

Our text this evening is one of those passages of Scripture that would not likely be preached on except as part of a series of sermons in which the preacher is working his way through a book like Colossians where it is there and you have to deal with it. Paul is telling slaves to obey their masters and masters to teach their slaves justly and fairly. That is a subject that does not seem to be relevant to us in our situation since we are neither slaves nor slave owners. But the instructions that Paul gives to slaves are relevant to us in our work and in the way we deal with our employees if we have employees. And we will consider them in that light. Clearly the relationship between slaves and their masters is significantly different than the relationship between employees and their employers. And yet what Paul says to slaves and masters here is consistent with what the Bible about work in general and so this passage and others like it have traditionally been applied to how we all are supposed to do our work and how bosses are to treat those who are under their authority.

But before we get to that, we think about the issue of how the Bible deals with slavery. Paul here mentions slavery, but he does not condemn it outright. And that is the same for the Bible in general. It does not explicitly condemn slavery. There are a few passages in the OT laws that forbid kidnaping people to make them slaves, but the institution of slavery as a whole is never explicitly condemned. The Bible does not explicitly say that slavery is wrong in principle. It accepts it as a reality and requires that slaves be treated well. But slave owners are not explicitly required to free their slaves. And no where do we read that certain kinds of slavery are just plain wrong.

There were many different kinds of slaves in the society in which Paul and the Colossians lived. The ESV here translates the Greek word for slave as bondservants, but the word in the Greek refers to more than just bondservants. A bond servant was a person who sold himself or herself into slavery usually because of a debt that they could not pay. This was an arrangement that people entered into freely and it was temporary lasting only until the debt had been paid. That kind of slavery was not fundamentally wrong. It was a way for people in desperate circumstances to work their way towards better circumstances.

But there were other slaves who were the property of their masters. People were taken as slaves in war and they were bought and sold as property. Some of those slaves lived in relatively good conditions and some of them lived in awful conditions. As Paul does here, the Bible does tell slave owners to treat their slaves justly and fairly but that was not understood to mean that slave owners were required to give their slaves their freedom. In what follows I will use the term "slave" in the sense of a person who is someone else's property.

Today it is pretty much universally accepted by Christians that the kind of slavery where slaves are considered property is wrong and sinful on the basis of biblical principles. It took a very long time for the church to reach something close to unanimity on that subject. At the time of the civil war in the USA in the 1860s there were still many Christians who believed that the Bible condoned slavery and that conviction only gradually died out in the years that followed. There are very few Christians today who would argue that the Bible approves of slavery. And there are important Biblical reasons to say that slavery is wrong and sinful even if the Bible does

not say that explicitly. There is the fact that all human beings are created in the image of God. That implies that people should never be treated as property. There is the fact that Paul here tells masters to treat their slaves justly and fairly. It took an awful long time, but eventually most of the church came to understand that unless it was some kind of voluntary arrangement, to treat a slave justly and fairly is to give him his freedom.

Why does the Bible not outright condemn slavery when it seems so obvious to us today that slavery is wrong on biblical grounds? The reason seems to be that that idea would not have crossed anyone's mind in ancient society. Slavery was a huge and accepted institution in that world. Vast numbers of people were slaves of various kinds. Slavery was part of the economic structure of the time and it was so common and so normal that no one would even have thought to question its existence.

The fact is that the biblical authors teach that slaves should be treated fairly and justly, but like Paul here they do not draw the conclusion that slavery itself was wrong. The fact is that we today are sure that slavery is wrong on the basis of biblical principles, but it took of the church 1800 plus years to come to clarity on that matter and the Bible does not address it explicitly. So this is how we understand the biblical teaching about slavery. God in his wisdom did not see fit to directly condemn slavery in the ancient world. He did teach the principles about justice and the dignity of human beings that would eventually lead the church to see that slavery is wrong. We can speculate on the reasons for that, but over all we can say that it is part of God's practice of revealing truth progressively and part of that has to do with the church gradually growing to a deeper understanding of the implications and applications of what God has laid out for us in his word.

But we have to be very, very careful with this way of thinking – that is with drawing implications from biblical principles that go beyond the explicit teaching of Scripture. It must be done and it is legitimate to do, but it can also be done in such a way as to try to get around aspects of scriptural teaching that society finds offensive.

One of the arguments that people use to set aside the biblical teaching on male headship in the home and in the church and the sinfulness of homosexuality is to claim that we must treat those issues the same way that we treat the issue of slavery. So they will say that if you work out the implications of the biblical teaching about the equality of man and women you will eventually come to the conclusion that male headship is a denial of that. And if you work out the implication of the biblical teaching that God made each of us special and unique you will eventually come to the conclusion that homosexuality is just an expression of how God made certain people.

The method of dealing with these kinds of issues then is to take biblical principles and to work out their implications in ways that the biblical authors themselves did not work them out. And those who espouse this kind of biblical interpretation claim that if you do this for slavery you must also do it for male headship and homosexuality. But what that kind of interpretation does is get around the authority of Scripture.

