

Paul's Letter to the Colossians Study
Bible Study Session 16
Colossians 3:22-4:1 : Topic 07.3

Study By
Lorin L Cranford
cranfordville.com

Greek NT

3.22 Οἱ δούλοι, ὑπακούετε κατὰ πάντα τοῖς κατὰ σάρκα κυρίοις, μὴ ἐν ὀφθαλμοδουλίᾳ ὡς ἀνθρωπάρεσκοι, ἀλλ' ἐν ἀπλοῦτητι καρδίας φοβούμενοι τὸν κύριον. 3.23 ὃ ἐὰν ποιήτε, ἐκ ψυχῆς ἐργάζεσθε ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώποις, 3.24 εἰδότες ὅτι ἀπὸ κυρίου ἀπολήψεσθε τὴν ἀνταπόδοσιν τῆς κληρονομίας. τῷ κυρίῳ Χριστῷ δουλεύετε· 3.25 ὁ γὰρ ἀδικῶν κομίζεται ὁ ἠδίκησεν, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν προσωποληψία. 4.1 Οἱ κύριοι, τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὴν ἰσότητα τοῖς δούλοις παρέχεσθε, εἰδότες ὅτι καὶ ἡμεῖς ἔχετε κύριον ἐν οὐρανῷ.

Gute Nachricht Bibel

3.22 Ihr Sklaven und Sklavinnen, gehorcht in allem euren irdischen Herren und Herrinnen! Tut es nicht nur äußerlich, um euch bei ihnen einzuschmeicheln. Dient ihnen aufrichtig, als Menschen, die Christus als Herr ernst nehmen. 23 Alles, was ihr tut, tut von Herzen, als etwas, das ihr für den Herrn tut und nicht für Menschen. 24 Seid euch bewusst, dass ihr dafür vom Herrn das ewige Leben als Lohn bekommt. Dient mit eurem Tun Christus, dem Herrn! 25 Denn wer Unrecht tut, wird dafür die volle Strafe erhalten. Gott ist ein unparteiischer Richter.

4.1 Ihr Herren und Herrinnen, behandelt eure Sklaven und Sklavinnen, wie es recht und billig ist! Seid euch bewusst, dass auch ihr einen Herrn im Himmel habt!

NRSV

3.22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, 24 since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

4.1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

NLT

3.22 You slaves must obey your earthly masters in everything you do. Try to please them all the time, not just when they are watching you. Obey them willingly because of your reverent fear of the Lord. 23 Work hard and cheerfully at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. 24 Remember that the Lord will give you an inheritance as your reward, and the Master you are serving is Christ. 25 But if you do what is wrong, you will be paid back for the wrong you have done. For God has no favorites who can get away with evil.

4.1 You slave owners must be just and fair to your slaves. Remember that you also have a Master -- in heaven.

The Study of the Text:¹

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

This third unit of the Haustafeln material, 3:18-4:1, treats the final segment of the ancient family, the slaves² and their relationship to the male head of the household. This discussion is particularly significant, not only in light of the parallel in Eph. 6:5-9,³ but also in that the entire letter of Philemon⁴ about the run away

¹Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

²The Greek words in the New Testament primarily are doulos [slave], syndoulos [fellow slave], doulē [female slave], douleuō [to be a slave], douleia [slavery], doulōō [to enslave], katadoulōō [to enslave], doulagōgēō [to enslave], ophthalmoudouliā [eye-service] = δούλος, σύνδουλος, δούλη, δουλεύω, δουλεία, δουλόω, καταδουλόω, δουλαγωγέω, ὀφθαλμοδουλία.

³NRSV: 5 **Slaves**, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; 6 not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. 7 Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, 8 knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free. 9 And, **masters**, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.

⁴NRSV: 1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5 because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7 I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have

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slave Onesimus was sent to Colossae where Philemon lived. Although not entirely certain, the likelihood is that the letter to Philemon was publicly read before the house church groups in the Lycus Valley as well as Colossians and Ephesians. Thus these three letters are especially interconnected with one another on this particular topic

Additionally, in the remainder of the New Testament this segment of the Haustafeln surfaces in other places, especially in 1 Tim. 6:1-2⁵ and 1 Peter 2:18-25.⁶ The contrasting dual world of early Christianity posed particular challenges. Spiritually, slavery was abolished and was to play no role inside the community of believers, as Col. 3:11⁷ and Gal. 3:27-28⁸ make very clear. Paul both assumes and encourages slaves to seek their freedom; cf. 1 Cor. 7:21.⁹ Yet, believers lived in a social and legal system where slavery was legal and widely practiced,¹⁰ and to advocate the social and legal abolishment of slavery would have brought the severest of penalties. The challenge to early Christian leaders was to balance these two conflicting dynamics together in a way that furthered the spread of the Gospel through out the Roman empire.



ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SLAVES

Our passage then emerges out of that first century challenge and addresses Christians who both were slaves and were slave owners.

