

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Paul's Letter to the Colossians: You serve the Lord Christ - Colossians 3:18-4:1

Elizabeth Fry, who worked so hard to improve conditions in Victorian prisons, once wrote, "Since my heart was touched at seventeen, I believe I have never awakened from sleep, in sickness or in health, by day or by night, without my first waking thought being how best I might serve my Lord." The Apostle Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, reminds his readers that they had "*turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.*" In the first century of Christianity idolatry was widespread. It did not simply mean having a shrine to an idol in the corner of a room in your house or going one day a week to a temple to worship a false god. No, idolatry affected everything: personal life, family life, food, business etc. Every aspect of community life was governed by idolatry. When the Thessalonians believed the Gospel they stopped serving idols and began to serve God. Just as the whole of their lives had been governed by idolatry, now they committed the whole of their lives to God's service. In the words of Romans 12:1, they presented their lives as living sacrifices.

Relationships

In Colossians 3:18-4:1, Paul explains in more detail what it means to serve "*the Lord Christ*" (Colossians 3:24). He does this by teaching us about service within a framework of relationships. The relationships he highlights are:

- Wives and husbands;
- Fathers and children;
- Employees and employers.

When we think about Christian service it is often in relation to some Christian activity such as preaching or teaching, working with young people etc. But Christian service is also carried out in the everyday circumstances and relationships of life. Do we think of our marriages, our responsibilities as parents, our jobs as opportunities to serve the Lord Jesus? This is our challenge this morning.

Wives

The first act of service presented to us is that of wives. I suppose if we had been writing Colossians we might have started with husbands. But Paul, both here and in similar verses in Ephesians 5:22-23, puts the wives first. When it comes to the success and stability of the Christian home the role of the wife is vital. For too long the role of women as wives, mothers and homemakers has been belittled. The struggle for the women's independence became paramount. Now there are signs, both in the USA and Europe, that some people are beginning to realise the importance of the woman's role in the home in terms of stable family life and way this underpins society. Paul's teaching about the role of women has often been criticised. It has even been suggested that it was based upon his dislike of them. However, an intelligent reader of his writings would soon discover the tremendous affection and admiration he had for the many women he knew and had worked with. No, Paul explains in his writings God's pattern for the relationships men and women enjoy and responsibilities they have. The relationship of a wife to her husband is characterised by submission. This statement taken in isolation would seem unfair. But it has to be understood within the context of Christian marriage in which Paul commands the husbands to, "*love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her*" (Ephesians 5:25).

The use of the word "submission" in the Bible is often misinterpreted as weakness and as only applying to women. But when we look more carefully at the Bible teaching about submission we find this is not true. In 1 Peter 5:5 we read, "*Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility.*" In other words, all Christians are to be marked by a willingness to honour one another and always to act with humility. Peter uses the expression "*be clothed with humility*" (1 Peter 5:5). This could be a reference to his experience of the humility of the Lord Jesus in John 13. In John 13:2-17 the Lord Jesus washes the disciples' feet. This was the act of a common household servant, probably a slave. It says in John 13:4 that "*[Jesus] laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself.*" The greatest exponent of submission and humility was the

Lord Jesus. These are the characteristics of the Great Servant. If we want to be effective in our service we have to learn submission to God's word and humility in obeying it.

Husbands

The submission of a wife to her husband is described as "*fitting in the Lord*" (Colossians 3:18). The word "fitting" means "to have come up to". In expressing such submission the wife is demonstrating the character of the Lord Jesus in her marriage. Husbands, on the other hand, are reminded to love their wives. It is remarkable that, in the Bible, wives are only once asked to love their husbands! This occurs in Titus 2:4 and refers to young wives. On the other hand, husbands are reminded to love their wives on several occasions (see Ephesians 5:25, 28; Colossians 3:19). It seems to me that women have a greater ability to demonstrate love whereas men are apt to fail in showing affection. Paul commands husbands to show love to their wives (Colossians 3:19). The background to this teaching is important. Paul lived at a time when women, like slaves, were treated as the property of their husbands. He does not exhort men to demonstrate authority but love. It was common, as today, for men to be angry and even violent towards their wives and not to be held accountable for cruel actions. Paul insists that this is not the behaviour of a Christian who is always to act in love and gentleness towards his wife.