There is a great and fundamental difference between the issue of slavery and how the Bible treats it and the issues of male headship and homosexuality and how they are treated in the Bible. God has chosen not to be explicit about the sinfulness of slavery. God does not speak to that matter directly. When we draw the conclusion that slavery is wrong, we are not going against any explicit teaching of Scripture. We are simply coming to a deeper understanding of the implication of the relevant biblical principles.

But when interpreters deny male headship in home and church and when they deny the sinfulness of homosexuality they are going against the explicit teaching of Scripture. Colossians 3:18 tells wives to submit to their husbands. That teaching is in harmony with profound biblical principles that are rooted in the creation story and run through the rest of Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 it is explicitly taught that “men who practice homosexuality” “will not inherit the kingdom of God and that teaching is consistent with the rest of the biblical teaching on sexuality and marriage. So when interpreters say that we must deal with male headship and homosexuality in the same way that we deal with slavery, they are using that approach to deny the clear teaching of Scripture on male headship and homosexuality.

I mention this to make you aware of how some interpreters manage to deny some of the biblical teaching that is particularly offensive in our time. With the issue of slavery it is a legitimate move to say that slavery is wrong on the basis of biblical principles even though the Bible does not explicitly condemn it. But it is not a legitimate move to say that male headship is inconsistent with biblical principles or that homosexuality is acceptable because the implications of biblical principles, because the Bible explicitly teaches these things. The way that that Bible deals with slavery is unusual but in the end it is clear from the Bible that slavery is wrong. But it is a denial of biblical authority to take something that the Bible explicitly affirms like male headship in home and church and say that that no longer applies because we understand biblical principles more profoundly today. And it is a denial of biblical authority to say that homosexuality is not a sin because we today have a better understanding of the implications of certain biblical principles.

That then on the whole matter of slavery in the Bible. From our perspective in the 21 century, we are surprised that the Bible does not explicitly condemn slavery, but from the perspective of the 1st century drawing that conclusion was something that would not have crossed their minds and God did not include that truth in his revelation to the biblical authors.

So let’s now consider how what Paul says in these verses applies to us. As I said before, we are not slaves and bosses are not slave owners, but the instructions that Paul gives to slaves and masters are relevant to us when we make adjustments for our different social situation and they are consistent with the general biblical teaching on how we are to think about our work and how people in authority ought to treat those who are subject to their authority.

So verse 22 says, “Bond servants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-serve, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, hearing the Lord.” Verse 23 “Whatever you do, work

heartily, as for the Lord and not for men....” We have to make an adjustment when we think of the clause, “obey in everything those who are your earthly masters.” That instruction would mean something different for a slave than for an employee. For a slave obeying everything would mean obeying everything appropriate given the nature of their relationship. It would mean obeying everything except when told to do something that God forbids. For an employee “obeying everything” must be understood in the light of the agreement between employer and the employee.

So employees are to obey the legitimate authority of their employers. The relationship between worker and boss is a voluntary one, but once it is entered into the boss has authority within that relationship. And employees are to respect the legitimate authority of their employers.

So we are to respect the authority of our boss as long as we are in that relationship. The phrase “in everything” means “every legitimate thing” if we make the adjustment to a non-slave situation. If you do not like what the employer is telling you to, you can always quit if it is serious enough, but in the light of this verse, it is clear that employees generally should do what they are told to do. They should respect the authority of their bosses. Sometimes employees are given tasks that they would prefer not to do, but if they are legitimate requests in light of the job description the employee must comply. In general we can say that this requirement is about submission to legitimate authority. The requirement “in everything” requires that we cooperate with them and do what we are told to do. Of course, in a employee/employer relationship if you fail to do what you’re told to do you might get fired. But that’s not the way it should go with Christians. We should obey in every legitimate thing and if that is unacceptable for some reason, then we can follow the accepted process for quitting.

The next part of the sentence teaches that workers should work hard even when they are not being watched. Paul tells slaves here that they must obey “not by way of eye-service, as people pleasers, but with sincerity of heart.” What he means here is clear. We know what he is talking about. The boss or the foreman is watching and everyone is working as they should. The boss or the foreman is not watching and the work slows down.

Paul mentions this because it happens. Probably most of us have witnessed it or perhaps have been guilty of slacking off when the boss is not watching. Paul is saying that that is not how Christian slaves are to conduct themselves. And that clearly applies to any work situation where there are workers who are being managed by someone in authority over them. We should be consistently putting in proper effort whether we are being watched or not. Bosses should be able to trust Christian workers to work diligently whether they are there or not. Our motivation should not be just to keep the boss happy, but to give him the kind of effort that he has a right to expect. Our motivation to work diligently is to come from within so that it makes no difference whether the boss is watching or not.

The next part of the sentence focuses on what our motivation should be for working diligently. “Not by way of eye-service, as people pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.” And then verse 23, “Whatever

you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men....” That is the heart of the matter. Our primary motivation in our work is to please our heavenly Master. There is nothing wrong of course with wanting to please our earthly bosses, but even more important than that is the motivation to please the Lord.

