

Introduction...

This morning we are going to continue our study in the book of Colossians and we are in a section known as the household code. It's called this because it addresses the three key relationships within the average 1st century home. The big idea behind this section is that the Christian faith is meant to shape every part of our lives. The gospel is not just truth for the mind it is truth that shapes all of life. So Paul's point in **Colossians 3** is to teach us how the gospel affects our relationship to the world, to God, to other believers, and the home.

And the home that Paul is addressing looks a little bit different than our own. Within the average 1st century home there were three key relationships: husband and wife, parents and children, then masters and slaves. It is estimated that between 35-40% of the Roman Empire in the 1st century were slaves. That would be somewhere in the vicinity of 3 million people.

The system of slavery in the Roman world was so extensive that there were 9 different categories of slaves, there were at least 7 different ways that a person might become a slave, there was a vast system of laws governing slavery, and there were even prominent cities where slaves were produced, processed and sold on auction blocks. Nearly every household had at least one slave in it and sometimes many.

It has been said by historians that Rome was built on the backs of slaves. Practically every sphere of life for a Roman citizen or Freedman would put them in contact with slaves and the home was no different. But as the gospel began to spread through the Empire it affected masters and slaves alike. Christians who were slaves grew to understand that their service to their master was to be done in a way that honored their Savior. Masters were to understand that their treatment of slaves was to be done in a way that honored their confession of faith in Christ.

But wait a minute, how can that be the only way the gospel affects the system of slavery? Why aren't we reading here in Colossians about how the gospel is intended to bring down the systemic injustice of human slavery? Why does Paul simply accept the system and not try to tear it down? On a larger note, what does the rest of the Bible say about slavery? How are we to understand what we see here in Colossians 3?

Transition...

The bottom line is that we need to work to understand a few things about the Bible and slavery so that we can put **Colossians 3** in context and answer some of these bigger questions. So what I want to do this morning is to give a brief history of slavery from the Ancient Near East up to the Roman world. Then with that context drawn, I want us to look at **Colossians 3:22-4:1** to try and understand and apply it to our own lives. Then I want us to finish up by looking at the NT to see why Paul and others addressed slavery the way they did.

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

Sermon Focus...

Now, before we really get into this subject let me just lay the cards out on the table and let you know that slavery as an institution can be seen throughout the Bible and nowhere in Scripture do we see a universal condemnation of it. However, what we do see in the scriptures is a radical departure from the cultural forms of slavery that we would all consider to be institutionally wicked. But we do not see a verse in Scripture that condemns slavery altogether and if I'm honest this bothers me.

It bothers me because the predominant idea in my mind around slavery has to do with race based new world slavery. When I hear the word slave, in my mind I think of African men and women being abducted, mistreated, transported against their will to a new continent to live a life of horrific oppression and being made to work in sugar cane fields, or cotton fields until they died. I struggle to get those images out of my head when I read the word slave.

Now I know enough about this subject to know that Ancient Near Eastern Slavery is not the same as New World slavery, **but** the truth is I don't want my discomfort to go away. I don't want to intellectualize slavery to the point where I simply accept the fact that slavery isn't all bad. I want that visceral reaction to the idea of slavery to remain in me because slavery is not just a thing of the past, it is alive and thriving in our world today. As Christians we should be doing our part to bring sex trafficking and child trafficking to an end because we know that all human beings are made in the image of God and have an inherent, God-given and eternal value.

But I do want to acknowledge that what we see in the Bible is very different from that type of slavery that took place in European Colonialism and the American South. In fact, we are going to see laws in the OT that govern slavery and in those laws we see that God expected His people to do things quite differently from the pagan nations of this world.

I. A Brief History of Slavery

Slavery refers to human beings in a state of forced labor or involuntary servitude and in the Ancient Near Eastern world slavery was an accepted fact. In the ancient world, slavery often resulted from a failed military campaign. Two armies would battle it out and the losing army along with the people it defended were typically taken into captivity as prisoners of war and afterwards many of them would be sold as slaves.

