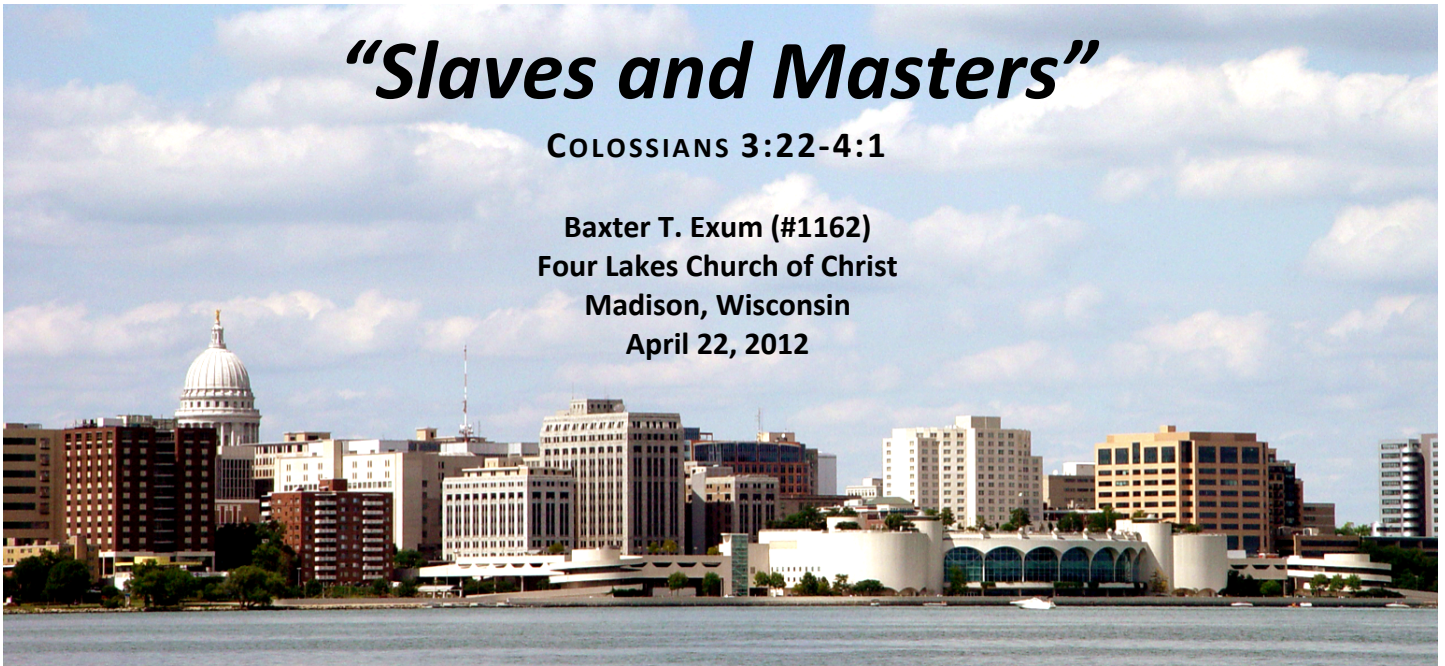


“Slaves and Masters”

COLOSSIANS 3:22-4:1

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Over the past several weeks, we have been looking together at Paul’s words concerning family relationships in Colossians 3. We found that wives are to submit to their husbands, and we learned that husbands are to love their wives. And then last week, we studied the relationship between parents and their children. Children are to obey their parents because this is pleasing to the Lord, and we also learned that parents (fathers in particular) are not to exasperate their children so that those children will not lose heart. As we wrap up this brief series of lessons, I would like for us to conclude by looking at the next few verses as the apostle Paul gives his inspired advice concerning the relationship between slaves and their masters. If there is someone who has not yet had a chance to be offended over the past few weeks, I should be able to take care of that this morning!

Of course, at this point, some of you are probably thinking: Wait a minute – we don’t have slaves and masters anymore! And that is true; however, there is some reason why these verses have been preserved for us. And as we look very carefully at Colossians 3:22-4:1, I believe we will find some very relevant applications concerning how we approach our daily work – the relationship between employees and their employers.

Obviously, we are not dealing with a perfect parallel...at least I hope not – I hope that no one here this morning feels like a slave at work, and I certainly hope that no one here is treating any employees like slaves, but there are some principles Paul gives us here that can help us in the work that we do – especially when we understand what slavery was like in the First Century. In the Roman Empire nearly 2000 years ago, you could end up as a slave by being born into it, you could be abandoned by your parents and taken in as a slave, you could sell yourself as a slave to pay off debts, your parents could sell you into slavery to pay off their debts, you could be sentenced to slavery for committing a crime, or (the cause that was far more common) you might have been captured in battle in a far-off land and brought back to Rome. Often, Rome would leave the common laborers, and they would bring back the doctors, the engineers, the accountants, and the teachers, and these people would then serve basically as highly educated and highly trained nannies or household servants. As basically prisoners of war, Roman law said that slaves had basically no rights whatsoever. The head of the household (the master) had the power of life and death over any slaves that he owned.

