

“The New Self and Our Work”
Colossians 3:22-4:1

May 11, 2014

SI: We’re back to Colossians for a few weeks as we finish this letter.

We’re still in chapter three.

Paul is explaining that the Good News of Jesus Christ
is not just that he accepts us as we are.

He accepts us as we are to change us from what we are
into what we ought to be.

And the place that change takes place
is not some exotic, super-spiritual greenhouse,
but the ordinary spheres of life.

INTRO: You would have to have your head in the sand not to notice how rapidly American culture is becoming hostile towards Christianity.

The prevailing attitude used to be indifference.

If a person expressed Christian beliefs and values in the public square, those were his or her personal views and you could take them or leave them. But those days of tolerance are gone.

The prevailing opinion now is that Christian beliefs and biblical teaching are hateful and harmful to a just society.

That may not be the majority opinion,

but it doesn't matter because it's the most influential opinion.

It's a narrative that sounds convincing to more and more people.

Do we want to give a voice to racists and misogynists and homophobes? No.

Do we want to give a voice to people who would turn back the calendar to the days of oppression and injustice? No.

We can't deny them freedom of speech, so we'll marginalize them.

We won't hire them, or let them be the face of our business, or tolerate them in public office.

Every few weeks there is a news story about a believer who has lost his or her job mostly because of comments made about the Bible's view of sex ethics.

I read Friday about brothers Jason and David Benham, Christians, who were fired from HGTV because of comments they once made about homosexuality.

I read their comments and they were true and loving.

But the culture makers consider them hateful and harmful to society.

Of course, there is nothing new about that accusation.

Christian teaching and practice was considered harmful to Roman society.

In 116 AD the Roman Senator Tacitus called Christians haters of mankind.

So that's an old one. We were called haters 1,900 years ago.

We're not going to be burned at the stake in Nero's garden,

or fed to wild beasts in the Coliseum—we'll be marginalized like the Benhams.

Now, what does all that have to do with this passage?

We're all very familiar with the way the Bible's view of sexuality under attack.

But that's not the only place this attack is happening.

Another place is the Bible's teaching on slavery.

The criticism is that the Bible and Christianity supports slavery.

The Bible supports injustice. Christianity is a religion of oppression. And here's the proof, we've just read it.

Instead of condemning slavery, instead of telling slave owners that they have to emancipate their slaves—the Apostle Paul tells slaves to obey their masters. He gives support to an evil, unjust institution.

And here's the final nail in the coffin.

In the South, the Christian South, the Bible-believing South, white slave owners used passages like Col. 3 to justify slavery and spiritually manipulate their slaves by telling them God says they have to obey master. This is one more proof Christianity is fundamentally a harmful influence on society.

How would you respond to that interpretation of this passage?

You might say: I'm never going to encounter that in my everyday life.

And you're probably right. But it's out there.

Our college kids are going to run into these types of arguments, claiming the Bible backwards and anti-social.

You might have unbelieving friends or relative who raise this sort of thing.

Even if you never have to explain and defend this passage of Scripture, you need to know it, because it tells us something important about our work.

Work is a reality for every single one of us.

It dominates the days of our lives and the course of our years.

Work can be good for some people, hard for others, and for many a form of slavery.

And even for those most blessed in their work, still filled with many frustrations.

But Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection is setting all things right—even work. One day there is going to be a new world.

Our work in that world is going to be all good, free of all frustrations.

In the new creation, we're going to hop up out of bed every morning, eager to engage in the work of Christ's kingdom.

That time is not here yet. Jesus hasn't returned—yet.

But he is giving us a little foretaste by changing us in our work, here and now. He's made us new from the inside out, given us the new self, and he wants that to change the way we see our work now.

Two points: 1. The Bible's view of slavery. 2. The Bible's view of work.

Hopefully, they will come together at end.

MP#1 The Bible's view of slavery

Does the Bible support slavery and injustice? No.

The Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the most powerful anti-slavery force in history and has brought about the liberation of vast multitudes of people.

Let's start with the Old Testament.

In Exodus 21, right after Ten Commandments, Moses gave laws regulating slavery.

Critics say: See! The Bible supports slavery.

That's a shallow and ignorant reading of the Mosaic law. Look at the facts.