It was also possible to become a slave through some form of kidnapping or piracy. Raiding parties (land or sea) would enter into small and lightly guarded villages carrying off anything of value including people who could be used or sold as slaves. **The most common way to become a slave was to be born to a slave mother, but next to this kidnapping and being a prisoner of war were at the top of the list.**

Now right from the start I want us to see that what was the common practice for Gentile nations regarding slavery was not allowed by God in Israel. I want to point out that slavery through kidnapping or trafficking was punishable by death in the OT law.

Deut 24:7 "If a man is found stealing one of his brothers of the people of Israel, and if he treats him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall die. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Throughout Scripture we see a condemning of those nations that practiced this kind of thing (Gaza and Tyre in Amos) and God used the nation of Israel to punish those nations that did this.

It was also forbidden in Israel to mistreat a slave because if you even knocked out his/her tooth the slave was to be set free (**Exo 21:27**). You might say, "Well what if a master beat his slave and no one ever found out about it?" Good question and the OT addresses that as well.

In **Deuteronomy 23:15-16** we read:

¹⁵ "You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. ¹⁶ He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong/oppress him.

The picture here is of a runaway slave who was most likely being mistreated by their master and God has given laws to protect them from further mistreatment. He has even instructed His people to care for them as they would a free man.

Tim Keller points out that:

"This is a direct contradiction of all existing slave laws of other societies in both ancient and modern times. Slave laws always penalized runaway slaves as well as those who harbored them. **So what does this law mean?** ... it assumes that the experience of slavery in Israel was not so harsh that there would be a great number of runaways. Indeed, **Deut 15:16** allows a slave to voluntarily remain in servitude after the Sabbath year."¹

In Israel, slaves were considered part of the owner's family and, if Hebrews, they had the right to Sabbath rest and to participate in religious feasts. They were allowed possessions, even to own slaves themselves, and they could buy themselves out of slavery by saving money they earned as wages. But even if they couldn't buy themselves out of slavery there was still the mandatory release of slaves every 7 years where all Hebrew debt slaves were set free from the ownership of others. And in **Deuteronomy 15** you see that the owner of those freed slaves didn't just let them go. He was also required by God to give material assistance to those he was releasing so that they didn't end up right back in the same place.

I hope that you're beginning to see that God was leading His people to view slavery through a whole new lens. They had been slaves in Egypt and they knew the harshness of being treated like something less than human, but God didn't want them to forget that. He wanted them to remember and instead of committing the same atrocities against others He wanted His people to understand the value of human life and human freedom. God's Word undermined the foundations of slavery as the world knew it.

At the same time, it was not uncommon for slaves in the ANE to be well-educated, even more so than their masters. Slavers were also known to exercise great power and influence at the insistence of their owners.

(**Illus...** Think about Joseph in the book of Genesis who was sold into slavery but then showed a great aptitude for business. His master (Potiphar) saw this gift and put Joseph in charge of his entire home and estate. Then later in life as a slave, Joseph rose to be the second most powerful man in the most powerful nation of the world, Egypt.

We see almost the same thing happen with Daniel becoming second in power to Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon though he too was a slave.

¹ Tim Keller, **Generous Justice** taken from a footnote on page 197-198.

Now, I am not saying that all Ancient Near Eastern slavery was this way. There were certainly instances of terrible abuse, oppression and mistreatment both outside and within Israel. But if we are going to rightly understand the history of slavery then we need to have the full picture.

Speaking of having the full picture, there is another category of slavery that people would enter into **voluntarily** and we refer to this as **indentured servanthood**. Much of the language in the OT that deals with slavery had to do with this form and it involved an individual who sold himself or his family into contractual servanthood in order to pay their debts or avoid poverty, which meant starvation and death.

(**Illus...**Let's say that you are a farmer with 4 children who went in debt to buy the equipment, seed and the hired help you needed to plant your fields. But something went wrong and your crop is a complete failure. There is no government department of agriculture to bail you out and no personal savings that will allow you to feed your family, let alone pay back your debt. So what do you do? **One option was to voluntarily enter into an agreement with a more successful land owner nearby.**

You would make an agreement for you and your family to work for that land owner for a number of years in return for food, wages, and debt protection. Then when those years of service were ended you could either go free and start over or make another agreement for a couple of more years. In some cases, a person might seek to become a servant for life and it was done voluntarily. That's indentured servanthood and this type of arrangement was completely different than what most of us have in mind when we think of slavery.

