the ignorance of the time about homosexuality and its nature and its causes.

Male headship can be seen as the consequence of an unenlightened culture that didn't know about human rights and women's rights in particular. And the acceptance of slavery, well, it was in a culture where this dreadful practice was unquestioned.

[4 : 22] So slavery is advanced as the case which proves the cultural limitations of the Bible's vision, at least in the area of social relations. We all agree that slavery is evil.

Now I'm deliberately kind of pausing to open up quite a big subject. And we will get to the text. But I want to try and clear the ground a little bit. To clear away some misunderstandings that stop us listening to verses 22 of chapter 3 to chapter 4 verse 1.

That we need to listen to it as the word of God. What stops us? Five comments. First of all, the problem with the offense. We need to see that the thinking that I've been talking about, that the Bible is kind of culturally bound, is hugely problematic.

To judge the Bible by the standards and the values of our culture, the understandings of our historic moment, is inexcusable arrogance.

It's chronological snobbery. To use C.S. Lewis' phrase. It means that you refuse to allow the Bible to critique your culture, except on your own terms.

[5 : 38] Secondly, the real challenge. The subject of slavery, rather than being the test case that proves the Bible's limitations, is therefore, I want to suggest to you tonight, a very good test case for believing Christians today.

Of whether you and I will actually humbly listen to the word of God. That we will expect its thorough goodness. And we should know that whenever we find it hard to see either God's word as good, it will either be because we've misunderstood it, or because we've got a kind of mistaken moral framework.

Do you remember last week, we thought about the offense that people feel so easily at Paul's words to wives in Colossians 3.18.

And I suggested to you that that offense is caused by two mistaken ideas that our culture has taught us. Now having said that, I want to say to you that the issue of slavery is difficult.

And certainly we will be hoped, I hope in a couple of moments, as we listen really carefully to what the Apostle Paul is saying, instead of what we imagine he's saying. That as we hear what he says in the context of the whole letter, rather than pulling it out of its context, as we live in it more broadly in view of the whole of the New Testament.

[6 : 59] Then we would discover that nowhere does the Bible endorse slavery. For example, in the same way that it endorses marriage. And family.

And the relationships that are involved there. Those relationships are clearly established and they are given by God for the good of the human race. But the really awkward thing is neither does the New Testament anywhere condemn slavery.

Even Christian slave masters are not told to liberate their slaves. They're not. So it is difficult. Fourthly, we need to see our baggage.

There is baggage in every single one of us that comes to the text tonight. There's always baggage. And that contributes to our problem. It's not the whole problem. But it certainly contributes to it. Because when we think of slavery, we can't help but think of the 19th century. Maybe the phenomenon in the US, that was race-based slavery.

[8 : 03] It was dependent, wasn't it, on the appalling slave trade. It was practiced at least very often, not always, but very often with terrible cruelty. And so we all have our image of slavery.

We are aware of that shameful institution that was gradually abolished under the influence of godly Christians like William Wilberforce. began with the abolition of the trade of slaves.

And the New Testament does condemn the trade of slaves. Man trading. But it is a mistake to think that the institution that we encounter in passages like Colossians 3 are exactly the same as they were in the 19th century.

That's not the case. These were domestic slaves serving within a household. I understand that 80 to 90 percent, I started to discover this this week, but I read it in a book that is very reliable, so it must be true.

80 to 90 percent of the inhabitants of Rome were slaves or former slaves. Slavery was not race-based. They were usually prisoners of war.

[9 : 10] And although a person could sell himself or herself into slavery in certain circumstances, slaves furthermore had certain rights under Roman law. And there were various ways that a slave might gain his freedom.

In some cases, many I think, a slave could expect freedom after seven years. In any case, under Roman law, he or she could expect to be set free at least by the age of 30.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that kids grew up thinking, oh, slavery was a wonderful thing and when I grew up, I wanted to be a slave. No one thought that. No one would dispute that freedom was normally preferable than the life of a slave.

No one would suggest that being a slave was a desirable condition. But we ought to recognize the historical context of the Bible's words and not read into them a situation that was not being

addressed at a particular time.

However, fifth problem is, I think, this. We are left with the conclusion that the Bible does not directly condemn or demand the overthrow of the institution of slavery as it was practiced in the New Testament times.

[10:25] Slaves are nowhere in the Bible called to rise and revolt. masters were not called upon to set their slaves free. Christians were generally not instructed to agitate for the abolition of this practice.

And so it is awkward. And I expect it was awkward in Colossae. Even within the fellowship of believers. And so this word is addressed to slaves and masters.