One of the primary interpretation questions here is how to appropriately apply this passage to the modern world. Although slavery unfortunately still exists in isolated parts of today's world, for the most part slavery has been abolished and stands universally condemned as unacceptable in our time. Thus, how should we take a text addressing the ancient situation of slavery and apply it to our world? The principles of biblical interpretation insist on finding a way to link the concepts of scripture to today's world, on the premise of the Bible standing a sacred scripture and thus as divine revelation of the will of God for all time. Commonly this passage in the Haustafeln and related texts are seen as relevant to the market place. Thus slave becomes employee and master stands as employer. Perhaps this is the best linkage,

been refreshed through you, my brother. 8 For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9 yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. 10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13 I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15 Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. 23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

⁵NRSV: 1 Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed. 2 Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these duties.

⁶NRSV: 18 Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. 19 For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. 20 If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 22 "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." 23 When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

⁷NRSV: **In that renewal there is no longer** Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, **slave and free**; but Christ is all and in all!

⁸NRSV: 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, **there is no longer slave or free**, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

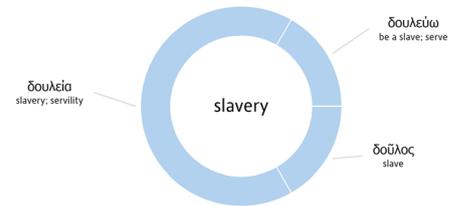
⁹NRSV: Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever. [GNT: *δοῦλος ἐκλήθης; μή σοι μελέτω· ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ δύνασαι ἐλεύθερος γενέσθαι, μᾶλλον χρῆσαι*; the *εἰ καὶ* assumes the gaining of freedom.]

¹⁰Roughly one third or more of the population of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the Christian era were slaves.

although the principle of historical criticism underscores that the closer the cultural situation between the exegesis of the text and the contemporary application world the more certain one can be in applying a text. The greater the gap between the then and now worlds of the text the less certain the application. Making a cultural shift from the family to the market place in the interpretive process represents a significant shift. The justification for this may -- in part at least -- be the economic basis for slavery in the ancient world. Slavery was essential to the economy of ancient Rome at the beginning of the Christian era.

Historical Context:

Slavery in the ancient world stands as the historical backdrop to this passage. The condition of slaves in the first Christian century varied according to the ethnic group possessing slaves. Greek slaves tended to be somewhat better off with stricter regulations governing their status and treatment. Hebrew slaves were also governed by strict regulations of the Torah. Roman slaves were regulated by Roman law but tended to be worse off than most other slaves.¹¹



Sources of slavery. At the beginning of the Christian era most slaves came from defeated enemies on the battlefield, and had little or no ethnic orientation, unlike slavery in more modern times which typically has a racial or ethnic basis. Amazingly many people ‘sold themselves into slavery’ in order to gain a better, more stable life. Many other sources for producing slaves existed in the ancient world of the Old Testament.¹² In New Testament times, the situation was similar.¹³

¹¹“The Israelites made a deliberate attempt to safeguard the slave from brutality by a master or overseer. By law a maimed slave must be released (Ex 21:26, 27). The few Hebrew slaves in a household frequently toiled alongside their masters in the fields, and they and household slaves often had a reasonable and secure existence, compared with the threat of starvation and destitution of the poorest free men.

In Greek and especially in Roman times, when the number of slaves increased dramatically, household slaves remained the best treated. Many became servants and confidants; some even established good businesses to their own and their masters’ benefit.” [Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 1971-72. S.V., “Slave, Slavery.”]

¹² “b. Sources of slaves [in the Old Testament]

“(i) *By capture.* Captives, especially prisoners of war, were commonly reduced to slavery (Gn. 14:21, claimed by the king of Sodom; Nu. 31:9; Dt. 20:14; 21:10ff.; Jdg. 5:30; 1 Sa. 4:9 (cf. RSV); 2 Ki. 5:2; 2 Ch. 28:8, 10ff.), a custom that goes back as far as written documents themselves, to roughly 3000 BC and probably further (references in I. Mendelsohn, Slavery in the Ancient Near East, 1949, pp. 1–3).

“(ii) *By purchase.* Slaves could readily be bought from other owners or general merchants (cf. Gn. 17:12–13, 27; Ec. 2:7). The law allowed Hebrews to buy foreign slaves from foreigners at home or abroad (Lv. 25:44f.). In antiquity, slaves were sold among all kinds of other merchandise and from country to country. Thus, the Midianites and Ishmaelites sold *Joseph to an Egyptian high official (Gn. 37:36; 39:1), and Phoenician Tyre imported slaves and bronzeware from Asia Minor (Ezk. 27:13) and sold Jews to the Ionians, thereby incurring a threat of like treatment of her own nationals (Joel 3:4-8). For evidence of the large numbers of Semitic slaves that reached Egypt in Joseph’s general period, probably mainly by trade, see references in *Joseph or in Bibliography below. For Babylonian merchant-enterprise in slave-trading abroad in places such as Tyre, see Mendelsohn, op.cit., pp. 3–5.

“(iii) *By birth.* Children ‘born in the house’ of slave-parents became ‘house-born slaves’; such are mentioned in Scripture from patriarchal times onward (Gn. 15:3; 17:12–13, 27; Ec. 2:7; Je. 2:14), and equally early in Mesopotamian documents (Mendelsohn, pp. 57–58).