This is a lot like an employee-employer relationship that we experience today, which is why so many pastors, scholars and Bible teachers read a passage like **Colossians 3** and automatically run to the apply it in that way. And we are right to do so, but indentured servanthood is just one aspect of this subject of slavery

But what about slavery in the city of Colossae? What was the situation in this church to which Paul is writing? Slavery in the Greco-Roman world was big business. A person became a slave in one of 7 ways: as a prisoner of war, kidnapping at sea or on land, exposed children were often picked up by slave-dealers, a deeply indebted man might sell a child into slavery, criminals were condemned to work as slaves in the dreaded salt mines, but the most common way that a person became a slave in the 1st Century was that they were born to a mother who was a slave.

The legal statues of a slave in the Roman world was that they were a "living tool" and they could be seen in every part of life. Some were deployed as Imperial slaves serving the Emperor and his household, some were public slaves fulfilling civic duties (tax records, archives, court reports, local historians). Some were trained to be managers who oversaw the affairs of a private home, some were skilled craftsmen who could be rented out as needed, some worked as cooks, gardeners, and personal messengers, some worked as Pedagogues (child instructor), some were temple slaves, others agricultural slaves and then there were mine-workers.

"In the first century, slaves were not distinguishable from free persons by race, by speech or by clothing; they were sometimes more highly educated than their owners and held responsible professional positions; some persons sold themselves into slavery for economic or social advantage; they could reasonably hope to be emancipated after ten to twenty years of service or by their thirties at the latest; they were not denied the right of public assembly and were not

socially segregated (at least in the cities); they could accumulate savings through earned wages to buy their freedom; their natural inferiority was not assumed.”²

Now, why am I teaching all of this? Because I hope that this will be helpful to us as a backdrop for understanding the situation that Paul is writing about in Colossians 3. Yes, he is addressing slaves but the picture that we have in our minds might be a little bit different than before.

II. Slaves in Colossians

At the time of Paul writing this letter it can be safely assumed that slaves were everywhere and they were a normal part of everyday life. **In a smaller city like Colossae there was likely a ratio of 1 out of every 3 persons was some form of slave.** Some fared really well and others were subject to abuse, but it is understood that slavery was an integral part of the world at that time. Industry, society, government, and the home life depended on it. But just as the OT redefined the treatment of slaves in Israel the NT authors seek to redefined the treatment of slaves in their day.

So Paul isn't working to abolish slavery but he is reordering the slave-master relationship.

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. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,

In other words, yes you have an earthly master and you should serve him well, obey his commands, do it with integrity even when he is not looking over your shoulder, and you should serve as unto the Lord. Seek to please the Lord not just men.

(**Appli...**Now this has application for us today in the area of our profession. We should obey our bosses and be good workers, not because we fear them but because we want to honor God in every area of our lives. We should get to work on time, we should work hard at the tasks assigned to us, we should be honest people, model employees even if our boss is a jerk. If we have an opportunity to change jobs we should do so in a way that shows respect and consideration.

The gospel has something to say about how slaves relate to their masters and how we relate to our bosses.

The tasks we do in life whether as a servant to a master or an employee to a boss, the tasks we do have the potential to be acts of worship to the Lord. Jesus cares about the integrity of your life, He cares about the sincerity of your heart and He knows that whatever you do in this life, whether slave or free, it can be done in a way that brings glory to Him. This doesn't mean that slavery brings Him glory but that we can bring Him glory even in the context of something like slavery

And in the end, even the slave will receive an inheritance...

V. 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.

² Murray Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ*, NSBT (IVP, 2001), 44.

With Christ there is neither slave nor free we are all one and the grace that saves doesn't discriminate. Slaves did have certain rights but owning property wasn't one of them. And yet, Paul wants the slaves in Colossae to know that because of their faith in Christ they were set to receive an inheritance from God. Eternal life in Heaven and a place at the table of King Jesus, that's their reward and it is more valuable and more sure than anything we might inherit in this life or on this earth.

