

## “Work, Slavery, and Power Dynamics” June 4, 2023

Scripture Reading:

**Colossians 3:22-25, 4:1**

22 Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. 4:1 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

As you know, we are studying straight through the book of Colossians. And along with the teaching on Sundays, we are providing all sorts of additional study resources so that the whole package is a deep dive into this book of the Bible.

I think our passage today merits such a deep dive because it contains both some interpretive challenges as well as some difficulty in knowing exactly how to apply it to our lives. It is a passage that, bare minimum, brings up some legitimate questions and unfortunately has been, at times, grossly mishandled and misused in history.

At the end of the day, this passage deals with the question, “How should Christians deal with power dynamics in society?” and its specific application for dealing with that question is in regards to work and labor...

So what I want to do with our time today is give us some big picture framework and Biblical context for how to interpret this passage faithfully, and then we'll land on how we might take the principles of this passage and apply them to our modern lives in our cultural context.

One of the most important keys to interpreting all of Scripture, and particularly confusing or difficult passages of Scripture, is to make sure your interpretation is consistent with the rest of the Bible. So let me bring your attention to some relevant selections of Scripture about power dynamics in general, and then we'll narrow in on work and servitude.

### **Big idea #1: God despises oppression and injustice.**

**Leviticus 19:13** - “You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him.”

That word oppress means to exploit, take advantage of, to violate, mistreat. It is to have the ability, the power, to cause someone else to lose so that you gain...and then act upon it. It can happen overtly through force - think tyrannical dictators or abusive husbands, and it can also happen through deceit and trickery - think con artists and swindlers. But it always involves someone taking advantage of the weak, wronging those who can't do anything about it, for the oppressor's benefit.

God says, “Not my people. That's not how we behave. Your neighbor is made in My image, just like you. They have the same inherent value and worth that you do as an image bearer. Therefore you must not advantage yourself by disadvantaging them.” And God takes it a step further:

**Isaiah 1:16-17** - 16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression...

Ok, so in Isaiah, it's a step further. We don't just avoid oppression ourselves. God's people are called to correct it when we see it. We are to be agents of righteousness, participating in the Kingdom of God on the earth, aligning ourselves with the ways that heaven and earth are overlapping in Christ.

And He brings really strong warnings on this.

**Proverbs 22:22-23** - <sup>22</sup> Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, <sup>23</sup> for the LORD will take up their case and will exact life for life.

The picture here is you think you can get away with it. Because you are rich and powerful, you think you can even twist the court system designed to uphold justice and use it to crush the needy. You think you can pick on the little guy and no one will notice. What you don't realize is God Himself is going to go full-on Erin Brockovich, pick up their case, and demand justice from you.

**Micah 2:1-3** - 1 Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand. 2 They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance. 3 Therefore thus says the Lord: behold, against this family I am devising disaster, from which you cannot remove your necks...

As far as threats from God go, that's a pretty aggressive one. If you use your power to take advantage of people and take what is not yours, God says, "Against your family, I am devising disaster from which you cannot remove your neck."

And the last threat warning from God on this gets specific to our context of work and slavery:

**Exodus 21:16** - "Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death."

So God tells his people, the nation of Israel, if a person is kidnapped and sold...which is the system of chattel slavery that existed here in America...that person responsible should be put to death. And I don't know how much more strongly God could condemn it. Whether someone who stole them or someone found in possession of a kidnapped and sold person gets the death penalty. Which is, of course, the maximum punishment. You can't give a greater consequence or deterrent than that. God says, "That's how the world around you operates. But not us. Not my people. And if you disobey this one, you die. That's how wicked it is."

--> Ok, well, how does that work? Because in our passage in Colossians, Paul doesn't come with near as much force. He doesn't say, "Masters, God will kill you if you don't stop it immediately."

