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Love in Daily Life II

Colossians 3:22-4:1

Intro: We are in the middle of a list of household duties that Paul has presented to the Colossians. This list was not given because the Colossians were notorious for dropping the ball on living for Christ in the home. No, this list was given to provide practical examples of how to accomplish the directive that Paul gave in v17. For the wife, Paul says that the knight in shining armor that you married may have turned into just a jerk in a rusty tin can but submission to your husband is how you can serve and worship the Lord in your daily life. To the husband who says, “I’m the king of my own castle!” Paul says you need to love your wife more than yourself, with a sacrificial love that puts her first. Besides, if you’re a Christian husband and Christ is not the King of your castle then your castle is in big trouble already. To the child who says, “My parents are just party-poopers!” (said every kid that’s ever lived) Paul says you are to obey your parents as service and worship to the Lord.

As we go through this list, we can’t help but recognize once again the preeminence of Jesus Christ in our lives as believers. Christ must be the Head of the home. It is by His power and authority that we should live in our daily relationships and, thus, fulfill the command of v17. If Christ is the preeminent One in our lives and our relationships then we will love each other, submit to each other, obey and treat one another fairly in the Lord. If you compare the list of household duties in Eph 5:18-6:9 you’ll notice that **Ephesian** passage emphasizes being filled with the Spirit while the list in our text emphasizes being filled with the Word, but the evidence of both fillings is the same: joyful, thankful and submissive living. To be filled with the Spirit means to be controlled by the Word.

The fullness of the Spirit and the fullness of the Word are needed in the home. If family members are controlled by the Spirit of God and the Word of God, they will be joyful, thankful and submissive – and they will have little trouble getting along with each other. Our text today deals with the relationship between slaves and masters, which would apply directly to the modern relationship between an employee and their employer. But even in the original setting, slaves and masters were to treat each other fairly and

that could only happen if they are filled with the Spirit and the Word. At the heart of every problem is a problem of the heart and only God Spirit and God's Word can change and control the heart.

22-23- So far, Paul has established a pattern. Those with little power or little room to maneuver in their lives receive few instructions. Wives and children are to live out their roles as a free offering to God. But now, with slaves and masters, the pattern is, at first glance, reversed. Slaves receive the longest piece of teaching in this section (**22-25**). There are a few reasons for this but the biggest reason may well be due to the long talks which Paul had with the runaway slave, Onesimus, whom he would later send back to his master Philemon. Onesimus ran away from his master and searched for Paul in Rome. He found Paul and it wasn't long before he found Jesus as well as Paul led him to Christ.

The command that slaves must obey their masters in everything is jarring to those who now consider the institution of slavery to be abhorrent, which it is. But, in Paul's day, slavery was an established institution and an entrenched reality that the early church could neither change nor ignore. Historians record that there were upwards of 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire itself. More than half of the people seen on the streets of the great cities of the Roman world were slaves. And, while the condition of many slaves was pitiful, others could hold positions of considerable responsibility within a household. This was the status of the majority of 'professionals' such as teachers, doctors and craftsmen.

Why didn't the early church openly oppose slavery and seek to destroy the institution? One reason was that the church was a minority group that had no political power to change an institution that was hard-wired into the social order. Paul was careful to instruct Christian slaves to secure their freedom if they could (**I Cor 7:21**), but he never advocated for rebellion or the overthrow of the existing order. The purpose of the early church was to spread the gospel and win souls, not to get involved in social action. Had the first Christians been branded as a rabble-rousing, anti-government sect, it would have greatly hindered their soul winning efforts and the expansion of the church across the Roman Empire. Let's face it, 1st Century Christians were the nicest, most loving people on the planet and they were severely persecuted anyway. While it is good and right for believers to get involved in promoting honesty and morality in government and society, this concern

must never replace the mandate to go into all the world and preach the gospel. A spiritual transformation must come before any moral or ethical transformation in society.

We should note here that Paul is in no way sanctifying slavery with his instructions here. On the contrary, what he *is* doing is subtly undermining the very premises of slavery while encouraging obedience as an expression of loyalty to the family group. He does this 1st) by addressing slaves as responsible human beings when most in his day regarded slaves as little more than animated machines. No one would try to impose any kind of moral obligations on animals or farm implements. By assigning slaves moral duties, Paul treats them as morally responsible individuals. One of the things slaves lacked in this society was self-respect. By issuing these commands, Paul affords them a measure of respect.