“(iv) *As restitution.* If a convicted thief could not make restitution and pay his fines and damages, funds towards this could be raised by selling him as a slave (Ex. 22:3; cf. a similar provision in Hammurapi’s Code, §§ 53–54: ANET, p. 168).

“(v) *By default on debts.* Debtors who went bankrupt were often forced to sell their children as slaves, or their children would be confiscated as slaves by the creditor (2 Ki. 4:1; Ne. 5:5, 8). The insolvent debtor himself, as well as his wife and family, commonly became the slave of his creditor and gave him his labour for 3 years to work off the debt and then go free, in Hammurapi’s Code (§ 117: DOTT, p. 30, or ANET, pp. 170–171). This seems to be the background to the Mosaic law in Ex. 21:2–6 (and 7–11), and in Dt. 15:12–18, where a Hebrew slave must work 6 years, explicitly a ‘double’ period of time (Dt. 15:18) compared with Hammurapi’s 3 years (cf. Mendelsohn, pp. 32–33), but on release he was to be granted stock to start up on his own again (see also d. (i) 1, below). Insolvency was a major cause of reduction to slave status in the biblical East (Mendelsohn, pp. 23, 26–29).

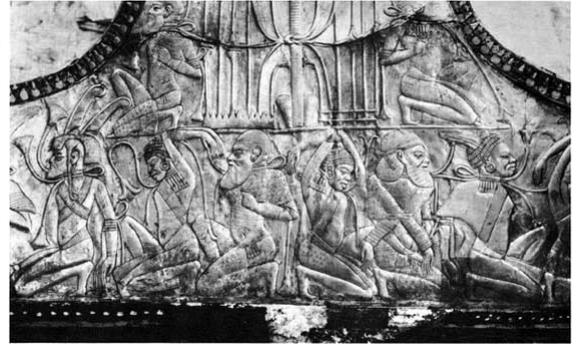
“(vi) *Selling oneself voluntarily into slavery,* i.e. dependence on another, to escape poverty, was widely known (Mendelsohn, pp. 14–19, for data). Lv. 25:39–43, 47ff., recognized this, but provided for redemption at (or with foreign owners, even before) Jubilee year.

“(vii) *Abduction.* To steal a person, and to reduce a kidnapped person to slavery, was an offence punishable by death in the laws of both Hammurapi (§ 14: DOTT, p. 30; ANET, p. 166) and Moses (Ex. 21:16; Dt. 24:7). The brothers of *Joseph were guilty of essentially such an offence (Gn. 37:27–28.with 45:4), and might well be ‘dismayed’ and need reassurance not to be ‘distressed’ (Gn. 45:3, 5, and cf. Gn. 50:15).”

[D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1110-14. S.V., “Slave, Slavery in the Old Testament,” by K.A. Kitchen]

¹³“The main sources of slavery were: (1) birth, depending on the law of the particular state concerning the various degrees of servile parentage; (2) the widespread practice of exposing unwanted children, who were then available for the use of anyone who cared to rear them; (3) the sale of one’s own children into slavery; (4) Voluntary slavery as a solution to problems such as debt; (5) penal slavery; (6) kidnapping and piracy; (7) the traffic across the Roman frontiers, Not all these sources were open in one place at any one time: there was a great deal of variation in local law and sentiment. The degree of slavery also

Status of slaves. In Roman society slaves would not be particularly distinguishable in public from free men. No distinctive dress was required for slaves. Roman slaves were often well educated, and could own property on their own. They occupied a wide range of occupations, both in public and in private.¹⁴ In general they were free from extreme abuse by their owners, although exceptions certainly were present.¹⁵



ROMAN PRISONERS TAKEN AS SLAVES

Yet, one must remember that a slave was -- and is -- a slave, that is, a piece of property that another human being owns. The loss of freedom and often of dignity were severe blows to the human dignity of an individual. Most slaves in ancient Rome eagerly sought their independence, i.e., manumission, especially so in Rome since this meant gaining Roman citizenship.¹⁶

Into this world came the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ. In our world we have difficulty grasping how degrading such a status in society might be. We often experience lack of respect in the work place and elsewhere because of the arrogance and pseudo-superiority of some people. But to be legally considered as a non-person with few rights and no legal status is another matter entirely.

Literary Aspects:

The literary elements of the passage again play an important role in the interpretive process.

Literary Form:

At the **broad genre** level, 3:22-4:1 is a part of the letter body, which implies the occasional nature of the material. This is further confirmed by comparison to the parallel passage in Eph. 6:5-9, that although similar in many ways is also significantly different from the Colossians text. Each discussion is framed in ways the apostle thought most appropriate to his targeted readers with each letter. Given also the reality that both letters would be read at Colossae, the differences are stylistic as well. Paul was concerned with ideas, not with individual words. Thus, the same essential idea was presented in different ways.

At the **small genre** level, 3:22-4:1 is paraenesis, and in particular Haustafeln paraenesis. The moral admonition nature of the text seeks to address a distinctive way of living for believers in Christ. This grows out of the foundational admonitions in 3:1-4 to seek the things above, and not the earthly things. Thus one's faith in Christ impacts even these social relationships inside the ancient family. The text applied to a variety of situations where both slave and master were believers, as well as only when one side was a believer.

varied greatly, and is impossible to calculate. It may have reached one-third of the population in Rome and the great metropolitan cities of the east. In areas where there was a peasant economy, however, it was reduced to a small fraction of that." [D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1110-14. S.V., "Slave, Slavery in the New Testament," by E.A. Judge.]