In the ancient world, slavery was a way of life. Every nation had slaves.

Slaves were generational property, bought and sold. They had no rights.

They could be physically abused. Families could be separated.

The Hebrews themselves were slaves in Egypt 400 years.

Book of Exodus describes their slavery as a horrible condition.

It tells of the cruelty of taskmasters, the beatings, the murder of Hebrew baby boys.

It says that the Lord heard their groaning. He told Pharaoh, Let my people go!

So after God delivered them, brought them out, gave them his laws for new nation.

One set of laws were about how to treat their own slaves.

You can't help but ask: Why on earth would they have slaves?

But when you read these laws carefully, a unique picture emerges.

Historians and scholars say there was nothing even remotely like these laws in any of the nations in the world at that time.

The first thing the law says is: "Remember you once were slaves in Egypt."

That's the preface to the slave laws. Remember, this is a person just like you.

Remember, God hears this person's prayers and groaning just like he heard yours.

So you should treat him just like you would have wanted to be treated.

And then here are some of the most important laws.

First, there was a procedure for Israelites to sell themselves into slavery.

Second, every seven years, slaves had to be set free with pay. Year of Jubilee.

Third, slave families could not be separated. Husbands/wives, parents/children.

Fourth, if a slave was beaten and lost a tooth, had to be set free.

Fifth, if a slave from a surrounding nation ran away from his cruel master and came to Israel, he could stay and live wherever he wanted.

Sixth, anyone who kidnapped people to sell into slavery was to be put to death.

Seventh, at Jubilee, if a slave wanted to continue in his master's house, could stay.

What is being described here? It was Israel's social safety net.

It was a system without precedent whereby people who were down and out and in debt could get dignified work and a chance to start again every seven years.

You might remember that's how many people came to this country when it was a British colony—as indentured servants. In debt and no future in England.

Legally bound to tradesman or farmer for certain number of years to get ahead. That may seem strange to us, but nothing fundamentally unjust.

Every system can be abused by sinful people, but OT law is remarkable not only for its justice, but how it gives people a chance to start over.

OK, says the critic, but what about Paul?

Why didn't he say slavery is wrong, and owning people is wrong?

Why did he support the status quo by telling slaves to obey?

Once again, that is an ignorant and incredibly shallow reading of Paul.

Paul's teaching destroyed slavery.

Not by attacking it from the outside, but by undermining it from the inside.

If you needed to destroy someone's computer files, you could do it two ways.

You could break into his house and smash his computer with a hammer—but if you tried that in Cullman, you would probably get shot.

Or, if you were really smart, you could introduce a computer virus through internet and destroy his files from the inside.

The Gospel was a good virus that destroyed Roman slavery from the inside out.

Look at the facts of history. Slavery was a way of life in the Roman empire.

Half to a third of the population were slaves and they performed every service.

Slaves were laborers, housekeepers, teachers, accountants, physicians, managers.

The lives of some slaves were cruel and brutal. Death sentence sent to mines.

On the other hand, Roman freemen sometimes sold themselves into slavery to Roman aristocrats as a path to upward mobility.

Our only image of slavery is the Old South. Roman slavery much more complex.

Add to this picture the fact that the vast majority of early Christians slaves.

Why do you suppose Paul says more to slaves than masters?

Not only more of them in the churches, most owned by unbelieving masters.

So the question for them was not whether slavery was good or bad—they knew that.

The question was not whether it should be abolished or reformed—not possible.

Slave revolts crushed with utmost brutality. Think of Spartacus.

The question was: As a Christian and a slave, what am I to do now?

That's the question Paul answered. We'll look at his answer in a moment.

But what was Paul's word to Christians who were slave owners?

You serve the same Lord. Your slaves are brothers in Christ.

What did Paul say to Philemon (Colossae) about his runaway slave Onesimus?

Receive him back no longer as a slave but as a dear brother,
both as a man made in God's image and as a dear brother in the Lord.

What was the effect of Paul's teaching on the early church?

Freemen and slave church members treated exactly the same. Could hold office.

There were a few famous bishops in early church who had been slaves.

Christian masters began working out the implications—my brothers in Christ,
people made in the image of God, they emancipated their slaves.

As Christianity conquered hearts and minds of across empire, slavery eradicated.

