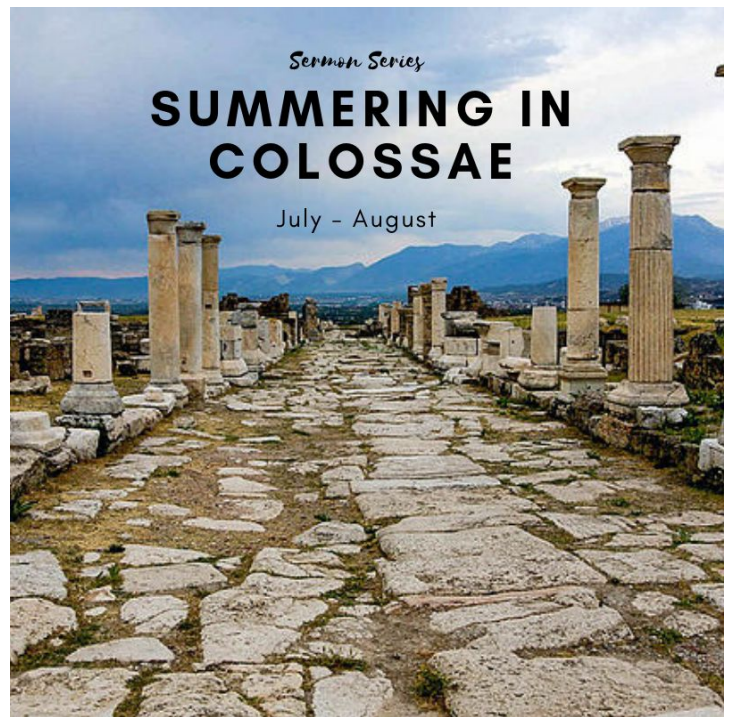


Colossians 3:18-4:1

**18** Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. **19** Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. **20** Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. **21** Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. **22** Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.<sup>1</sup> **23** Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, **24** knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. **25** For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

**4:1** Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.



**Interpreting Scripture Responsibly & A Master Like No Other**

This morning we come to part six of our journey through Paul's letter to the Church in Colossae, also known as the book of Colossians. You'll recall that last week we looked at verses 18 through 21, where Paul had begun taking the template of a Roman household code, which was common in his day, and altering it in significant ways to reflect the values of a family operating in the Kingdom of God instead of Roman family values.

Of course, as we lamented last week, throughout history those four verses have often been interpreted much differently, allowing them to be easily weaponized to justify tyrannical attitudes and even abusive behaviors of husbands and fathers toward their wife or children in the name of God. And the reason this has been such a problem through the years is due to a common failure to understand how to properly interpret scripture. So I'd like to begin today by taking a few minutes to talk about how to interpret scripture more responsibly, which will continue to be relevant as we then approach today's portion of our Colossians passage.

There is a recklessness in the way many Christians interpret scripture today. There are not only individual believers, but entire church traditions, who interpret scripture in has come to be known as the Fundamentalist method of interpreting scripture,

- where the Biblical text is read in a straightforward, surface manner,
- and then conclusions are drawn about the meaning of the text based on that superficial reading,
- and those conclusions are then assumed to be Biblically authoritative, when in fact they may be far from what the Biblical author intended, and even contrary to God's heart or the Gospel.

Now, there are many Christians who would bristle at being labeled "Fundamentalist", but who approach scripture in just this way. And verse 18 that we looked at last week is a great example of a verse where this can lead to catastrophic results. When Paul writes, "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in

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<sup>1</sup> Wright: Many manuscripts read "God" here, rather than "Lord", perhaps to avoid confusion between the Lord Jesus and the lord, i.e. master, as the greek word for lord, kyrios, could indicate either.

the Lord,” many have read this (or read their cultural bias *into* this) that Paul is giving Christian men license to Lord over their wives and require unconditional obedience. Now, I’m not saying that all fundamentalists will interpret this passage in such an extreme way, but this interpretation is certainly one of the possible (and frequent) outcomes of the fundamentalist approach. But those who come to such a conclusion are typically unaware of many key factors for rightly understanding the text, like we talked about last week: that Paul is using this ancient household code template or that Paul actually addressed the wife in this verse rather than the husband. And so the fruit of approaching scripture recklessly has real consequences in people’s lives, by seeming to provide biblical justification for a husband to be a tyrant - or even abusive - toward his wife, all while reassuring himself “for the Bible tells me so”.

