

## All Things New

### Week 11: When Life is Out of Your Control

#### Colossians 3:22-4:1

Don't you wish that text said something else? Something like, "Slaves, you have no earthly masters. Christ has set you free spiritually and physically. And Masters, who are you to think you can "own" another human being. Stop it! That's not God's will!"

That's what I wish this text said, but it doesn't. And so, we read these words and they make us a little uncomfortable, right? We're shocked by them because they seem to be saying, at least indirectly, that slavery is okay. And that seems crazy because even that word "slave" makes us squirm a little bit. There's so much oppression and injustice wrapped up in that word.

It almost makes us embarrassed that it's in the Bible. Like, if you brought a friend to church with you today, you're probably squirming in your seat a little bit, too. Leaning over, going, "We don't usually talk about this kind of stuff." Mouthing, "*I'm sorry!*" But, as we continue to work through this letter to the Colossians, we're not going to skip over the parts that make us uncomfortable. As much as I'd love to. This is two weeks in a row preaching on an "s" word. "Submit" last week and "slave" this week. Easter is in 14 days...I'm ready to talk about the resurrection!

But, this is our text for today, so we're going to tackle it head on. And so, what do we do with a passage of Scripture that seems to condone something we know is evil? I think it's important for us to remember that **the Bible is written to broken and fallen people living in a broken and fallen world.**

So, let's go back to the 3 circles we looked at a few weeks ago...(God's design, Brokenness, Jesus)

Slavery is not a part of God's design. God created people and gave them work to do. He told them to cultivate the earth, fill it, subdue it, have dominion over it. In God's original design, when things are how He wanted them to be, our work was meaningful and fulfilling. We were designed to participate in what God was doing to make this world glorious and fruitful. And that means there's a lot of work to do, but we would all find satisfaction and joy as we did the work together. And so, God's plan was not to give them slaves...instead He gave them children!

The point is, slavery is not a product of God's design, it's a product of the Fall. Slavery is sin because it's outside of God's design. That's what sin means. And sin will always lead to brokenness. So, when sin came into the world, it gave people this desire to not only have dominion and control over the earth, but to have dominion and control over other people. With sin came oppression, typically towards people who were viewed as different or less than. With sin came war, which often led to taking people captive and forcing them into

slave labor. With sin came poverty and unjust financial systems that would put people in the awful position of selling themselves or their family into slavery just to be able to survive.

Which...just a quick word about that last one...it's still happening today. There are people, both men and women, who feel like their only option is to sell their bodies in order to provide for their family. And now, they are caught in modern day sex trafficking and slavery. We have a ministry here at Sherwood Oaks that meets once a month on a Monday evening to reach out to these, mostly, women and offer them hope and freedom.

It's a front line attack on sex slavery, and if you want to be a part of the team that's making these calls and showing these women love and compassion...offering them hope...if you want to be a part of the Rescue America team, come find me after the service and I'll get you connected.

All that to say, slavery is not a part of creation, it's part of the fall. It's not in God's design. It's rooted in sin and brokenness. And remember, the Bible was written to broken and fallen people living in a broken and fallen world, so it doesn't gloss over the ugliness of it. Instead, it instructs us how to live in this broken, fallen world with its broken and fallen systems. Paul is writing this letter to a real church, filled with real people, telling them how to live out the Gospel. How to let the Gospel inform and instruct the way we live and relate to one another.

So, if this text isn't so much about slavery, as it is about that, then it might have something to say to us, too. So, I want to read the first and last verse again. We'll talk briefly about what it meant for the people who were a part of this church in Colossae, and then what it means for us today. Let's look at it again...(READ Col. 3:22; 4:1)

Now, when we hear this text and the words "slave" and "master," we can't help but think about the 19<sup>th</sup> century transatlantic slave trade where people were systematically taken from their homes to be bought and sold into a lifetime of slavery. Paul actually condemns this practice in 1 Timothy 1. He calls the idea of buying and selling people ungodly and sinful and contrary to the Gospel.

But, I think there's a difference between that kind of slavery and the people Paul is addressing in this letter. The word "slave" is best translated "bondservant." When Paul writes this letter, there's somewhere around 20-30% of the Roman Empire living as bondservants to another. They would often enter into this type of service to pay off a debt or escape poverty. Often times, bondservants would get their freedom back.

So, it's different from what we think of in our nation's history, but it's still a system ripe for injustice. Like, I don't want to soft-sell it. It's still one human being thinking they can have control over another. But, Jesus makes all things new. He is the one thing that changes everything, including this relationship. So, Paul says, "You both have a new master now."

Jesus is called “Lord” or “Master” five times in this section. Paul is emphasizing that Jesus is the One, True master and that both bondservants and masters serve him. And if you serve Jesus and really seek to follow him, then it’s going to transform your relationships. Your faith in Jesus ought to transform how you interact with each other. How you do your work and how you treat those who work for you.

So, Paul says, “Slaves, you are set free from people pleasing” because you don’t work for a master, you work for THE Master, and he’s already pleased with you. So, you can work with your whole heart because you’re not serving a human master, you’re serving Jesus with the way you do your work. And he assures them in verse 24 that an eternal inheritance is coming their way.

In a way, Paul gives dignity to the slaves sitting in the church that day. He talks to them as people, not property. He talks to them as brothers and sisters in Christ who should be treated as such. So, he sets the example, but then he tells masters to treat their servants fairly and justly. To treat them the way God treats us. Don’t exploit them, don’t manipulate them. Don’t abuse them.