So Christian slaves are instructed to be model servants, to be sincere, hard-working, men and women of integrity. They are to see their service to their masters through the eyes of their relationship to the Lord and let the eternal promises of God motivate them. And if they are unjustly treated they are to understand that vengeance belongs to the Lord.

But what about masters?

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

First of all, Paul wants slave owners to know that they too have a master in Heaven. If men might be tempted to abuse their position at times one antidote to that would be to remember that they are answerable to a higher-master and Paul is not talking about the state. God sees our sin and He will not show favoritism when He judges. So just as slaves are to serve as unto the Lord, masters are to address their slaves as unto the Lord.

Paul says, "treat them right! Be just! Be fair! But above all understand that you are brothers in the heavenly household that matters most." It's subtle here in Colossae but Paul wants masters to understand that in the eyes of God and according to the gospel, there is equality between masters and slaves. **Legal status isn't what matters most, God's Word is what matters most and in this way the teaching of the NT became the ground for the abolition of slavery throughout the world.**

In Philemon, which is a companion book to this letter, Paul turns the common understanding of slavery on its head when he encourages a slave owner to treat his servant as a brother in Christ. Onesimus was a runaway slave converted to Christ under Paul's ministry and Paul is sending him back to his old master Philemon, but he pleads with Philemon to understand that, "he left as your slave but I am sending him back to you as a brother..."

In one sense the NT authors weren't striving to be social revolutionaries but **they were** trying to change social institutions. The church was small but they believed that the best way to transform the world wasn't by passing laws but by changing hearts. They were after gospel change and they understood that when true gospel change takes place in the heart of men and women the culture around them would be affected.

So the logic follows in this way, if enough people are born-again to faith in Christ then the society, as a whole would benefit from the growing influence of Christianity. History demonstrates the veracity of this statement. Where genuine Biblical Christianity is embraced society as a whole improves.

To be honest and fair Christians have often been the cause of many social problems. As sinner-saints the church has often been guilty of great injustice **but when** the teachings of Christ are rightly embraced even those wicked seasons have been brought to an end.

William Wilberforce in Britain fought throughout his life to abolish slavery and before his death he saw his laws passed. **Martin Luther King Jr.**, confronted racism in America and the arguments he used in the battle were Biblical ones. In his *Letters from Birmingham Jail* MLK called for Christians not to abandon their faith but to realize what the Bible actually teaches. He called for a truer expression of Christian faithfulness as the means to bringing an end to the race hatred in the south.

When Christian truth is embraced accurately it will change a our heart, a our home, a our culture, and a our eternity

Conclusion...Slavery and the Gospel

For most of us the idea of slavery is uncomfortable but in the NT slavery is more than an idea, it is a reality. **Here's what I mean, in the book of Romans, Paul lets us know that whether we want to accept it or not we are all slaves.** Because of the rebellion in our hearts we are slaves to sin. We might want to do good but the sin in our hearts keeps us from it. We might want to stop doing bad things but the sin in our hearts keep us doing those things.

In the NT, sin is personified as an evil power that owns us like a wicked slave master and his intention is to one day sell us to a new master...death. The whole picture is that we are hopeless, powerless, slaves to sin and death.

But Christ came and crushed the power of sin and death. Jesus came to set us free. He conquered sin when He died in our place on the cross and He conquered death when God raised Him from the dead. And now, we who have put our hope and trust in Christ need to understand that we belong to Him. Paul says, "we have been bought with a price and we belong to a new master now."

He is **not** like our old wicked slave-master, He is a good master who loves us, who died for us, who rose for us, who lives for us, and who is preparing an eternal home for us as we speak. We were slaves to sin and death but now we are slaves of Christ, and instead of calling us slaves He calls us friends, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, joint heirs of eternity.

Don't forget that the gospel changes everything. It turns slavery into freedom. It changes our hearts, our lives, and our homes and has the power to change our culture. It can end sinful institutions that have been around for centuries.

It can change you and me so let's not treat the gospel like it's something cheap but see it's God ordained power to change the world.