So just because someone draws a conclusion from a passage of scripture - even if it seems to be the obvious meaning - doesn’t guarantee that their conclusion is authoritative or true. If we really care about discerning truth from the Bible, then we must take a more responsible approach. And the way to go about interpreting scripture responsibly is to begin by seeking to understand what the biblical writer was actually saying to his audience, by taking into account both the historical and biblical context; but then, rather than applying the specific message for that first century audience to our twenty-first century lives, we instead need to consider what theological principle or principles are being expressed through the biblical writer’s message; then, finally, we should consider how that deeper, timeless principle might apply in our present-day context. And it may end up applying to our lives in much the same way that the biblical author was applying it or it may not.

But if you’re having trouble tracking with me here, listen to how scholar Haddon Robinson explains it. He says we cannot decide what a (biblical) passage means to us unless we first determine what the passage meant (that is, what it meant back when it was written). He says, “To do this we must sit down before the biblical writer and try to understand what he wanted to convey to his original readers. Only after we comprehend what he meant *in his own terms* and *in his own times* can we clarify what difference that should make in life today.” But Robinson insists that our application of any Biblical passage “*must come* from the (deeper) theological purpose of the Biblical writer.”

So *this* is how I approach scriptures when I’m preparing a sermon for a Sunday. In preparing for last week’s sermon on verses 18 through 21, it was only from examining the historical and textual context that it became evident how unprecedented - and therefore how significant - it was that Paul was holding men accountable to loving their wife (v19) and not exasperating their children (v21) is what is most significant in this passage, but also who Paul chooses to address in each verse indicate he was encouraging all parties in a marriage and nuclear family to take responsibility for what is actually under their authority and control, which is their *own* attitude and behavior in their family relationships.

Well, turning now to the verses that follow on slaves and their masters, this will be our focus today. But I should note that here Paul is still in the midst of his altered household code that reflects the values of the Kingdom of God, because in Paul’s context the “bondservants” - or slaves - he refers to would’ve been considered part of the household. So these are individuals a Roman household code certainly would’ve addressed.

But this is another example where I’m sure it won’t surprise you that there have been occasions in history when interpreting this passage with a reckless approach has led to devastating results, as it could easily lead one to conclude Paul is condoning slavery here. In fact, that is *exactly how* many conveniently interpreted this passage in the confederate south. Although there were many passages in the Bible that terrified slave owners in the 18th and 19th centuries, Colossians 3:22 was not one of them, because on the surface this passage seemed to fit perfectly with their cultural biases.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, when the influence of fossil discoveries and Dawriniian evolution was causing Christian committment to a young earth to fade in much of the American Church by the end of the 1800s, the Deep South of the United States remained a bastion of anti-evolution sentiment, because an admission that early Genesis might be interpreted in a manner other than the straightforward reading would require them to admit that passages like Colossians 3:18ff might also be understood in a manner

However, if one takes into account the historical and scriptural context in which Paul wrote this it becomes evident that Paul was not intending to condone slavery here at all! You see, first, from an historical perspective, we should understand that the system of slavery in the Roman empire differed in some significant ways from the system of slavery in our country's history that we are more familiar with. To begin with, slavery in the Roman Empire was not racially-based like it was later in America and the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup> But there were also different levels of slaves in the Roman Empire. Craig Keener explains that there were slaves who worked in mines, and they "had the worst life, dying quickly under the harsh conditions"; then there were agricultural slaves (who competed with free peasants for the same work); and then there were household slaves that our passage refers to. And they generally had the best life of the different types of slaves, although the women (and sometimes boys) were vulnerable to sexual exploitation by their masters. But unlike the slaves in our history, many of the Roman household slaves in urban areas had the opportunity to become free at some point in their lives; and in some cases they were even assisted by their former owners to become independently wealthy. In fact, the truth is that in the Roman Empire many male household slaves were actually *better off* than the average free person from the economic and social standpoints and in the possibility for upward mobility.