What this means is that our work is service to God. It means that working is something that God requires of us and he cares about how we work, how much effort we put into it, how diligent we are, how much we care about the quality of what we do. This principle gives our work great meaning. It means that our work is not simply something that has meaning on an earthly physical level. It belongs to our relationship with God. Our relationship with God is primary and our relationship with men is secondary. “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men”

Our everyday work is an important part of what God requires of us. God instituted work before sin entered the world when Adam and Eve sinned. At the very beginning God told Adam and Eve to have dominion over the earth and to subdue it and to keep and cultivate the garden. So work belongs to God’s purpose for us as creatures made in his image. We were created to work. And before the fall work would have been perfectly satisfying. It would have been perfectly enjoyable. It was an important part of how God designed mankind to serve and glorify him.

After sin entered into the world, work became less enjoyable although the joy and satisfaction was not completely gone. But after the fall God cursed the ground so that work became much more difficult. Thorns and thistles grow and that represents the frustrations and drudgery that are part of every kind of work. We can still enjoy our work but all work has its hard parts – things do not always go the way we want them to – we get tired and unmotivated – work often involves sticking to it when it is not fun and we would rather stop.

But when we are saved, we begin to think of our work in the light of God’s original intention of us serving him through our earthly work. And this passage reflects that. Paul is speaking to saved people here. People who are forgiven in Christ, embraced as his beloved children, and in whom the Holy Spirit is at work renewing them in the image of Christ. So Paul is addressing people here who love God and see the rightness and blessedness of serving him. They are those who are trying to keep God’s commands because they love those commands and they are not burdensome. One of their great joys is thinking of God being pleased with them and their lives as they live them trusting in Jesus.

This is the context that Paul here tells Christian workers to “work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” “Working heartily” – what an expressive term. It speaks of enthusiasm. It speaks of joyful diligence. It speaks of an inner motivation that looks at work positively – because of what it means in God’s world. Work is service to God. Work is a form of worship in that it is offered to God. It does not matter if it is for money or in the home or in school – work is a huge part of the way that we seek to please God. That gives work profound significance. It is a powerful motivation. As we grow in our Christian life, we grow in our desire to please God

and it is a wonderful thing that our everyday work is a large part of how we can serve and please God. So God cares about how we work and that gives us great motivation to do it to be best of our ability.

Paul also speaks of the inheritance as a reward. The term inheritance ultimately refers to life in the new creation. We receive it by grace through faith and yet the bible also speaks of it as a reward. How we work matters not only in this life but also for the life to come. Working heartily as for the Lord belongs to the way that we lay up for ourselves treasure in heaven. Somehow, there will be rewards in glory for those who have worked diligently as for the Lord in this life. Paul makes it clear that to work heartily is a way of serving the Lord Christ.

Paul also includes a warning in these verses. Verse 25, “For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.” This is the opposite of reward. If working heartily as to the Lord leads to reward, failure to do so leads to punishment. God is gracious and salvation leads to obedience and service, but the Bible also warns against disobedience and refusing to serve the Lord. In this context the focus is on work. In Paul’s time for a slave to refuse to work heartily as for the Lord was an expression of disobedience not only to man but to God. And surely that principle applies to us as well. While we continue to struggle with our sinful natures, if we are truly saved, it will affect our every day work and if it does not – if we are not working heartily to the Lord in our work, we had better pay attention to Paul’s warning here. “For the wrong doer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.”

Finally Paul addresses Masters. Chapter 4:1, “Masters, treat your bond servants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.” We have a number of employers in our congregation. We have a number who have authority over others in the work place. This instruction is pretty straight-forward. Treat those under your authority justly and fairly. In the ancient world there were slave owners who did treat their slaves well and there were those who treated their slaves poorly. In our contemporary world, there are employers who treat their employees well and there are those who treat their employees poorly. Paul is making it clear what he expects of Christian employers. They need to remember that they also have a Master in heaven. And to act accordingly. But as everything else in the Christian life, doing the will of God is the way of blessing.

So while this passage is about slaves and their masters, it is actually very relevant for us today. It instructs us about the meaning of work and in so doing helps us to see our everyday work are part of the way that we serve the Lord. And that is very encouraging. Work has its drudgery and its challenges. We live in a fallen world and even as saved people who have the Spirit we still have sinful natures. And so we are not immune from bad attitudes about our work. We are not beyond being people pleasers. We do not always do our work heartily as for the Lord and not for men.

But if we are trusting in Jesus and following him we are forgiven and God is at work in us and it is from that place that we tackle the challenges that come with our work. No doubt we have experienced something of the blessedness of working heartily as for the Lord. Our God is good and his will for us is good. And we can

experience a great deal of satisfaction in serving the Lord through our work. It is not always pleasant. There are always challenges. But this call to work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men is a powerful motivation for us to give our best and persist through the hard parts and the drudgery because it is not pointless. It is not meaningless. Working as to the Lord can help us to do the best we can at our jobs even in the hard parts. And there are many good parts as well – the satisfaction of a job well done – the rest that comes after the work is done – and favor and approval from God who accepts our efforts in and through Christ so that the offering of our work to God is cleansed and purified through the righteousness of Christ.

Life without work would be pretty dull. We are created to be productive. And we can experience much satisfaction and joy when we do our work as an offering to God.