

Section 10: Down to Earth 2: Work Relationships - Living it out in the workplace

Colossians 3:22- 4:1

3:22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism.

COL 4:1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Last Sunday, I was looking at the whole area of family relationships and I wondered if I had emphasised strongly enough the whole idea undergirding it all. That is the idea that we are servants of the Living God and of Jesus Christ His Son. That is what is at the heart of all that was said - it is all about Jesus, about the practicalities of His life being lived out in us.

Among the appreciative comments over what was said last week about the family, someone said that he looked forward to what I would have to say about the whole subject of slavery, as it seemed that this was something which was just accepted in New Testament times.

So, before going on to deal with these verses in detail, a general word about this question of slavery.

Slavery at that time was something that was part of the accepted fabric of society. There was a variety of types of slave - from those who were captured during wars, to those who were enslaved because of poverty. There was also a whole range of states of slavery, from those treated with absolute cruelty to those who were treated as part of a family. Slaves were a considerable part of the work force at that time. They were not slaves in the sense associated with slavery in more recent times.

The main and the first priority for Paul was not the physical wellbeing of the slave population, or the social engineering of the society, but rather the eternal well being of the people involved. It is not that slavery was something which was endorsed, but rather it was the view that the gospel was the most relevant message to the situation. It was something that had to be preached and the people - slaves as well as free - won for Jesus Christ, that they might know eternal life.

Not that Christianity has been indifferent to the evils of slavery. Over

the generations there have been a great number of profound changes brought about by the Christian church and by individual Christians. Even so, the most profound and far-reaching change is the transformation that is wrought in the hearts of men and women. It might well be argued that the changing of the hearts of men and women is what brings about a change in society. This might well be seen in our current day and generation.

Such a change has practical implications.

Let's look at this in the light of our situation by covering four aspects:

- . Accountability to our earthly master.
- . Accountability to our Heavenly Master.
- . Accountability to ourselves.
- . Accountability of employers.

but commenting on them as a group rather than as individual points.

1. If we are under the authority of someone then we are to be obedient, hard working, employees. As 1 Peter 2:18 says: "*submit yourselves to your masters, with all respect*". It is about doing what we are supposed to be doing: an honest day's work for an honest day's wage.
2. "*Work at it with all your heart.*" I am reminded of a story from colonial days when a contractor in an overseas country noticed that his workmen only worked when he was present. To overcome this, he placed his glass eye on a post while he went away. It worked for a while, until one day he noticed that someone had placed a hat over it, which let the men resume their resting because the 'eye' could not see them! Maybe we, too, are guilty of only working as 'eye-pleasers' We need to work with all our heart in a trustworthy manner.
3. We need a theology of work. By that I mean a biblical understanding of what work is and what each one's responsibility is. That means that work is something to which we are called; and so we do it to the glory of God. Work is difficult and challenging but we are made for work: it is part of our make up. We are creative beings as we are made in the very image of God. Jesus was a carpenter and Paul a tentmaker.
4. It is not as if we are just working for men, to please them. We are to put our hearts into our work and into all that we do out of reverence for God and a desire to please Him.
5. Our accountability is to God and not to men. There is the whole

concept of a "calling" that in recent generations has been lost. That is because there has been a loss of a sense of the presence and purpose of God in our lives. The will and purpose of God has been overcome with a desire to please and satisfy self.

6. Employers or 'masters' (whoever they might be at whatever level) are to act responsibly and caringly. There should be justice and fairness. There is to be no partiality.
7. The principle of accountability is all important. It is a conviction of who is ultimate master. It is the Lord you are serving.
8. There is an eternal reward that has to be considered. That is the certain knowledge that we have as our inheritance the faithfulness of the Lord. Righteousness will be rewarded.
9. There is a consequence for disobedience. Ignoring these instructions means that we reap what we sow.

Thus Paul, spelling out the practical implications, encourages us to play our part - each one, whatever our position or status - with diligence, commitment, respect and regard for each other in a way that pleases God because it demonstrates His '*better way*'.