Within marriage there is the service of love. In Galatians 5:13 Paul writes, "*through love serve one another.*" This service of love is seen in a most beautiful way within a Christian marriage. We live in an age where women are still abused within and outside of marriage - an age in which men's actions are too often characterised by violence. The happiness of a true Christian marriage serves to show to the world the love of Christ in the behaviour of the wife and husband.

Children

Today we hear a lot today about civil disobedience and the growing resentment towards authority. More than ever, the disruptiveness of children and the problems of discipline at home and in school are in the news. These are not new problems. Paul was obviously aware of the difficulty of disobedient children in his own day. And it is very interesting that in Colossians 3:20 he speaks directly to children. As with adults, the example he always presents is the Lord Jesus. Jewish children had been brought up with an understanding of the Law. In it they were commanded to, "*Honour your father and your mother, that your days be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you*" (Exodus 20:12). It is striking that Luke reminds us of the childhood of the Lord Jesus. When He was twelve years old we read that, "*He went down with them [that is His parents] and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them*" (Luke 2:51).

Most children get to a stage where they think they know more than their parents. When Jesus was a child He did know more than His parents, but He still obeyed them. It is amazing to think that the very Person who sustains the whole of creation entered not only into that creation but into the very relationships we know as parents and children. The Lord Jesus always valued human relationships and the responsibilities they brought. At the beginning of His life He demonstrated obedience towards His parents (Luke 2:51). At the end of His life, as He died on the cross, He ensured that His mother would be properly cared for by asking John to look after her (John 19:25-27). The Lord Jesus' service included obedience to His earthly parents and responsibility for them. There is little wonder that He is pleased when Christian children follow His example.

Fathers

But there is another side to this story. If children are to be obedient, fathers are not to discourage them (Colossians 3:21). It is once again interesting that Paul did not see mothers as a discouragement to children. In fact, in 2 Timothy 1:5, he remembers the great encouragement Timothy's mother and grandmother were to his young friend and how he had been taught the Scriptures from childhood.

Paul did find it necessary to warn fathers not to discourage their children (Colossians 3:21). The problem highlighted by Paul was the tendency always to find fault with children or perhaps just some of them. The result and it can cause lifelong damage, is that the child feels it can do no right and becomes despondent. There is today the added danger that parents can become so ambitious for their children, even to the extent of trying to fulfil their own ambitions through their children. When children do not meet their parents' expectations, they are criticised and sometimes persecuted for their failures. We have to recognise that our children are individuals.

It is for Christian parents to provide the protection, authority and discipline that they need. We are encouraged "*to bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord*" (Ephesians 6:4). The word for "training" applies to teaching by example and action. This is complemented by admonition which emphasises training by what we say. A Christian parent has to be consistent in word and action and this is the service which fathers, in particular, are encouraged to undertake. An effective father is neither a bully nor a weak willed man who gives way to the will of his children. A

father is a man who serves the Lord by gently leading and keeping his children in the right direction in life. I remember that DL Moody, the remarkable American evangelist, made it a rule to apologise to his children when he got it wrong. Openness and honesty with our children will always enhance their respect for adults. Stubbornness and unfairness will always diminish that respect.

Employees

From Colossians 3:22 Paul addresses employees and employers. Of course, in his day, many employees were slaves. In his letter to his friend Philemon, Paul deals with the matter of a runaway slave called Onesimus (Philemon 8-16). It was very important to the Christian testimony that Christian masters and Christian servants lived out their faith in Christ. One of the great dangers was that Christian masters might continue to treat their servants unjustly and with little respect. The other danger was that Christian servants, who now knew liberty in Christ, might show disrespect towards their masters and bring the Gospel into disrepute. Paul's teaching about these relationships demonstrated how true Christians could be a real witness in the way they fulfilled their responsibilities at work. As most of us spend a good deal of time working for a living, this passage has a lot to say to us today.

Colossians 3:22-23 show us that the true Christian regards everyday work as a service to Christ. Work has always had the same problems. Some people do as little work as possible because they are lazy or do not think they are paid enough. Some work hard only when they are being watched and try to curry favour with their bosses. Some complain endlessly about the conditions of work or are very unhappy about their bosses. Often there are genuine reasons for complaints and such things need to be addressed. But Paul is encouraging Christians to do everything in the light of serving a greater Master - the Lord. We have a Lord in heaven to whom we shall one day give an account of our service. He will not want to hear excuses like "I didn't have a good boss" or "My work wasn't very interesting". He will ask how we served Him in the circumstances He placed us.