¹⁴"Domestic and public slavery were the most widespread forms. In the former case the slaves were purchased and employed as an index of wealth. Where only one or two were owned, they worked beside their master at the same occupations. At Athens they were indistinguishable in the streets from free men, and the familiarity of slaves towards their owners was a stock theme of comedy. At Rome the great houses employed scores of slaves for sheer luxury. Their work was highly specialized and often largely effortless. In the case of public slaves, their status conferred a good deal of independence and respect. They performed all sorts of duties in the absence of a civil service, including even police services in some cases. Professions such as medicine or education were commonly filled by slaves." [D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1110-14. S.V., "Slave, Slavery in the New Testament," by E.A. Judge]

¹⁵"The condition of slavery was everywhere being steadily mitigated in NT times. Although slaves had no legal personality, owners recognized that they worked better the more their condition approximated to freedom, and the owning of property and contracting of marriages were normally allowed. Cruelty was condemned by the growing sentiment of common humanity, and in some cases legally controlled; in Egypt, for instance, the death of a slave was subject to a coroner's inquest. While in Gk. states emancipated slaves became resident aliens of their former master's city, at Rome they automatically became citizens on manumission. Thus the vast flow of slaves into Italy, especially during the last 2 centuries before Christ, had the effect of internationalizing the Roman republic, anticipating the government's own policy of steadily broadening membership." [D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1110-14. S.V., "Slave, Slavery in the New Testament," by E.A. Judge]

¹⁶"Manumission could be readily arranged at any time if owners wished. In Rome it was most commonly performed by testament, and limits had to be placed on the generosity of owners to prevent the too rapid dilution of the citizen body with persons of foreign extraction. In Gk. states 2 common forms were a type of self-purchase, in which the legal incompetence of the slave was overcome by the ownership technically passing to a god, and manumission in return for a contract of services which simply meant that the slave continued in the same employment though legally free." [D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1110-14. S.V., "Slave, Slavery in the New Testament," by E.A. Judge]

Literary Setting:

As is illustrated in the outline of Colossians on the right, 3:22-4:1 stands in a variety of relationships that play an important role in the interpretive process. In the broader context, the passage is a part of the letter body. Next, it is a part of the paraenesis section of 3:1-4:6. Also, it is the third element of the Haustafeln instruction on family relationships in 3:18-4:1. To be noted as well is the tone of worship of God that surrounds the Haustafeln material in 3:16-17 and 4:2-6.

Consequently in seeking to understand the text the impact of this context should be given full consideration. Paul isn't laying down a new Torah of God here. Instead, he is encouraging Christian slaves and Christian slave owners to adopt a distinctive way of relating to one another. The radical nature of this comes to the surface through comparing Paul's discussion with the secular discussions found in the surrounding Greco-Roman society. And even in comparison with the rather strict, but humane regulations for slaves in the Law of Moses. The outstanding example of how Paul intended these guidelines to be implemented can be seen in part through a careful study of the Letter to Philemon, which was also addressed to a Christian slave owner who was a leader in the Christian community at Colossae as well.

When studied against this backdrop along with the emphasis upon equality in Col. 3:11 and Gal. 3:28 together with the encouragement of slaves to seek their freedom in 1 Cor. 7:21, one can only conclude that the apostle was wisely laying the foundations for a new day in which slavery would not longer exist. But given the prevailing circumstances of that day, open advocacy of abolishing slavery immediately would have only brought severe suffering upon both slaves and slave owners. The better alternative was then for believers to live out their faith commitment in positive relationships and witness even as slaves and slave owners. Inside the believing community these social distinctions would vanish and the church could then model to the rest of the world a new humanity, redeemed by the grace of God.

Literary Structure:

The block diagram of the original Greek text visually presents the inner connectedness of the thoughts within the passage. The rather literal English translation presented below highlights this from the translation aspect.

3.22 Slaves,
47 **obey your human masters,**
 in everything,
 not with eye-service,
 as men pleasers,
 but
 with sincerity of heart,
 fearing the Lord.

Outline of Colossians

Praescriptio

Introduction: 1:1-2
Superscriptio: 1:1
Adscriptio: 1:2a
Salutatio: 1:2b

Proem

Thankfulness: 1:3-8

Body

Intercession: 1:9-12
Christus Hymnus: 1:13-20
Reconciliation: 1:21-23

Paul's Ministry 1: 1:24-29
Paul's Ministry 2: 2:1-5

Christian Living 1: 2:6-15
Christian Living 2: 2:16-19
Christian Legalism: 2:20-23

Seeking the Heavenly Things: 3:1-4
Christian Behavior: 3:5-11
Getting Dressed: 3:12-17

Haustafeln: 3:18-4:1
Husband/Wife: 3:18-19
Father/Children: 3:20-21
Master/Slaves: 3:22-4:1

Admonitions and Requests: 4:2-6

Conclusio

Tychicus: 4:7-9
Greetings: 4:10-17
Closing: 4:18
Letter Validation: 4:18a
Prayer Request: 4:18b
Benedictio: 4:19c

3.23 **Whatever you do,**
 48 **be doing it,**
 as to the Lord
 and
 not to men,
 4.24 because you know

from the Lord
 that...you will receive the reward
 /-----|
 which is your inheritance.