### **Big Idea #2: The American system of chattel slavery is different from many historical systems of slavery/indentured servitude.**

You may be surprised, and you may not, to hear that this passage of Scripture in Colossians is one that was used, at times, to justify the slave trade that existed in the West a few hundred years ago. Ignoring very specific and very clear passages like the one in Exodus 21 we just read, enslavers used passages like this one as an appeal that the Bible condoned what they were doing.

It's not completely surprising because these are many of the questions that come up for us when we read words like "masters" or "servant" in this passage. We can't help but picture the system that existed here. It's our frame of reference, and it's hard to even imagine any other system. So let me give you a biblical example of another system.

What existed here is in stark contrast to the example that we see in the book of Daniel. Where Daniel is technically a slave. But he accrues large amounts of personal wealth, and rises to the number two in command of the entire nation. It isn't a system at all based upon race. And far from Daniel being thought

of as lesser-than eventually, he held more power and influence and prestige than everyone in the entire civilization, other than the king.

As with all sorts of things in history that are from this long ago, there is some meaningful debate as to the particulars of the system of slavery that existed in first-century Rome at the time of this writing. Which, of course, is the system that Paul speaks into.

Here are some things that we do know.

-It was not a system based on race or ethnicity. In fact, from appearance alone, there was no way to determine whether or not someone was a bondservant.

-Slaves were often prisoners of war or those heavily indebted, and sometimes they were able to accrue personal wealth through their service.

-Most often, they were able to earn their freedom. In fact, there was a formal manumission process that was performed by a magistrate that gave servants full Roman citizenship.

The translation oversight committee for the ESV Bible, which we teach from, says:

“In New Testament times, a *doulos* is often best described as a “bondservant”—that is, someone in the Roman Empire officially bound under contract to serve his master for seven years (except for those in Caesar’s household in Rome who were contracted for fourteen years). When the contract expired, the person was freed, given his wage that had been saved by the master, and officially declared a freedman.”

And this leads us to Big Idea #3, which is crucial for your understanding of this passage, but it’s a tough idea for us to wrap our heads around.

**Big Idea #3: There is a difference between systems that are potentially oppressive and systems that are necessarily oppressive.**

The slave trade that we know of that happened in the West was necessarily oppressive. It was based on the idea that certain ethnicities were more or less human than others. It was based on kidnapping and selling human persons as though the infinite value of a human life could be reduced to a monetary amount. It did not allow the enslaved to accrue wealth from their labors, nor were they paying off a debt through their labors. It was a system that necessarily violated specific biblical commands.

However, throughout history, there have been other versions of slavery and indentured servitude that were not necessarily oppressive but only potentially oppressive. Think back to the example of Daniel in the Babylonian empire. The Babylonian king, whom Daniel served, had the power to oppress Daniel. To take advantage of him, mistreat him, and there was little that Daniel could have done about it. It is a potentially problematic power dynamic. But that isn’t what happened with Daniel. He was not oppressed. He was able to rise to a position of great wealth and power in the kingdom.

So Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, writing to the church in Colossae and knowing the particular system of servitude they operated around, does not see their particular system of servitude as necessarily oppressive. He sees it as potentially oppressive.

And, of course, because of their position, servants in Ancient Rome were often mistreated horribly. So Paul addresses that potential mistreatment. The context he was speaking into was one where one person had the power over another person, and the fact that this brings with it some potential for serious problems.

There is potential for one person to mistreat the other and for the other to have no recourse. Nowhere to turn, no way to right the wrong. One person could potentially take advantage of the other. And Paul gives a short set of instructions, but upon examination, they are profoundly helpful and insightful and protective.

Here is the point I want to make. The Spirit of God that inspired the writing of these verses is the same Spirit of God that inspired the writing of Paul's letter to the Colossians. We should not expect contradiction, especially when something about the heart of God is laid out as clearly as his hatred of oppression.