In Aristotle’s household codes, he said there can be no injustice towards something or someone you own. But Paul comes along, informed by the Gospel, and says, “Um, you don’t own them. They were bought at the price of Jesus and they belong to him, just like you do.” So, your bondservants are not property, they’re people. Treat them that way. And remember, you’ll one day give account to YOUR Master for how you did.

So, while I wish that Paul would have written a treatise to Caesar, calling him to abolish this system because of the way it conflicts with the Gospel, that’s not his goal here. And Caesar probably wouldn’t have listened to someone who was writing as a prisoner, anyway. So instead, Paul writes to this church about how the Gospel changes us from the inside out. How it makes all things new, including the way we treat one another. And so, Paul is not condoning slavery. I think he’s actually framing it in a way that, for followers of Jesus, it would be unthinkable.

So, that’s what this text would have meant to the original audience, but what about us? Well again, the Bible is written to broken and fallen people living in a broken and fallen world. Paul’s words can teach us how to live and walk with Jesus, no matter the situation or circumstances we’re in right now. How we can walk with Jesus when life feels a little out of our control. Scripture speaks into those places in our life that feel awful and oppressive. And, for some, that could be how you’d describe your job!

I think there’s a reason why shows like *The Office* and *Abbott Elementary* are so popular. They capture the mundane parts of work life and relationships in a way that resonates with people. In the late 90’s, there was a movie released called *Office Space*. And, I can’t really recommend the movie. But there’s a part in there that I think captures what so many people feel.

Peter is the main character in the movie and he feels trapped in this dead-end job. He eventually gets to this place where he just doesn't care anymore. And, some executives come in who are trying to decide if they're going to downsize and so everyone is afraid they're going to lose their job. But, Peter doesn't really care anymore, so when he's called into this meeting, he just kinda lays it all out there.

Both execs are named Bob, so Bob 1 says, "You see, what we're trying to do is get a feeling for how people spend their time at work so if you would, would you walk us through a typical day, for you?" Peter says, "Well, I generally come in at least fifteen minutes late, ah, I use the side door - that way Lumbergh (his boss) can't see me. After that I sorta space out for an hour."

Bob 2 says, "Space out?" Peter says, "Yeah, I just stare at my desk, but it looks like I'm working. I do that for probably another hour after lunch too, I'd say in a given week I probably only do about fifteen minutes of real, actual, work."

Obviously, the two Bobs look a little confused. Peter goes on and says, "The thing is, Bob, it's not that I'm lazy, it's that I just don't care." Bob 2's like, "You don't care?" Peter says, "It's a problem of motivation. If I work hard and Initech ships a few extra units, I don't see another dime; so where's the motivation? And here's something else, Bob: I have eight different bosses right now. So that means that when I make a mistake, I have eight different people coming by to tell me about it. That's my only real motivation is not to be hassled; that, and the fear of losing my job. But you know, Bob, **that will only make someone work just hard enough not to get fired.**"

I know a lot of people who feel that way. Maybe you do. You feel undervalued, under compensated, under-utilized. Your work environment is unhealthy and frustrating. You work under oppressive expectations and demands from your boss...or bosses. You work just hard enough to not be hassled or fired.

But, no matter who you are, or what your circumstances, if you're a follower of Jesus, you've been given a new motivation for work that's different from all the ways the world is motivated by work. Finding meaning and joy in your work is part of how God designed you, and circumstances don't have to be just right for you to experience that. You can find it right there in the middle of whatever work you're doing. Paul says in **verse 23...(READ 23-24)**

There's not a task you can't give your best effort to because it's for the Lord. There's nothing too mundane, to meaningless, to unnoticed. The Gospel transforms the way we view our work because it's not for our company or our boss, we work for the glory of God. We work for our One, True master, Jesus. He is our audience. He is the one we worship with our work, and it makes all the difference.

So, we come here on Sundays to worship, but our worship doesn't stop here. It extends to our jobs, so all week long we give ourselves in worship to God through our work. And, if that is our approach, then we work hard, not just because our boss is watching; we work hard because our work is an act of worship lived out in front of our Master. So, followers of Jesus ought to be the best employees someone can have.

In the same way, followers of Jesus ought to be the best bosses someone can have. Paul says in **4:1...(READ)**

If you're a boss, how does rightness and fairness show up in the way you lead and serve those who work for you? How does it show up in your hiring and firing practices? In your compensation packages? Vacation time? Are your employees better people because they worked for you, or do you belittle them? Are you harsh with them? Yell at them? What's in the wake you're leaving behind? Are they happier, healthier people, or would they say, "Yeah, I worked for that person before. I was surprised they were a Christian."

And you may think, "It's not my job to make them feel happier and healthier. I pay them to work for me and get the job done." But I think following Jesus ought to change our priorities. Jesus' priority was people and so if you're a boss who's a follower of Jesus, we ought to go out of our way to treat people with dignity and respect. To be FOR them, not just about what we can get FROM them.

Following Jesus transforms how we work and how we lead others. And the transforming factor is that we have a new Master. He's our new Boss who is making us new...and it makes all the difference.

You see, at the end of the day, if you're a follower of Jesus, you are a bondservant to him. But we can joyfully serve him because, as our Master, Jesus made himself nothing and took on the nature of a servant. He came purchase our freedom, and in response, we glorify God with all we do, including our work.

Jesus bought us, and we belong to him. He is the only Master who brings us freedom. He is the only Boss who offers us something far better than stock shares...He promises us an eternal inheritance. And our One, True Master enables us to walk in God's design and makes us fully human again. He makes us new and He gives new meaning and value and purpose to every part of our lives...including our work.