49 **be subject to the Lord Christ;**
 3.25 for
 50 **the one doing wrong**
will be paid back
for what he has done wrong,
 and
 51 **God is not partial.**

4.1 Masters,
 52 **with justice**
 and
equity treat your slaves,
 because you know

that you also have a Master
 in Heaven.

Fundamentally the text divides into two sections as reflected in the direct address, ‘Slaves’ and ‘Masters.’ For some unknown strange reason the Dutch publisher Stephanus¹⁷ who set up the chapter and verse divisions of the New Testament in 1551 inserted a chapter break between these two basic but inner connected sections.¹⁸ This work was done originally when he traveled from Paris to Marseille by horse back. Scholars have jokingly said over the years that, with such strange versification of the text, his horse must have tripped when he inserted the break point. Clearly such illogical divisions do not reflect any level of divine inspiration.

The first pair of admonitions to slaves focus on submission to both their human (#48) and divine (#49) masters. Two matching reasons (#s 50-51) are given for the admonitions. Everything connected to the slave’s obligation to his human master is religiously oriented. One’s faith commitment is the motivation to serve the master in a way that is pleasing to God.

The admonition to the masters stresses just and fair treatment of their slaves (# 52). At a participle clause the reason for this is the realization that even though being a human master they have God as their Master who will hold them accountable for their actions toward their slaves.

Exegesis of the Text:

The exegesis of the text will be based on the two natural divisions of 3:22-25 and 4:1 addressing first the slaves and then the masters.

Slaves’ obligations, vv. 22-25: “22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, 24 since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.” (3.22 Οἱ δοῦλοι, ὑπακούετε κατὰ πάντα τοῖς κατὰ σάρκα κυρίοις, μὴ ἐν ὀφθαλμοδουλίᾳ ὡς ἀνθρωπάρεσκοι, ἀλλ’ ἐν ἀπλότητι καρδίας φοβούμενοι τὸν κύριον. 3.23 ὃ ἐὰν ποιῆτε, ἐκ

¹⁷Robert I. Estienne went under the publishing name in Latin of Robertus Stephanus. For details, see “Robert I. Estienne,” *Wikipedia* online.

¹⁸“The first person to divide New Testament chapters into verses was Italian Dominican biblical scholar Santi Pagnini (1470–1541), but his system was never widely adopted.³ Robert Estienne created an alternate numbering in his 1551 edition of the Greek New Testament.⁴ The first English New Testament to use the verse divisions was a 1557 translation by William Whittingham (c. 1524-1579). The first Bible in English to use both chapters and verses was the Geneva Bible published shortly afterwards in 1560. These verse divisions soon gained acceptance as a standard way to notate verses, and have since been used in nearly all English Bibles.” [“Chapters and verses of the Bible,” *Wikipedia* online]

ψυχῆς ἐργάζεσθε ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώποις, 3.24 εἰδότες ὅτι ἀπὸ κυρίου ἀπολήμψεσθε τὴν ἀνταπόδοσιν τῆς κληρονομίας. τῷ κυρίῳ Χριστῷ δουλεύετε· 3.25 ὁ γὰρ ἀδικῶν κομίζεται ὁ ἠδίκησεν, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν προσωποληψία.).

First, one needs to place the parallel texts elsewhere in the New Testament on the table for comparison. Such will sharpen the distinctives of the Colossian text.

The Eph. 6:5-8 parallel is the most important text for comparison:

5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; 6 not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. 7 Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, 8 knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.¹⁹

The core admonition (v. 5a) is identical to the beginning admonition in Colossians 3:22. The expansion elements, -- with... -- in vv. 5b-6 stress a similar theme as found in Col. 3:22b.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.

The wording is different but the essential points are the same. Ephesians is broader and more inclusive, as one might expect with the letter functioning as a cover letter for Colossians and Philemon.

First Timothy 6:1-2 stands in close connection also:

1 Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed. 2 Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved.²⁰

The differences from Col. 3:22-25 here are more noticeable than with Eph. 6:5-8. The core admonition, τοὺς ἰδίους δεσπότης πάσης τιμῆς ἀξίους ἠγείσθωσαν, calls upon slaves to adopt an attitude of respect toward their masters, who are labeled τοὺς ἰδίους δεσπότης rather than τοῖς κατὰ σάρκα κυρίοις as in Colossians and Ephesians. No significant difference between these two terms is present. In 1 Timothy the goal is a good Christian witness by the slave for the gospel. The second admonition addresses slaves with Christian owners and calls upon them to not try to take advantage of the Christian faith of their master. Instead, the Christian slave should work harder for his Christian master since they share a common faith in Christ. The fundamentally negative attitude toward slavery is signaled by the phrase “the yoke of slavery” (ὑπὸ ζυγὸν δοῦλοι).