Along with that, the writer of the book of Colossians, the apostle Paul, grew up in a devout Jewish family. In traditional Jewish education, students by the age of 6 would attend synagogue schools. By around 10 years of age, they would have learned and memorized the first 5 books of the Bible, called the Torah; which included Leviticus 19, which we read a second ago, that says, "Do not oppress your neighbor," and Exodus 21, that says anyone who steals a person should be put to death.

He studied in the Jerusalem school of Rabbi Gamaliel, one of the leading Jewish thinkers of his time. Which means he would have been intimately familiar with all of these passages we've just read. Paul knew his call was to not only avoid oppression but to correct it when possible. He knew the call on God's people was to be active participants in the pursuit of justice. So he would never directly contradict that with anything he wrote to God's people.

So we know he isn't saying to ignore the Old Testament and God's hatred of injustice and oppression. I know I've been writing you this whole letter about living in contrast to your surrounding community, but when it comes to work, forget it. Just do what the people around you do. It's good enough.

If you want more on this particular issue regarding the Bible and slavery, we've got resources available for you.

It's a passage about power dynamics. One person has a good deal of power over another person. There is potential for one person to mistreat the other and for the other to have no recourse. Nowhere to turn, no way to right the wrong. One person could potentially take advantage of the other. And Paul gives a short set of instructions, but upon examination, they are profoundly helpful and insightful and protective.

He speaks to those in authority, and he speaks to those under authority.

I'd like to flip it and talk about the **person with power first**.

4:1 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Jesus's power is ultimate. His authority is ultimate. No person is ultimately in charge. And all human persons with power will one day give account to him for how they handled the power they were given.

So, parents—you have a great deal of power over your children. You greatly determine the happenings in their day-to-day lives. There is potential for a parent to treat their children very poorly, and the children have very little they can do about it. They have very little recourse.

Bosses and supervisors, you have power over your employees. You are in a position of authority, where your job is to give them instructions as to what they should do. You require certain things of them, and their payment, and therefore livelihood, is determined by their execution of those things. That is a lot of power to hold over another person. There is a great deal of pressure on that other person to do as they are told and not rock the boat and not cause problems or question the norms around them so that they can be sure to remain employed.

So this passage gives a very direct confrontation to those who would abuse the power that they have. Paul says anyone who possesses authority possesses a delegated authority. That anyone with power is to use that power to serve the individuals and the whole group that they are over. They are to treat people justly and fairly. They are to work for the health and holiness of both the individual and the whole group. And this is not an easy assignment.

Sometimes the person you have power over does not perceive that what you are doing is in the best interest of themselves or the overall group. Tough love is sometimes necessary but rarely received favorably by the beloved. I have yet to be giving one of my children a consequence, and they say to me, “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

So authority, or power, is not ultimate—it can’t be wielded by whoever is in charge unthinkingly or selfishly.

But it’s also not necessarily exploitative.

We live in a time where many people think, or at least have a sense that, all power is necessarily corrosive and exploitative. And therefore, must necessarily be disbursed as widely and broadly as possible. But the view that authority is almost by nature evil is not a view shared by God in Scripture nor by the vast majority of human history. We’ll get to those under authority in a minute, but one thing we need to hear is that authority isn’t necessarily something to rail against.

And what people in positions of power and authority need to hear is that your authority is not ultimate. You cannot just do what you want. Because you are under the authority of God, and He will hold you accountable. You never get to call the shots to serve yourself. And you shouldn’t want to because you have a higher calling.

And, you should be aware that power creates a permissive environment around you. The people around you are increasingly incentivized to go along with whatever you want because it benefits them.

In an unhealthy family, the dynamic can become, “We’ve just got to do whatever it takes to keep Dad happy. Or to keep Mom happy. What they want is not rational or reasonable or in the best interest of our family, but if we contradict them, then things will get worse for us, and we will have to deal with their wrath, so it’s not worth it. Just go along with it.”

I know of marriages and families where the operating principle is, “We do not go against Mom’s wishes. Or, we do not go against Dad’s wishes. Because if we do, they will make us all pay, and it’s not worth it.”