2nd) Most masters took for granted that slaves were morally incapable of deciding to do good. They assumed slaves were helplessly controlled by their passions and hopelessly evil. Thus, they tended to treat them as if they were witless children. But Paul treats Christian slaves as morally independent persons fully capable of Christian virtue. God won't overlook their misconduct just because they're slaves who are supposedly not responsible for themselves. They are responsible for themselves. Being in the miserable condition of slavery and even being a victim of injustice and/or abuse doesn't excuse returning evil for evil, or even halfheartedness for evil.

3rd) There were plenty of contemporary lists of household duties but in the case of slaves, the secular lists merely advised masters on how best to handle their slaves. Since Paul begins with commands to slaves and then addresses masters, he shows no interest in helping masters run their slaves more efficiently. His concern is to enhance the mutual love and respect between slaves and masters.

Now, as many slaves held positions of responsibility within the household, their opportunities to cheat their masters were plentiful. Thus, Paul's first command to slaves is to be obedient to their earthly masters. Sure, the expectation that slaves would obey their masters was normal across the entire spectrum of society. But, the fact that Paul adds in everything complicates matters. A slave might not have a Christian master and slaves were frequently powerless victims of sexual harassment and abuse. Paul's

command assumes the master's demands are reasonable and appropriate; but the question does arise: how does one serve 2 masters, 1 on earth and the other the Lord of heaven and earth? The following commands deal with behaviors that would be of interest to the master but they also keep in full view the greater obligation to the Lord.

Slaves are warned against eye-service. This phrase could have a few meanings. It may refer to performing tasks only superficially and doing only what can be seen: going through the motions of service (busy work). It may also refer to doing something only to catch the master's eye, or to please those who are in authority. Or it may refer to working only when you are being watched – like the light inside the refrigerator. This type of worker gets a performance review that says: Works well under constant supervision. Slaves are also not to beguile their masters, working only to win their favor, be man-pleasing. This command prohibits working with ulterior motives and keeps slaves from becoming hypocrites, fawning before their masters. Christians, no matter what their station in life, are always to give sincere, wholehearted service. These are what slaves are not to do.

On the positive side, what they are supposed to do is fear God. Here, Paul transforms the motive of their service. Slaves are to work diligently because the life they live and the work they do is their offering to God. Thus they don't work in fear of their master's displeasure, but God's. By fearing God, Paul could mean fear of His judgment but more likely he means the sense of awed awareness of God that the term describes in the OT. If believers are to do everything in the name of the Lord, then Christian slaves must work for their earthly masters as for the Lord. The master is not a substitute for the Lord, but slaves are encouraged to work as if for the Lord. It is as they are aware of God that believing slaves are enabled to transform their daily work into something offered to Him. Their deference to their masters is thus elevated to obedience to Christ, whom they must obey and serve with all their hearts. The slaves most humble task then becomes a high calling and brings benefit to God.

The work ethic of Roman slaves isn't much different than that of the modern shift worker. Most are always tempted to work only as hard as they have to, thinking they only have to please men, and in many cases that's true. But not for the Christian worker. God wants every Christian worker to see that ultimately, they work for Him. Therefore, they should work heartily, as to the

Lord and not to men. The Christian who is a dishonest, lazy or unreliable worker has something far worse to deal with than a reprimand from their earthly supervisor. Their heavenly Supervisor may prepare a reprimand for them too. Christians slaves (or Christian employees today) have the highest of all motives for faithful and conscientious performance of duty; they are above all else servants of Christ, and should work first and foremost to please Him.

24- Paul's 3 commands to slaves are coupled with a promise of reward and with a warning. Slaves at that time were more accustomed to hear the phrase you will receive in connection with some kind of punishment; Paul uses it with a promise of reward, an inheritance. Slaves, who had no legal standing in Roman society and who could not inherit anything according to this world's laws, are here promised an inheritance from the Lord of the universe – the same hope that all Christians have (**1:12**). This is clearly a reference to the life of the age to come and is greater than anything their human masters can offer, even freedom.

Paul's next comment to slaves reminds them who the true master is: the Lord Christ. This is an unusual phrase for Paul to use because nowhere else in his epistles does he allow Lord and Christ to stand together without the name Jesus as well. The force of this unusual phrase can be brought out by a paraphrase: so work for the true Master – Christ!. Once Christian slaves see themselves as slaves of Christ rather than of earthly masters, they can look forward to ultimate freedom – the fulfillment of their salvation in glory with Christ. This command leads into Paul's warning in the next verse.

25- Just because society might consider slaves to be morally incompetent or slaves may consider themselves to be victims of oppression, it doesn't absolve them from any wrongdoing. It would be tempting to think that as the poor and oppressed, slaves would find God on their side. Paul doesn't suggest this. What he does say is that God judges everyone impartially, and a slave who has not fulfilled his potential as a slave of Christ will have to answer to God as much as any slave owner. Similarly, when a Christian worker does poorly in their job, they shouldn't expect special leniency from their boss, especially if the boss is a Christian. Being a Christian makes us more responsible, not less.