We know from history, in fact, that Rome did not take slave revolts lightly. Some have estimated that there were somewhere around 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. And so with those numbers, the Empire had

no tolerance for even a hint of insurrection – think Spartacus – no mercy, no tolerance for revolt. With that in mind, it is interesting that the New Testament was written into the middle of this situation. Some have wondered why the New Testament does not simply condemn slavery outright. Why didn't Paul tell slaves to run away? Why didn't Paul condemn those who owned slaves? Why did God never encourage some kind of political solution? My understanding is that God had another plan. Instead of inciting a mass revolt that would have been crushed by the Roman Empire, God instead chose to work on people's hearts. And so to me, it is interesting that God works more behind the scenes, emphasizing Christian principles that would eventually lead not only to a change of heart, but eventually to the abolition of Roman slavery altogether. For example, we find earlier in this chapter, in Colossians 3:11-13, how Paul speaks of those changes that take place when we obey the gospel, ***"...a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all. So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other,"*** and so on. There is no distinction in Christ between slave and freeman; besides, when you put on a heart of compassion, and so on, how could you possibly own and mistreat another human being? We have an entire book in the New Testament, the book of Philemon, written by Paul to a slave owner whose slave had run away. The slave had found Paul in prison in Rome and had obeyed the gospel. Paul sent the slave back to his master with what we now refer to as the book of Philemon, and Paul begs the master to receive Onesimus the slave back not as a slave but as a brother. Over and over again, therefore, the New Testament brings forth some very powerful principles that would eventually lead to the end of slavery in the Roman Empire – not a political campaign, not a revolt, not a protest, but an emphasis on changing one heart at a time.

With these comments in mind, I would like for us to consider what Paul has to say to slaves and masters, and again, I would like for us to try to apply some of these basic ideas to the work that we do today. Wouldn't it be safe to say that we still have struggles between labor and management, between employers and employees? I am going to base my thoughts this morning on this assumption, that there can be some level of stress between employees and employers, that there is often a break in the relationship between labor and management. It may not rise to the level of slaves and masters, but how should we conduct ourselves as we interact with others in the work that we do? If you will, please look with me at Colossians 3:22-4:1,

22 Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. 25 For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. 1 Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

Is there a way to do the right thing at work even in a difficult situation, even when it doesn't seem fair? Is there a way for employers to live as God would want them to live? As we study this passage, I would like to break it down as we have with the two lessons from earlier in this passage – in a very simple way. First of all, let us look at Paul's words to slaves, and then let us study Paul's words to masters. And as we study, let us try to apply some basic ideas to our situation today.

I. But first of all, let us please consider Paul's words to SLAVES.

And again, hopefully we are not actually slaves today; however, for roughly 40-60 hours every week, most of us have for all practical purposes sold ourselves, we have sold our time to do something for another person. And so maybe the picture here is a little more accurate than we would like to admit.

A. As we look at Paul's advice (starting in verse 22), we find first of all that slaves are to *"...in all things obey those who are your masters on earth."*

And here we are nearly 2000 years later – although our situation at work may not be ideal, I would suggest that we have a responsibility before God to do for our employer what we have agreed to do. If slaves, Roman prisoners of war who had obeyed the gospel, if they were told to obey their masters in all things, then how much more should Christians today be willing to do what the job requires. Of course, it seems rather obvious, but it is amazing how we are able to find ways of doing something other than what we are supposed to be doing. For several years now, Salary.com has conducted an annual survey to try to figure out how much time people waste at work and how they are doing it. These are some recent figures. They surveyed more than 3200 people between February and March 2012 (so ending just a few weeks ago), and they discovered that the Internet is obviously the worst culprit, with 64% of all workers admitting to surfing personal, non-work related sites during the day. Well, we can maybe understand that, but then we get to the details. 39% do this less than an hour each week, but 29% do it 1-2 hours, 21% do it between 2-5 hours, 8% surf personal sites 5-10 hours each week, and 3% admit surfing personal sites more than 10 hours every week. As you can imagine, the worst offender is Facebook, and then it goes down from there (including checking the news, shopping, checking personal email, and so on). By the way, men and those with PhD's are the most likely to waste time at work on the Internet. I am sure that nobody here has ever done this, but it is something that we should probably consider!