I know of workplaces and organizations where everyone under authority operates under the guiding principle of not contradicting those in charge. Even if things are happening that are not healthy and righteous and in the ultimate best interest of the organization.

So for all of us, in whatever positions of authority God has placed us in, with whatever power we possess in relationship to other persons...whether that be a classroom that we are in charge of, a family, a direct report or two, a LifeGroup, an entire business...a great question to ask occasionally to those around you is, “Is there anything about how I operate or how we operate as a group that you don’t bring up with me because of fear of how I will react?” Is there anything that people don’t tell me? Is there anything you are permissive about because of fear of recrimination?”

Because your authority is only delegated. It isn’t ultimate. And you are accountable to God for how you use the power he has given to you.

And that's not an easy assignment. Leadership is rarely having to decide between a good solution and a bad solution. That's easy and doesn't actually require leadership. That rarely happens. More often, you are deciding between a good solution and another good solution. Or a bad solution and another bad solution. And you have to pick your problems. Which is all the more reason you need honest feedback from those you are leading. You can't afford to have glaring blindspots hindering you. Leading is hard enough as it is. We need all the help we can get. And we who are bosses, parents, pastors, and leaders, need to know deep in our bones that the authority given to us isn't ultimately ours. It's delegated to us. God has entrusted the people he's given to your leadership. They are God's people; they are loved by Him. And the call of this text is to rightfully and humbly understand your position.

Not only is all authority ultimately Jesus', and we'll be held accountable by him for how we used ours... but he actually shows us what a godly use of that power is... to serve others... He used his power to save, to heal, to transform, to help... and as we consider the variety of roles in which we have power... these ought to be the things that mark our authority and leadership, too.

It'd be another great question to ask... do I see my authority, my leadership, also as an avenue to serve others and bless the world?

Now I'd like us to flip the coin and talk about the responsibilities of those under authority.

22 Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

We live in a time where many people believe that a person in power requiring something of someone else, that the other person does not want to do, is an abuse of power. This passage also confronts that idea. Paul is talking to people who categorically have a more difficult present situation than any of us who are employed in America in 2023, and he says that you can, with sincerity of heart, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men. You can go to work with a frustrating, sinful boss who asks you to do things that you do not enjoy... and you can put love into your work because you consider that you are working for Jesus, not for your boss.

It is not wrong for someone in authority over you to require you to do something that you don't want to do. That is not controlling or abusive. They are not abusing their authority or creating a toxic environment by requiring you to do something that you do not want to do. And in fact, you can put love into the work required of you that you do not want to do. Not just can, but are commanded by God to do so.

There is no such thing as uncursed work. Even if you have a job you love, there will be parts of it that you do not love. Some aspects of it are going to feel like work, and that's ok.

If you are under authority, it is also not wrong or abusive for someone to make a decision that is different than the one you would have made in their position. It is not demeaning or a personal offense if someone does not take your input or advice. It doesn't necessarily mean they didn't hear you; it might just mean they disagreed with you. And it is not an attack or a sign of moral flaw if someone disagrees with you.

If someone is intimidating just because of their personality or position, that's not necessarily sinful or wrong. They can certainly act in sinful ways that result in intimidation, but the fact that you are intimidated by them does not make them wrong by default. Someone's personality type doesn't automatically make them more of a sinner than you.

And yes, I am being somewhat self-serving by saying that one. Because all of us enneagram 8's are tired of it. It's not our fault we're self-confident and you aren't!

Listen, think about it like this. Your boss has every single right to ask you to do things that you don't want to do. And... You have every right to say, "I am willing to add that into my job description. Now what is the pay raise commensurate with this increase of responsibility?" And that's why you need enneagram 8's in your life!

Let me finish here and just quickly expose a couple of encouragements that Paul gives for our work. A couple of things here that can serve as motivation and change of mind for how we approach our daily work.