And as we allow it, as we accept it as the good word of God, it actually changes my idea of freedom. And perhaps my idea of human rights do not mishear me.

It's my ideas of freedom and rights that are challenged, not freedom and rights itself. God himself has set us free according to the New Testament.

He has set us free from the dominion of darkness. He's brought us into the kingdom of his Son. Redeemed. We are forgiven all our trespasses. How does Christ, the one who is reconciling all things in heaven and on earth to himself, he's making peace by the blood of Christ, Christ's cross, how does Christ Jesus redeem the slave?

[11:47] How does Christ Jesus redeem the master? How does the one who is a slave, who is a master, who's come to faith in Christ, how does that slave or that master experience new life in Christ?

Experience the new ordering of life that Christ brings, the redemption, the freedom that he brings. Could it be that there's a freedom, there is a redemption that is solid and is real and yet is not dependent on the kind of freedom, the kind of ideas of independence and liberty and autonomy that matter so much to me in my generation?

And so I want to say to you, we should join Onesimus and Philemon in the congregation and humbly listen to the word of God. The word of the apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. Chapter 1, verse 1. So let's see the word to slaves. Chapter 3, verse 22. Born servants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters.

We shouldn't miss the fact, should we, that in the church, in the International Presbyterian Church of Colossae, there were slaves and the slaves were addressed.

[13:15] Onesimus was not the only one. They were members of that gathering. There were members of that gathering who were slaves and they were rightly recognized and acknowledged and they were regarded as responsible for their own conduct.

And as we hear these words, we hear that slaves were to be obedient, you see at verse 22, in everything to those who are your earthly masters.

All their master required. Paul isn't interested in Colossians in exploring the very reasonable question on what limits are there. Any more than he wasn't interested in discussing the limits of a child's obedience to their parents earlier, or a wife's submission to her husband a little earlier.

That does not mean that there are no limits. The Bible does set limits very clearly. But that's not his point here. His point is to set their obedience in a whole new context.

In a context that radically changes their situation. Their masters, can you see verse 22, are only their earthly masters. literally, the masters and lords according to the flesh.

[14:30] But you slaves no longer live in fear of your lords or your masters according to the flesh because your lord is Christ Jesus. You still have an earthly lord, slaves, but it's very important that you know that that is what he is.

He's an earthly lord. He's your only lord in the realm of the flesh. Now, what struck me this week as I studied this is that my tendency is to think that my allegiance to the Lord Jesus overrides my earthly allegiances.

Do you sense that? Or at least my allegiance to Christ loosens my allegiances and ties to mere human beings.

I am serving Christ. I'm sorry, there are times when I must sit a little loose to the obligations of the world, of this world. But I think this really challenges that.

The extreme case of slavery is a challenge to that understanding of the relationship between the lordship of Christ and merely earthly, this worldly obligations.

[15 : 48] If you are a slave, your obedience to your master is not compromised by having Jesus Christ as Lord. It's actually put in good order.

If it's possible to speak like this, it's redeemed. And your obedience, verse 22, is not by way of eye service as people please.

Which means is that you're not to serve as a slave who wants to be seen serving. You don't obey to appear obedient.

Then the quality of your obedience would depend on whether you're being watched or not. do you see your service as slave is not now as a man pleaser. No, your obedience, your obedience to your earthly lord is now with sincerity of heart, the end of verse 22.

Or better, a little better, is singleness of heart. Christ. It's not simply the case, it's not the case that you have allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ that pulls you in one way, and your earthly obligations pull you in another way.

[17 : 04] You're not between the two. No, the Lord Christ is reordering the universe, and the Lord Christ does not pull us out of earthly relationships. relationships. But he calls us to live in those relationships, in the family, in the workplace, under him, fearing him, fearing the Lord.

Which if you remember the Old Testament notion of fearing the Lord included loving him, and trusting him. And I don't want us to lose sight of the fact that these words are addressed slaves. But I do want us to see that as we listen to the words to the slaves, just as every free person in Philemon's house that day listened to the words to the slaves, we must see that if this is how Christ works even with the slave, that has huge implications for every single one of us.

There's a new obedience of the slave. And that's generalized in the next verse. Can you see that? It's a new life. And this radically new way of life is filled out.

Verse 23, whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men. Just glance back to the summary of the Christian life.

[18 : 32] What is the Christian life all about? Chapter 3 and verse 17, whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

And now we learn that the slave, as a slave, is liberated to live like that in the flesh. He or she may have very limited freedom.