However, despite these differences with American slavery, let me be clear: the Roman system of slavery was still an *unjust* institution that treated people as property and enabled the powerful to exploit them for profit. But the reason Paul doesn't *condemn* the practice of slavery here in his letter to the Colossians - the reason he doesn't argue that all slaves should be emancipated - is quite frankly because it would've been *fruitless*. At this time Christianity (was not yet illegal, but it) was a minority religion in the Roman Empire, with absolutely no leverage or influence to reform the behemoth Roman economic system. So the reason Paul doesn't suggest the Christian slaves in Colossae should fight for emancipation, because he rightly discerns that in this historical situation it would be a waste of their time and their lives.

However, Paul doesn't come to this conclusion in every situation - and this is one reason we can be sure Paul is not pro-slavery. The book of Philemon is actually a letter Paul writes to a Christian slave master by that name in regard to a runaway slave named Onesimus. And even though Philemon had the legal right under Roman law to execute any runaway slave, Paul writes to ask Philemon to consider freeing Onesimus instead, so that Onesimus could assist Paul in his ministry. So in *that* situation, Paul discerned that emancipating this individual slave was a *realistic possibility*, because Philemon and Onesimus were both believers, and so that's exactly what he argues for. But that was not the case with in the Colossian church, where a slave seeking freedom might cost them their life or if a Christian slave master freed his slaves he might actually be leaving those former slaves economically and socially worse off!!

So Paul has taken all of this into account in choosing to write to the Church in Colossae the way he does. And he first addresses those who are slaves beginning in verse 22, writing,

**"22** Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.<sup>4</sup>  
**23** Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, **24** knowing that

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that doesn't support slavery and racism.

This anti-evolution sentiment in the Deep South would prove crucial for the resurgence of Young Earth Creationism with the faux scientific publications of *The New Geology* by George McCready Price (who was a Seventh-Day Adventist, but not a scientist) in the 1920s (also the era of the Scopes Monkey Trial) and *The Genesis Flood* by John Whitcomb (not a scientist, but a Southern Baptist civil engineer) & Henry Morris (a theologian) in the 1960s.

To dig deeper on this subject, visit <https://www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/aee>

<sup>3</sup> Most slaves during the Roman Empire were foreigners and, unlike in modern times, Roman slavery was not based on race. Slaves in Rome might include prisoners of war, sailors captured and sold by pirates, or slaves bought outside Roman territory. ([https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves\\_freemen.html](https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves_freemen.html))

<sup>4</sup> Footnote on *kyrios*...

from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”

So these slaves were living under an unjust institution where the law supported their masters reigning supreme over their lives and allowed their rule to go unquestioned; and this was an arrangement these slaves were powerless to change. So it's not surprising that in those days slaves often had the reputation of being lazy, because why wouldn't they be? Because slaves weren't compensated and had no share in any profits, why should they exert any more effort than they had to if only their master would benefit? But the way Paul addresses the slaves here re-directs their focus away from this external life situation they find themselves in and onto the spiritual reality that they are now citizens of the kingdom of God; and he re-frames the slave work they do as serving God, rather than their earthly masters. He tells them: “work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men”. Now, this spiritual reality Paul emphasizes - that citizens of the Kingdom serve God, not men - could certainly be applied narrowly to our lives today in regard to how we go about our work: that, whether paid or volunteer, we should go about the work we do with integrity and give our best effort. But a broader (and more significant) parallel between the unjust circumstance these Colossian slaves were living under and the situation of our lives concerns where we derive our sense of value as people.

Keep in mind that, in the slave economy, these slaves were valued entirely based upon their performance; each of their lives were *quite literally* given a monetary value based on what they could do: these slaves could be bought or sold and the price was based upon how hard they would work and how much they could produce.

But inherent in Paul's writing to them is the reminder that as citizens of the Kingdom of God their value is not determined by an earthly master. Rather, they have a Heavenly Master who deemed them to be of such great worth that He sent his Son to die for them, and therefore: who values them just as they are for who they are, not for what they do. And unlike the worldly slave masters who might mistreat them, the Lord - their Heavenly Master - always has their best interest as His priority. And unlike the worldly slave masters who would refuse to share their profits with their slaves, in verse 24 Paul reminds them of the incomparably valuable inheritance the Lord has promised to them. So by living in union with Christ - the life of the kingdom of God - can allow even a slave to live contently and maintain their dignity in the midst of injustice.

So this is how the Kingdom of God - living in union with Christ - can allow even a slave to experience contentment amidst injustice. Like Paul will later write to the Philippians about his own unjust imprisonment: “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:12-13 NIV).