Look back through centuries, the greatest campaigns against slavery were lead by
Christian missionaries and politicians wielding biblical arguments.

Who spearheaded abolition in British Empire? William Wilberforce.

Who convinced British govt to outlaw burning widows in India? William Carey.

Who pushed British govt to fight African slave trade? David Livingston.

The arguments of the American abolitionists always biblical. (Robert Woodberry)

So we have to ask, What about our Bible-believing Southern forebears,
and their use of the Bible to defend chattel slavery?

They were wrong. They not only got the Bible wrong, they were out of step with
the clear practice of the church from the earliest days of Apostles.

That should make us hang our heads in shame.

And Presbyterians in particular ought to be ashamed, because the greatest
theologians in America in the 1800s were Southern Presbyterians.

Much more theologically sound than Northern Abolitionists—a flaky bunch.

For years Southern Presbyterian theologians said if slaves continued to be
mistreated, God was going to pour out his judgment on the South.

But after the war started they changed their tune and closed ranks.

They defended a system that not only went against the spirit of Paul's teaching,
it broke every single one of the laws of Moses we talked about a moment ago.

And if I had been alive back then, I would have been right there with them.

It's a sobering lesson on how Christians can be blinded by the times live in.

And how we must ask: What has the church historically taught about subject?

Mostly, how God's word is good and true and dignifying and liberating to people,
even when Christians get it totally wrong.

That's the Bible's word on slavery.

The Gospel is a power that lifts people up, better their lives, purifies their relationships, and makes them friends to other people.

So now let's consider

MP#2 The Bible's view of work

As I said a moment ago, majority of early Gentile Christians probably slaves.

The big question they were asking as new Christians wasn't:

Is slavery good or bad? Or, should slavery be abolished?

It was, Ok, now I'm a Christian, I'm a follower of Jesus. How do I live now?

Whether a slave or a freeman, how do I approach my work?

Paul's point in Colossians 3 is that through faith in Christ, everything is made new. You are no longer who you once were.

The old man is dead. The new man has been born.

You exercise and work out the implications of the new self

in the ordinary spheres of life—in church, in marriage, in family, and in work.

Remember, there was an emphasis on spiritual fads in the Colossian church.

Some people were saying that it was all about special diets, way to fullness.

Others emphasized religious rituals and holy days.

Others practiced esoteric Bible studies for really serious people,

Others were into communicating with angels.

Paul says: Nope, none of that weird stuff.

It's church, marriage, family, work—that's where you live out the new self.

That's where Jesus wants you to practice being a new person in him.

One day Jesus is going to return and set everything right.

His work of redemption is going to extend even to creation—new heavens/earth.

But he's started by saving our souls and making us new inside.

And as new people, we start to bring some of this newness into every sphere.

So, the new man goes to work Monday and guess what? He has a new boss.

His new boss is Jesus. Paul says it twice.

You are working for the Lord, not for men. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

There are several implications from this teaching.

First, it's dignifying.

I'm not a golfer, but suppose I decided to be one, asked you to be my caddy.

You might do it out of pity, but it would be a humiliating experience.

But suppose Tiger Woods or Bubba Watson asked you to caddy for them.

You would be honored. Who you work for makes all the difference.

If you are working to serve Jesus, and not just that angry, unfair, irrational person who orders you around every day, then you are in a position of honor, and your work is important.

That's **another implication**, if you are serving Jesus, there is **not a sacred/secular division in work**. It's not the case that some work is holy, some ordinary.

If it's all work for Jesus, then it's all sacred.

It's not that you do your ordinary job,

then you serve Jesus on Sundays in church, or when you do Christian ministry.

It's not that your work is holy to God when you share your faith at work,

or when you use the money you have earned to support church and missions.

By all means, do both those things.

But your work is holy to God in itself. You actually serve Jesus in the work itself.

Sometimes Christians are able to look at their work and figure out why Jesus

has them doing the job they are doing. How it fits in his kingdom scheme.

But that's not true for many Christians. In what appear to be lame, dead end jobs.

Vast multitudes of Christians today in the Third World, work daily menial tasks.

Even Christians in developed nations work in jobs like the cog in a machine.

If you died tomorrow, company or business would go on without you.

Guess what? Jesus put you in your job, however menial and lame may seem.