One reason for Paul's instruction here is clarified a little bit over in 1 Timothy 6:1, where Paul said, ***"All who are under the yoke as slaves are to regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine will not be spoken against."*** In other words, of all people in the world, Christians ought to be known as being the hardest workers. As Christians, we have a reputation to uphold. Paul makes it even more clear in Titus 2:9-10, ***"Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive."*** As Christians, then, we are not to be the whiners, we are not to be the time wasters, but we are to do the job that we are being paid to do. And the reason is: When we have the opportunity to speak about our faith, our supervisors and fellow-workers will not be turned off of the message by our previous behavior.

B. As we go back to Colossians 3:22, we find something else, and that is: Slaves are not to just LOOK like they are working, but they are to ACTUALLY do their work with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

Literally, Paul says that slaves are not to render ***"eye-service."*** The first part of that word is the same word we get the word ophthalmologist from. Literally, then, they were not to be ***"eye servants."*** That is, the slaves were not to try to make themselves look like they are working only when the master was watching, but their service was to be from the heart, knowing that God was watching. Again, not that this would ever happen today! If we're honest, I think we would have to admit that you don't need to be a slave to see how this could apply to doing any job. And so the warning is about making ourselves look extra busy when somebody is looking but then slacking off as soon as the supervisor is out of sight. And yet Paul would encourage us: Even when no one is watching, let us keep on doing what we are being paid to do.

And I would add: Even if the job is boring, even if the job appears to be going nowhere. Think for just a moment about Joseph in the Old Testament. There was a young man who was sold into slavery at the age of 17. He ended up working as a household servant, but he took that job seriously. He was falsely accused and had to leave that position and landed in jail. In jail, he worked his way up to the top. Even in jail, Joseph continued to do what was right, and God used those experiences to bless him in some amazing ways. Joseph was the best slave he could possibly be, and God put him second in command in the land of Egypt. We are not to render eye-service, but we are to work with sincerity, even when not being watched.

C. There is a third idea in verse 23, and that is: We are to do our work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.

In other words, Paul says that we must go to work eagerly, with the same enthusiasm as if the Lord Himself were our personal supervisor. Serve in that classroom as if the Lord Himself was standing in the doorway. Take calls as if those calls were being routed to the Lord. Maintain the database as if the Lord was standing by your side. Prepare and serve meals, wash dishes as if the Lord was sitting at a table out in the cafeteria. Package that cheese as if the Lord was about to stop by for a sample. As Christians, we are to do our work for the Lord rather than for men. And we do this, because the way a Christian does his or her job reflects on Christ, regardless of who your immediate supervisor or employer may be. Earlier this morning, brother Harold handed me my paycheck for this week. And you know, when I look at that check, I realize that my check actually has the name of Christ on it. The funds come from the "Four Lakes Church of CHRIST." Now I realize that your paycheck might not have the name of Jesus on it, but according to Paul here in verse 23, all of us should probably be working as if our checks were signed by the Lord. We are to do our work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men. On the job, our primary responsibility is to represent the Lord well, not that we need to be preaching all the time, but that we work hard and teach through our example.

I would close this verse with some comments made by Martin Luther. Luther said, "The maid who sweeps the kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays, not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps, but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship." When we work, therefore, we are working for the Lord. God, then (as far as our work is concerned), is just as pleased with the person who cleans and maintains the nursing home as He is with the medical missionary who goes to some far-off land, because both are working for Him.

D. There is something else Paul has for slaves (in verses 24-25), and it comes in the form of a reminder that God will be the one to ultimately reward or punish based on our performance on the job.

It seems that Paul is addressing some very important questions here: What if your supervisor doesn't notice how hard you're working? What if your co-workers make fun of you for working as hard as you are? What if your co-workers pressure you to do less, because after all, it's not in the contract, and by going above and beyond, you are making the rest of them look bad? What if people take advantage of you by taking credit for something that you have done? What if you end up being the only one washing the dishes (or whatever), while the rest of them are taking a smoke break? There are so many similar questions we could ask, but it seems that Paul's advice to slaves is: Do not worry about it! Those things are out of your hands! As Christians, our job is to work hard and to let God sort it out in the end.

As Christians we know there are many ways that God can take care of things. As we briefly noted earlier, the example of Joseph – terribly abused and falsely accused, and yet God worked that out in the end. Think about Daniel, taken away from home as a young man, kidnapped, taken away as a prisoner of war, and yet God was watching and used Daniel in some amazing ways. We think about King David, ignored by his older brothers, hunted by King Saul, pursued by enemies, and yet God worked it out in the end. God has a way of taking care of His people.

Paul, then, is telling us to keep our eyes focused on something beyond the paycheck – we are to look out into the future, knowing that God will be the one to ultimately bring our reward for how we have worked here in this life. Your job may not pay what you think it's worth, but someday God will balance the scales. Paul put it this way in Ephesians 6:7-8, ***“With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.”*** And with that, Paul ties it together, ***“whether slave or free.”*** We may be slaves, we may have freedom concerning where we work, but in either situation, the Lord is paying attention. There is nothing we do that God does not notice.