First Peter 2:18-25 is another important related text:

18 Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. 19 For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. 20 If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 22 “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” 23 When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.²¹

Again the language is somewhat different, even at the core admonition in v. 18a: Οἱ οἰκέται ὑποτασσόμενοι

¹⁹GNT: 6.5 Οἱ δοῦλοι, ὑπακούετε τοῖς κατὰ σάρκα κυρίοις μετὰ φόβου καὶ τρόμου ἐν ἀπλότητι τῆς καρδίας ὑμῶν ὡς τῷ Χριστῷ, 6.6 μὴ κατ' ὀφθαλμοδουλίαν ὡς ἀνθρωπάρεσκοι ἀλλ' ὡς δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ ποιοῦντες τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκ ψυχῆς, 6.7 μετ' εὐνοίας δουλεύοντες ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώποις, 6.8 εἰδότες ὅτι ἕκαστος ἐάν τι ποιῆσῃ ἀγαθόν, τοῦτο κομίζεται παρὰ κυρίου εἴτε δοῦλος εἴτε ἐλεύθερος.

²⁰GNT: 6.1 Ὅσοι εἰσὶν ὑπὸ ζυγὸν δοῦλοι, τοὺς ἰδίους δεσπότης πάσης τιμῆς ἀξίους ἠγείσθωσαν, ἵνα μὴ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡ διδασκαλία βλασφημηθῶσι. 6.2 οἱ δὲ πιστοὺς ἔχοντες δεσπότης μὴ καταφρονεῖτωσαν, ὅτι ἀδελφοί εἰσιν, ἀλλὰ μάλλον δουλεύετωσαν, ὅτι πιστοὶ εἰσιν καὶ ἀγαπητοὶ οἱ τῆς εὐεργεσίας ἀντιλαμβανόμενοι.

²¹GNT: 2.18 Οἱ οἰκέται ὑποτασσόμενοι ἐν παντὶ φόβῳ τοῖς δεσπότηις, οὐ μόνον τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς καὶ ἐπιεικέσι ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς σκολιοῖς. 2.19 τοῦτο γὰρ χάρις εἰ διὰ συνείδησιν θεοῦ ὑποφέρει τις λύπας πάσχω ἀδίκως. 2.20 ποῖον γὰρ κλέος εἰ ἀμαρτάνοντες καὶ κολαφιζόμενοι ὑπομενεῖτε; ἀλλ' εἰ ἀγαθοποιοῦντες καὶ πάσχοντες ὑπομενεῖτε, τοῦτο χάρις παρὰ θεοῦ. 2.21 εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ ἐκλήθητε, ὅτι καὶ Χριστὸς ἔπαθεν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ὑμῖν ὑπολιμπάνων ὑπογραμμὸν ἵνα ἐπακολουθήσητε τοῖς ἰχνεσιν αὐτοῦ,

2.22 ὡς ἀμαρτίαν οὐκ ἐποίησεν

οὐδὲ εὐρέθη δόλος ἐν τῷ στόματι αὐτοῦ,

2.23 ὡς λοιδορούμενος οὐκ ἀντελοιδόρει, πάσχω οὐκ ἠπέλει, παρεδίδου δὲ τῷ κρίνοντι δικαίως· 2.24 ὡς τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν αὐτὸς ἀνήνεγκεν ἐν τῷ σώματι αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὸ ξύλον, ἵνα ταῖς ἀμαρτίαις ἀπογενόμενοι τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ ζήσωμεν, οὐ τῷ μῶλωπι ἰάθητε. 2.25 ἦτε γὰρ ὡς πρόβατα πλανώμενοι, ἀλλὰ ἐπεστράφητε νῦν ἐπὶ τὸν ποιμένα καὶ ἐπίσκοπον τῶν ψυχῶν ὑμῶν.

ἐν παντὶ φόβῳ τοῖς δεσπόταις. Slaves are called Οἱ οἰκέται rather than Οἱ δοῦλοι as in the previous passages. The major difference is that Peter seems to be addresses just household slaves rather than the broader designation in the other texts. Masters are called τοῖς δεσπόταις rather than τοῖς κατὰ σάρκα κυρίοις as in Ephesians and Colossians. No real difference is present between these two terms. Peter's emphasis is upon Christian slaves showing proper respect for their master regardless of the way he treats them. The key motivation is Christ and His saving work in the life of the slave. Paul also sees Christ's non-retaliation posture as the example to be followed by the slave in the midst of unjust treatment (cf. v. 21).

In Col. 3:22, the slave is to obey his human master: ὑπακούετε κατὰ πάντα τοῖς κατὰ σάρκα κυρίοις. The admonition is virtually identical to that given to children in 3:20: ὑπακούετε τοῖς γονεῦσιν κατὰ πάντα. Fundamentally the slave is to do whatever his master tells him to do (κατὰ πάντα). Just as with children, and especially as with the wife (v. 18), the limits are within the framework of the slaves' Christian faith. Additionally the attitude of joyfulness and enthusiasm in obeying is stressed: μὴ ἐν ὀφθαλμοδουλίᾳ²² ὡς ἀνθρωπάρεσκοι, ἀλλ' ἐν ἀπλότῃ καρδίᾳ. Finally the fear of God is a motivating factor: φοβούμενοι τὸν κύριον.