For ancient slaves and for modern Christian workers, there is no guarantee on earth of fairness of treatment from those whom they work for. Sometimes partiality means that bad workers are unfairly rewarded and good employees are penalized or left unrewarded. While those occasions are hurtful and demeaning, they're not a green light for cranking up the complaint department and fomenting rebellion among the rest of the workforce. Here, Paul assures both our ancient brethren and us that there is a final rewarding and punishment, and with it there will be no partiality.

But, in that day, slaves were not accustomed to expect favor or partiality so why did they need to be warned that God shows no partiality. Wouldn't they benefit more from some encouragement rather than a warning? The purpose for this warning to slaves might best be explained by Paul's recent business involving Onesimus. The pronouncement makes it clear that becoming a Christian doesn't nullify past wrongs against others; the wrongs must be paid back. In Onesimus' case, Paul assumes the obligations owed to his master (**Phil 18**). With these instructions, Paul may be trying to get out ahead of any further unrest among other slaves who may misinterpret the leniency that could be shown to Onesimus. If Philemon agrees with and follows Paul's request, the perception may be that running away brings a reward. With this warning, Paul dissuades any slave from trying to take advantage of a Christian master's gracious forbearance and willingness to forgive.

4:1- In the context of ancient slavery laws, the command to masters is shocking! Paul demands that slaves be treated with what is just and fair. Other humanitarians of the day urged slave owners to be good masters and moderate their punishments. Of course, the hard work and dedication of a Christian slave should avert punishment but Paul specifically puts limits on the master's dominance over his slaves. Aristotle has said that it was pointless to talk about justice in the master/slave relationship because there can be no injustice relating to one's own property. Everyone took for granted that justice had nothing to do with how one treats their own belongings.

Paul's statement is a bold stand in support of the rights slaves, who had no legal rights. He says that they are to be afforded justice and fairness. Meaning, masters are not free to set their own standards on how to treat their slaves; rather, it must line up with what God would consider as just and fair. The word fair is related to equality and suggests even-handed, impartial

treatment. This is even more powerful than a command for masters to be kind or pleasant to slaves. You can be kind or pleasant to animals or pets, but you can only be just and fair to fellow human beings. Paul commands masters to make a recognition that would ultimately undermine the very foundations of slavery. Without making an overt protest against slavery, Paul seems to understand that if he could establish the point that slaves were equals in the body of Christ, full human beings with both responsibilities and rights, then in time the whole structure of slavery in the Roman Empire would crumble.

Sure, the gospel didn't immediately destroy the institution of slavery, but it did gradually change the dynamic of the slave/master relationship. Social standards and pressures disagreed with Christian ideals but the Christian master was to practice those ideals just the same. He was to treat his slave like a person; like a brother in Christ. He was not to mistreat him; he was to deal with his slave justly and fairly. After all, the Christian slave was a free man in the Lord and the master was a slave to Christ. In the same way, our social and physical relationships must always be governed by our spiritual relationships.

To sum up, in these household rules, Paul's not setting out his vision of an ideal Christian household. Instead, he showing how all Christians, regardless of their social status, may offer their lives as an act of worship and service to God. Each person addressed could carry out the duties that Paul outlines, whether or not other members of the household were Christians. This drives Paul's main point to the Colossians - that the service and worship of God are not to be found in the spiritual spheres where angels dwell, nor are they gained through religious rules and discipline, but are found in the ordinary life that Christians face day-by-day.

At the same time, there's also a radical emphasis on the use of power. Those who are powerless (wives, children, slaves) can make their very powerlessness an offering to God. Those who have power must not abuse it. The power of slaves was limited and mainly found in an ability to cheat their masters. That power should not be used because a power that exists only in dishonesty is at odds with the new life to which Christians have been called.

The powerless, by seeing their work as God's work, find a new dignity that

has nothing to do with social status but everything to do with an awareness of their own worth as beloved children of God. They are thus treated as responsible persons, answerable to God for their actions and with the personal worth that such a responsibility gives. For this reason they are addressed first, wives before husbands, children before fathers, slaves before masters.

Others, though, have real power to affect the lives of others for good or ill. Husbands, fathers and slave owners had it in their grasp to destroy lives. They also had the ability to offer encouragement, protection, justice and support through love. For a Christian, the true use of power lies in doing just that. Thus power, of whatever kind, brings with it a corresponding degree of responsibility to God, and God will demand an answer for how it has been used. In fact, where power is used to build up, it is to some degree been transferred. The job of the powerful is ultimately empowered the powerless.