II. As we come near the end of this passage (chapter 4:1 in Colossians), there is another huge part of this discussion, as Paul continues with some inspired advice for masters (or as we might say today, EMPLOYERS, or SUPERVISORS, or MANAGERS).

As I see it, Christian employers are to realize that they too have a Master in heaven, that they will also be held accountable for how they treat their employees. And that right there (as Paul says in verse 1) should cause them to treat their employees with ***“justice and fairness.”*** And for masters in the ancient world, to even consider treating slaves with justice and fairness was a revolutionary idea. And really, the idea is basically that we will live by the Golden Rule, that we will treat others just as we would want to be treated. You guys can probably think of a lot more than I can, but to me, several things come to mind: fair pay, decent hours, reasonable expectations, safety, a concern for health and family, and perhaps even a share in the profits. Again, it seems to me that these are some of the basics. If I were the employee, this is how I would want to be treated; therefore, as the employer, this is how I should treat those who work under me – the Golden Rule.

Most of you know that my wife works for the Madison School District, and as I have mentioned before, as a manager, she needs to regularly attend various trainings – many of them focused on how to handle a diverse workplace. They will schedule a day to get together to listen to experts who have been brought in to give their expert opinion on how everybody needs to get along. There will be a presentation, and handouts, and break-out sessions, and all of this. And when the day is over, the day can pretty much be summarized by the Lord's words in Matthew 7:12, ***“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”*** Of course, in a public school we dare not attribute that concept to Jesus, but that is basically the conclusion of the experts concerning how to get along in the workplace – treat other people the same way you would like for them to treat you.

Several years ago, a research magazine surveyed several thousand employees and asked them this question: What are the most serious faults of executives in dealing with their associates and subordinates? The most common response (at 68% of all respondents) was this, “The failure to see the other person's point of view.” Again, the most common failure of executives in dealing with their subordinates is something that is directly addressed by the Golden Rule. And that is what Paul is saying here in Colossians 4:1. Masters are to treat their slaves with justice and fairness. Be just. Be fair. See things from their point of view, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Over the past three lessons from Colossians, have you noticed a pattern for those in positions of authority? Whether we are talking about husbands with their wives, or fathers with their children, or masters with their slaves, in each relationship, the one who takes the leadership role is to lead with love and concern, knowing that they also will ultimately be held accountable to God. Can you imagine what life would be like if all leaders took these things to heart? Can you imagine what life would be like if husbands lived by the Golden Rule? We would no longer need any shelters for abused women. Can you imagine what life would be like if all fathers lived by the Golden Rule? We would no longer need any programs aimed at caring for abandoned children. And when it comes to employers and employees, if employers lived by the Golden Rule, the whole discussion concerning unions and collective bargaining would be a relic of the distant past.

Before we dismiss this as something only addressed to the CEO's, let's just realize that many of us may fit in here in a way that we may not realize. You may not be the big boss, but a number of us here may be called on to lead a team. I know that when I serve as a Chief Election Inspector for the City of Madison, I sometimes have a group of 10-12 people who serve under me for a very long 15-hour day. I need to keep these things in mind. Some of you might employ a baby sitter from time to time. Some of us go out to eat where someone serves us our food. Do we realize that that server is probably only paid about \$2.33 an hour? As they serve our table, we have a responsibility to keep that in mind and to treat them with justice and fairness as we try to put ourselves in their situation and to see things from their point of view. The Christian in that situation will not say, "Give me another cup of coffee!" But the Christian will treat his servant with the utmost of respect, knowing that we also have a Master in heaven.

Conclusion:

Several years ago, I read an article based on a contest held in Milwaukee where people were encouraged to send in stories about how bad their bosses were. The contest was called "The Boss from Hell." The article had some truly amazing stories about bosses who were unreasonable, unfair, liars, very deceitful. For just a moment, imagine reading that article and then taking a job, knowing beforehand that your boss would be like that. Hopefully we would never do that. And yet when we think about it, millions of people do it every day. Satan could certainly be described as the "Boss from Hell." When someone turns away from Jesus as a Master, Satan is right there willing to take over. And worse than any earthly supervisor, he is truly unreasonable, unfair, a liar, and incredibly deceitful. Jesus, though, is so much better. He is our Master, but as the Lord once said, ***"Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."***

If you are ready to take the Lord as your Master this morning, we want you to know that He has offered to take away our sins when we humbly do what He has told us to do. We reject sin, we put our trust in Christ, we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism, and at that point our sins are forgiven as we are raised up to live the Christian life. If you would like to discuss it further, let us know. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front. We can do that right now. But if you are ready to obey the gospel, you can let us know immediately as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: foullakeschurch@gmail.com