In Col. 3:23-24, the slave is to approach his service as actually serving God: ὁ ἐὰν ποιῆτε, ἐκ ψυχῆς ἐργάζεσθε ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ καὶ οὐκ ἀνθρώποις, The enthusiasm factor arises out of seeing the deeper service being to God and not just to a human master. The long view is the reward from God at the end of the journey: εἰδότες ὅτι ἀπὸ κυρίου ἀπολήμψεσθε τὴν ἀνταπόδοσιν τῆς κληρονομίας. In this world the slave may be considered as a piece of property, but he knows that in Christ he will one day inherit a home in Heaven with the God of this universe. Thus he is serving the Lord Christ, as he serves his human master: τῷ κυρίῳ Χριστῷ δουλεύετε.

In Col. 3:25, the twofold reasons for such service are given. First, he knows that the God of justice will inflict punishment upon those treating people unjustly: ὁ γὰρ ἀδικῶν κομίσεται ὃ ἠδίκησεν. This applies both to the slave and to his master. Judgment Day will mean the righting of all wrongs by God Himself. Second, the slave realizes that God has no favorites whom He excuses from just treatment of others: καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν προσωποληψία. In this world powerful masters may claim exemption for just and fair treatment of their slaves, but on Judgment Day such will not be the case. Both slave and master will be treated the same way by God.

What the apostle Paul calls for here is a radically different Christian approach that is based upon one's faith relationship with Almighty God through Christ. The Christian slave is to always see a deeper dynamic present in his service to his human master. Both accountability by God and the justice of a holy God are a part of the motivation for his work.

In seeking to apply this text to the modern work place, the same basic values and principles would apply to the Christian worker. The believing employee needs to see the workplace as a ministry to God in the sense of rendering faithful service to his employer as a positive Christian witness to his boss. He should never try to take advantage of a Christian boss by asking for special favors and exemptions just because he and his boss share a common Christian faith. Resisting the temptation of retaliation at unjust treatment is the model set by Christ, in 1 Peter.

Down through the centuries when Christians have been real Christians in the work place, their witness for Christ has been strong. But when they fail to honor Christ by their labor in the work place Christianity has been given a 'black eye.' No where in these instructions of Paul is there room for a bully pulpit in the work place where Christian workers seek to push their religion on to others. The Christian witness of the worker is gained by the way he or she does their work while on the job.

Masters' obligations, v. 1: "1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven." (4.1 Οἱ κύριοι, τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὴν ἰσότητα τοῖς δούλοις παρέχεσθε, εἰδότες ὅτι καὶ ὑμεῖς ἔχετε κύριον ἐν οὐρανῷ.).

While several related texts addressing the slave are found, only Eph. 6:9 stands in parallel to Col. 4:1:

And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master

²² **ophthalmodouλία.** Not found outside the NT, this term refers in Eph. 6:6 to a douleía of slaves which is outwardly satisfactory but does not express an inner obligation for the sake of God and Christ, so that the eyes of the master are deceived. It also occurs in the plural in Col. 3:22 for the actions that make up this deceitful service." [Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Abridged (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 182-86. S.V., "doulos, syndoulos, doule, douleúō, douleía," by Karl H. Rengstorff.]

in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.²³

In Ephesians, Paul admonishes the masters to treat their slaves the same way slaves are to treat their masters. A part of this is the demand to stop threatening their slaves: ἀμιέντες τὴν ἀπειλήν. The motivation is the realization of their accountability to God who stands as their Master and judges impartially: εἰδότες ὅτι καὶ αὐτῶν καὶ ὑμῶν ὁ κύριός ἐστιν ἐν οὐρανοῖς καὶ προσωποληψία οὐκ ἔστιν παρ' αὐτῶ.

Also to be noted is that in the secular world of Paul somewhat similar admonitions to slave owners can be found, as Peter O'Brien notes:²⁴

This admonition finds parallels in both Hellenistic and Jewish ethics. On the Greek side these appear as early as Plato (*Leges* 6.776d–788a) and Aristotle (*Politica* 1260b.6), while during the Roman period Seneca was the most ardent advocate of the humane treatment of slaves (note especially his forty-seventh letter to Lucilius, cf. J. N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca* [*NovTSup* 4; Leiden: Brill, 1961] 185–92; Crouch, *Origin*, 117–19). He does not attack the institution of slavery as such but accepts it as part of the existing social order. He feels great pity for slaves, expresses keen censure of the way they are treated and condemns the misuse of slaves for all kinds of contemptible tasks even though he recognizes some slaves are anything but faultless (cf. Sevenster, *Paul*, 186). Seldom do the Stoic codes, however, refer to the relations of masters to slaves. Palestinian Judaism accepted the institution of slavery, and slaves were viewed as the property of their masters (Str-B 4, 717). Hellenistic Jewish circles knew and used current Hellenistic appeals to masters to treat their slaves properly (so *Ecclus* 4:30, “Be not like a lion in your home, and tyrannous and terrible toward your slaves,” also 7:20, 21; 33:31; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2:66–68, 89–91; 3:137–43; *Ps Phocylides* 224; see Crouch, *Origin*, 118, 119, for further examples).