He wants you to be in it right now and to work for him.

You might feel more holy if you could teach the Bible to little Native American

children on the Yakama Indian Reservation like Chris and Mary Granberry.

But the reality is that your job now is holy, because Jesus put you there to work.

And somehow it is part of his big plan to redeem all creation.

That leads us to **another implication. This changes the way you work.**

You don't just work hard when the boss is around.

I love the old King James: "Not with eyeservice as menpleasers."

You work hard all the time because the Boss is always around.

You are always under the eye of Jesus.

That's a sobering and wonderful thing to know that Jesus is watching work.

And Paul also says that you work with sincerity of heart, reverence,

with all your heart, and expecting an inheritance.

Amazing. I've been put in this job by Jesus. He's my boss. I'm serving him.

Heartily, reverently, because I'm inheriting all this and more.

It's like a cosmic version of that show Undercover Boss, where the owner of the company goes incognito to work the most menial and difficult jobs. Nobody at work knows who he is, but we do, because we have inside scoop.

And we're watching with fascination.

Only it's us, we're the undercover boss, children of the King, co-heirs with Christ. All heaven is in on the joke and they're watching the show with great interest.

Our heavenly Father, and our elder brother Jesus, and all the angels—because the Bible says, one day we will govern the angels.

Are saying, look at him in that tough job. Look at her doing those menial tasks, Look at her with that rotten boss and complaining co-workers.

He's going to own the company one day, she'll have it all, and aren't we proud!

And if in your work you happen to be a boss or owner,

Paul says, Masters—Jesus has put you in your position to serve like a slave.

He's put you in a position that he wants you to leverage for what is just and fair to your employees and customers and everyone else with whom do business—with suppliers and distributors and who ever.

This week George Cochran sent me an email that fit so perfectly with this sermon: I wanted to share with you the attached recognition of the man who was a key contributor to the path I journeyed as a chemist and a Christian. Not only was he my professor and research director at Tennessee, but he was also my Sunday school teacher. I was his graduate student when he was pursuing his second doctorate at New York University. His thirst as a student of the Word and an effective disseminator of its truth as he understood it inspired a similar hunger in me. . . I thought you might find his biographical sketch in this publication to be of interest. Imagine, professionally active in the cutting-edge of chemical science for 65 years and still pushing back the envelope.

I clicked on the attachment and read about Dr. George K. Schweitzer:

Schweitzer is the holder of three doctorates, one in inorganic and nuclear chemistry, one in the history and philosophy of religion, and one for his work in the philosophy of science. He came to UT in 1948 to initiate the inorganic division of the newly-established Ph.D. program in chemistry and to participate in the early UT-Oak Ridge graduate instructional and research program. He has mentored over 130 graduate students. . . He has done research work in the fields of radiocolloids, nuclear recoil, photoelectron spectroscopy, solvent extraction, rare-earth chemistry, and radioactivity detection, and continues in the area of mechanochemistry.

You can ask George Cochran to define those terms for you.

There are so many lessons from a life like that, but here's the point I want to make. One day Jesus is going to say to Dr. Schweitzer,

Well done, good and faithful servant.

Lord will praise him for being a good church member, teaching Sunday school,
and for being a good Christian witness on the university.

But Jesus is mostly going to praise him for being a good chemist.

And for working hard in the chemistry lab, because that's where Jesus put him.
Whether your work is mechanochemistry or dirty diapers,
whether it is pushing a pencil or digging a ditch,
whether you are the boss man or the low man on the totem pole—
you are a new person in Christ.

And he wants you to exercise your new self in the sphere of your work.

How do you do that?

Remember, it is the Lord you are serving, not men.

And the Boss is always around, so you work heartily and reverently.

Even if nobody knows it, you are the heir apparent.

You are inheriting all this and more one day, and angels will do your bidding.

But best of all, you will hear, Well done, good and faithful servant.

Because that's what we are—servants and slaves.

Once we were slaves to sin and the Devil,
but we were liberated to become slaves of Jesus.

That should make you sympathetic and kind to everyone you meet—
because this person is a slave just like you.

Either he's a fellow slave to Jesus, and your brother.

Or he's still a slave to sin and you can sympathize, because you know how
terrible that is, and you want him to know the liberty of serving Jesus.