We might say no freedom at all, but the slave is a Christian. And the slave is a slave, as a slave is living for the Lord Christ. Christ. His or her service, everything they do now, is serving the Lord Christ.

Do you see how radical it is? And it's precisely because it is the extreme case of slavery to which these words are addressed. Do you see how every obligation under which you labor, every burden that life puts on you, every pressure under which you are placed.

You are liberated by Christ, not from those things, but you are free to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father through him.

[19 : 55] You are free to work, not under grudging compulsion, but from the centre of your being, from your soul, knowing that you are living for Christ, not for man.

Paul continues this amazing line of instruction of the slaves in Philemon's house, 7 verse 24, and you say, near reward. Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. And again, isn't it the case, this extreme case of slavery intensifies what is said. slaves are not normally rewarded for their work. It was an end of year bonus.

They're not normally rewarded, they are not paid, at least not more than a pittance. The motivation for much of what we do in life is of course the reward we hope to receive. Not necessarily monetary, though that is included, but there are all manners of rewards that motivate our efforts.

Whether it's simply the reward of satisfaction when the achievement is completed, whether it's the approval of others we expect to win, or the gratitude that will be expressed to us, the reward for what we do is so much the motivation and the shaping force of what we do.

[21 : 12] But it wasn't so for a slave. Can a slave be redeemed from a life of rewardless effort? And what we see here is that faith in Jesus Christ changes a life.

even for the slave. And here we see starkly what Paul meant at the beginning of his letter when he gave thanks to God for the hope laid up in heaven about which you've heard in the word of the truth of the gospel.

What he meant and how important it was and how hugely significant it was when he taught that God has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. God is it seems to me as I hear

these words addressed to the slaves I see how much of my life is motivated still by so many pathetic rewards.

So let me ask you what is it that keeps you going? Really what is it that keeps you going? In the burdens and in the stress and in the hardship and the pain what reward keeps you going? I'm sure that there are rewards in your mind you are expecting. Why would you go through it all? In life and living whatever you do?

[22 : 35] Can we share in the liberation that these slaves enjoy from bondage to an earthly reward? Do you know, do you really know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward?

Undeserved of course. All of grace. Of course, but the most powerful and liberating motivation for living every part of life well is all summed up by saying what has been behind everything that has been said so far at the end of verse 24.

You are serving the Lord Christ. You have a new master. You are serving the Lord Christ. The NIV is actually better. I think, well, the old one was, it is the Lord Christ you are serving.

And again, the serving word there is slave. It's the word for slave service. Here is the power that transforms the life of the slave.

He or she has become a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the Lord Christ you're serving. whatever indignity there was in being a slave, whatever shame, whatever drudgery, it can never be the same and it must never be the same.

[23 : 57] And I wonder whether you are as moved as I was when I reflected on these words this weekend, hearing this word to the slaves in Philemon's house. Do you feel the power of the words here? Do you feel the power of these words?

It is the Lord Christ you are serving. And the word to slaves ends with a slight surprise. Look at verse 25. The wrongdoer will be paid back to the wrong he's done and there's no partiality. Here's the reality that this word forces us to see. You have died with Christ. You've been raised with Christ. Your life is hidden with Christ in God.

When Christ appears you will also appear with him in glory. United to Christ changes everything. Everything. But it does not mean that you are taken out of the world. Being united to Christ changes everything but it does not mean that you are taken out of your obligations of life in this world.

In whatever situation you might find yourself the Lord God the Lord Christ your Lord my Lord verse 25 cares about wrongdoing.

[25 : 10] And you will answer for him about wrongdoing. whatever your obligations might be mind you so will your earthly masters. Because with the Lord Christ there is no partiality.

the life of a slave who belongs to Christ is profoundly changed. Finally there is a very brief word to the masters and it is brief but it is nonetheless radical isn't it chapter 4 verse 1 masters treat your bond servants justly and fairly knowing that you also have a master in heaven.

Earthly lords earthly masters who are believers have a heavenly lord and have a heavenly master. Such lords such masters in other words are slaves.

In the great reordering of things the power of the powerful is put in a new place. But the heavenly lord doesn't do away with earthly power.

The heavenly lord brings that under his own rule. The powerful are still powerful but their power must now be exercised with justice and with fairness justly and fairly.

[26 : 37] And the masters the bosses they must know that it is the lord christ they are serving. And so I want to finish with asking as we think over the words of the apostle this evening.

These words strike us so strangely. And they do find us a little bit uncomfortable tonight. But will you hear it? And will you heed the word of God who gives us a new obedience, a new life, a new master, and a new world.

Let's pray.