First, Paul says that in Christ, we have a better reward than work could ever give us.

**Better reward**

Vs. 24 -...knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

Think about the hope this promise would have held for some of these bondservants Paul was writing to. Some of these servants may have had a terrible master. Not just. Not fair. Some of these people through history would have deceitful masters who kept tricking them and increasing their debt, and they would never get the freedom or rewards they were promised at all.

Paul's encouragement to them is, regardless of the earthly rewards they receive. The praise, the money, the raises, the accolades...no matter what, they have a better reward coming. They will inherit the new heavens and the new earth. That though their temporary rewards might be lacking, their eternal reward will be to live forever with Christ himself. Paul's reminder here is no, your worth is set at the cost of royal blood when Jesus died for you on the cross. And not only has He died in your place, He's also secured for you an inheritance in God's family forever.

And that promise helps you look to your boss or your job and serve with your whole heart.

And then Paul says we have a better purpose in our work...

**Better purpose** - working for Jesus.

Vs. 23 "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men," and then in vs. 24 "You are serving the Lord Christ."

There are a lot of popular quips in our culture, like, "Find a job you love, and you will never have to work another day of your life." What the person who made that up didn't realize is how hard dream jobs are to come by, and that even still, they are jobs.

But Paul says we can work as if for Christ himself.

And if that's true, the good news, the empowering part, is that no labor is undignified in God's economy. If you are scrubbing floors, you are doing so for Jesus himself. Think of how dignifying and empowering and ennobling that is for someone who otherwise would see their daily labor as meaningless and degrading and lesser than and unimportant. There is nothing you do for God that is unimportant, and your daily labors, whatever they are, are for God himself.

You've got to let this sink down into your bones. All the way down to your soul. Hey plumber, you unclogged that pipe? God himself says, "I'm proud of you. You made life better for someone I love and deeply care about."

I spent way too much time at my kids' school this past 2 weeks...we had end-of-the-year parties, and elementary school graduation ceremonies, and preschool graduation ceremonies. Literally, I was at my kids' school for something on Monday, Thursday, and Friday of last week, and then Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday this week. And Monday was Memorial Day. So 7 out of 9 school days. It was out of control. I think they were making up for Covid last time. We didn't get to go to the school for anything for 2 1/2 years, so to make up for it, they just invited us to all live there. And, of course, we're there thanking the teachers and the administrators. I know a lot of you work in schools. So I'll just tell you, as a dad, those teachers and administrators at my kids' school...I care deeply about every single word and interaction you've ever had with my child. My babies are some of the most important people in the world to me. I care about everything that happens to them. Did you encourage them? Did you correct them? Did you discipline them? Did you teach them? Did you help them? Did you look out for them? I want every person who comes into contact with them to help them, serve them, and build them. Because those are my babies, and they are precious to me. My kids are 5, 8, and 10, and I call them my babies, and all three of them are like, "I'm not a baby." And I always say, "You will always be my baby, no matter how old you are."

You've gotta see God as a heavenly father, who, in his infiniteness, is capable of loving and caring about every single person on the planet even more than I care about my kids or you care about your kids. So when you go to work, whatever your job is, you are helping God's people. People he would do anything for, people he has done everything for.

So if you're a CPA doing people's taxes, you'd better do it like you realize you are serving one of God's kids. Do not take shortcuts. If you do my kids' taxes one day, you'd better get it right. You'd better look out for them. Treat them fairly and do a good job. I receive it as love when people look out for my kids. And Jesus says the two most important commands we should obey are to love God and to love people. And your work, your labor, is one of the ways you can love people. So work with all your heart. You are serving God's babies.

You can put love into your work without necessarily loving your work. Your labor need not be your identity. That's found in Christ and not your career or productivity or success. But your labor also need not be drudgery. You can work with your whole heart as you remember that you are ultimately serving God himself by joining Him in his work of creation renewal.