The motivations behind these admonitions are non-religious almost always. Economically it made sense to treat one's slave humanely. This would especially be true where only one or two slaves might be in the household. In Judaism a religious motive from the Torah might enter the picture but often the same motives as their non-Jewish neighbors promoted the admonitions.

In Col. 4:1, Paul insists upon just and fair treatment of slaves by Christian owners: τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὴν ἰσότητα τοῖς δούλοις παρέχεσθε. Note the comments of O'Brien:²⁵

The apostle does not command the masters to free their slaves, but he clearly “points to an amelioration of the slaves' lot” (Martin, *NCB*,; 124): they are to treat them justly and fairly. “What is just or right” (τὸ δίκαιον *BAG*,; 196, comments: “The neuter denotes that which is obligatory in view of certain requirements of justice”; cf Schrenk, *TDNT* 2, 187, 188; Hinson, *RevExp* 70 [1973] 505, following Hagedé, 197, suggests that it might refer to salary; the idea of honest remuneration might be implied in the notion of “fairness” especially as παρέχομαι rendered “treat” means literally to “grant,” see *BAG*, 626) is paralleled by “what is fair” (τὴν ἰσότητα, *BAG*,; 381, Stählin, *TDNT* 3, 354, 355). The relationship between the two was frequently discussed in the moral teaching and instruction of popular philosophy (the two terms were often treated as synonyms; Philo gives a detailed exposition of “fairness,” ἰσότης, in *Rerdivher* 141–206, calling it the “mother of justice” [μήτηρ δικαιοσύνης], *Despeleg* 4, 231; cf Stählin, *TDNT* 3, 354, 355, Lohse, 162). Here the second term reinforces the first denoting “the spirit of equity as distinct from the letter of obligation” (Radford, 296, cited by Hinson, *RevExp* 70 [1973] 505; note Lightfoot, 228, who says, “the word naturally suggests an even-handed, impartial treatment,” and Abbott, 296, who describes it as “what cannot be brought under positive rules, but is in accordance with the judgment of a fair mind,” cf Stählin, *TDNT* 3, 355; against Meyer, 461, 462, and others who suppose the meaning to be that slaves are to be treated as equals — but this is an obscure way of expressing such a thought). So any harsh measures of repression or victimization of those in a helpless position (Martin, *NCB*, 124) are clearly ruled out (cf Eph 6:9).

The motivation for such humane treatment of slaves by Christian masters is clear: εἰδότες ὅτι καὶ ὑμεῖς ἔχετε κύριον ἐν οὐρανῶ. The masters must remember that they have God as their Master and He will **hold them accountable** for how they treat their slaves.²⁶

²³GNT: 6.9 Καὶ οἱ κύριοι, τὰ αὐτὰ ποιεῖτε πρὸς αὐτούς, ἀμιέντες τὴν ἀπειλήν, εἰδότες ὅτι καὶ αὐτῶν καὶ ὑμῶν ὁ κύριός ἐστιν ἐν οὐρανοῖς καὶ προσωποληψία οὐκ ἔστιν παρ' αὐτῶ.

²⁴Peter T. O'Brien, vol. 44, *Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 234.

²⁵Peter T. O'Brien, vol. 44, *Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 232.

²⁶Note O'Brien's comments (WBC, 233):

“εἰδότες ὅτι καὶ ὑμεῖς ἔχετε κύριον ἐν οὐρανῶ. “Because you know that you also have a Master in heaven” (NIV). The motivation for this just and fair treatment is basically the same as the slave's motive for obeying his master (v 24; note the repetition of εἰδότες, “knowing”). Masters also (καὶ ὑμεῖς, “you too”), like their slaves, are answerable to a greater Master in heaven (with the words κύριος ἐν οὐρανῶ, “a Master in heaven,” one is reminded of 3:1–4 — Christ is in heaven seated at the Father's right hand in the place of honor). This one Lord and Judge will decide whether these earthly masters have done what is truly just and fair. His will is the assessment that really counts. The relationship between masters and slaves has undergone a basic change. Both owe obedience to the one Lord, and therefore both have the true standard for their conduct toward one another (cf Sevenster, *Paul*, 192; it is at this point of motivation that, for all their apparent similarities, Paul and Seneca part company).”

In the modern application, the Christian employer has special responsibilities to his employees. They can not be treated with injustice and unfairness, or else the employer will face the wrath of God in Judgment Day.

When one looks at the relationship between slave and master, or, employee and employer, in terms of the guiding principles advocated here, it is easy to see how the gospel changes lives. Relationships inside the Christian faith operate on the basis of respect and just treatment. Serious commitment to one another and a willingness to do what helps the other person prevail in a genuinely Christian setting. What a difference there would be in our world today were these principles implemented in the market place!

2. What does the text mean to us today?

- 1) What is your attitude toward your boss at work?

- 2) How do you approach doing your work on the job?

- 3) What is your attitude toward those you supervise at work?

- 4) How do you treat your employees?