But even though none of us are slaves, the truth of what Paul writes here is incredibly important for us. After all, like those slaves, we also live in a world where we are darn near constantly receiving the message that our value is in what we do:

- For example, our consumer society values us for our earning power and our spending power;
- In our most important human relationships we have often been loved conditionally, depending on the extent that we'll comply with the wishes of others or meet their needs
- And many have even been wrongly taught through religion that God's blessings are tied to how moral we are or how hard we work to serve him.

But we have been made citizens of the Kingdom, with a Heavenly Master who values us just as we are, not for what we do. And we live under grace, which means we are acceptable to God not based upon what we do, but based upon what Christ has done - by his perfect life and sacrifice. Indeed, the Good News of the Kingdom is that our worth isn't tied to anything we do in this life. But that is a difficult truth to get from our heads to our hearts. Pastor Peter Scazzero suggests that building a sabbath - a



day of rest - into our weekly lives is a hedge for all of us against finding our worth in what we do. But think about how hard it is for us to do that - to take a sabbath - and stick to it. Why? Because our hearts have been so trained to derive our sense of worth from producing, from doing, rather than deriving our worth from God, whose love for us is unconditional. # # #

But what about the second part of this passage, the portion where Paul addresses the slave masters? Beginning at 3:25, Paul is writing to both slaves and their masters: “For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.” And then in 4:1 he tells masters: “treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”

Well, while the typical Roman slave master had little to no accountability for how they treated their slaves, here Paul alters the Roman household code for them just as he had for husbands (to love their wives - verse 19) and for fathers (not to exasperate their children - verse 21). Paul reminds those who with slaves in their households that, as citizens of the Kingdom, they *also* have a Master over them. So they will be accountable to God for how they *use* this worldly advantage God has allowed them to have, for how they treat the slaves under their authority. #

Well, the truth of what Paul writes here is similarly important for us. Even though none of us are *slave masters*, I would suggest that every one of us enjoys certain worldly advantages that others do not have. I would invite you to just take a moment to think about what advantages you may enjoy.

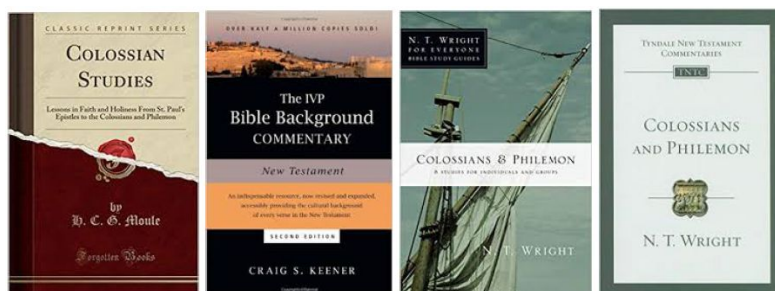
- For example, some of us may enjoy a surplus of time - as a result of being retired or single or widowed.
- Others of us may have may have been blessed with a special talent or skill or an education we received;
- There are some who have a level of worldly authority over others through a job we hold,
- Or there may be relationships where we have spiritual authority either by virtue of being a parent's or a role of spiritual leadership we may have, or where we've been granted spiritual authority by a spouse, friends, or our adult children;
- Or finally, we may enjoy financial advantages relative to others in our society. Although *most of us*, as Americans, would be considered rich in comparison with the rest of the world.

Well, whatever advantages we have, the temptation for the slave masters was to use that worldly advantage for their own benefit. However, to do so they would be operating outside of the Kingdom, disconnected from their Heavenly Master. But here Paul re-frames the slave masters' role for them, as a worldly advantage God had allowed and an opportunity to treat their slaves “justly and fairly” as God treats us all, as an opportunity for the way they treat those under their charge to be a witness to the character of our Heavenly Master.

And the same is true for any worldly advantages that have been bestowed upon us. We can either choose to use any worldly advantages we have for our own benefit<sup>5</sup> or we can operate in union with our Lord to use our advantages for the glory of God in blessing to others. #

Who will we live for? And are we willing to use our time, talent, and treasure in partnership with Him?

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.



<sup>5</sup> Or seeming benefit. In reality, this would be using our advantages in pursuit of external contentment to mask our inner discontent.