I heard recently of a family where the son never did any housework. This used to really annoy his sister. The son started university and after his first year came back home. As soon as the family finished their meal, he began clearing the dishes and then started the washing up. His sister could not believe the change she was seeing. When she asked him about his new behaviour, he told her how he had been taken along to the Christian union at university and had become a Christian. It was not long before the sister took the same step of faith and now the whole family are believers. Why? Because a new Christian had the right attitude to work. Nothing is too menial to be a witness to the Saviour.

Paul encourages the Colossian servants to undertake their service as something which is done for Christ and in a Christlike spirit. If all Christians worked like this, what a difference our testimony would make. The New International Version translates Colossians 3:23, "*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.*" This verse should transform our view of everyday work because not only does it mean we are working for the Lord but that the work itself is valued by the Lord. The Gospels remind us that the Lord Jesus values even a cup of water given to one in need (Matthew 10:40-42, Mark 9:41). This is why Paul goes on to speak in Colossians 3:24 of reward. This is a very touching verse. A slave was not paid for his work. He was owned and had no real possessions because everything belonged to his master. When Paul writes, "*knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance*" (Colossians 3:24), he was not simply thinking of the future. He is saying that the Lord Himself is the present possession of His people. The Christian experience of knowing joy and power in the most adverse circumstances comes from Christ reigning in our hearts and lives now. In the future we shall enter into all the fullness of the life which we really have in Christ.

But Paul also reminds us that wrongdoing, whether by master or slave, will be the subject of God's judgement. This judgement has no regard to status or wealth. God will judge perfectly. This is in stark contrast to the many injustices we witness in the world.

Today we also face other difficulties at work. One is the tremendous pressure and stress which work places upon the individual and the family. It is very important that work does not undermine relationships and family life. This can happen because the demands of work are too great to bear. It can also happen because we become so absorbed in our work that we no longer have time for the vital relationships in our lives. We have to ask ourselves the reasons why these things happen. Have we become covetous? Are we striving too competitively in our work? Are we serving ourselves rather than the Lord and those we love? It is important to sit down especially with our spouses to evaluate the direction our work is taking us. We need to prioritise things in our lives so that the work we do to live, does not become life itself. Many solid marriages have failed because ambition and the pressure of work have become too great. It is equally important that, in serving the Lord, we do not overlook the service He has given us in regard to our families. Albert Einstein was wise when he wrote that we should, "Try not to become a man of success but rather try to become a man of value".

To help us to do this it is sometimes a good thing to sit down and list all the commitments we have. Then look at each one and ask ourselves the question, "Is this something the Lord wants me to do?" (see Acts 9:6).

A few years ago at a young couple's weekend my wife and I organised, a couple were complaining about all the work they had to do. It was obvious everything had become too much for them. We asked them why they did certain things and it became clear they had gradually taken on so much work that they could not carry on. We suggested they looked at all these responsibilities carefully and asked themselves which ones the Lord really expected them to do and which ones were over-commitments. The next year they came to the weekend and told us that they had reviewed their commitments and reduced them. As a consequence, they were a much happier family. William Gurnall wrote, "God will not thank thee for doing that which He did not set thee about." It is good advice.

Employers

In Colossians 4:1, Paul turns to Christian employers. He reminds them that they also have a Master who is in heaven. They were responsible to treat their servants with justice and fairness. The world has always suffered from injustice and unfairness. The greatest example of this was when the Lord Jesus was judged and crucified. Justice and fairness are attributes of God Himself and as His people we are expected to demonstrate these same features. Paul emphasises the special responsibility which Christian employers have in regard to these qualities.

The history of industrial relations in this country is one which is born out of the conflicts between employees and employers. A lot of this history involves the exploitation of workers who for many centuries suffered long hours, very arduous work, and lived in extreme poverty. Throughout the world today, there is still much evidence of the same injustices. Christian employers should never be associated with such practices.

The standard Paul sets before Christians, with such responsibilities, is that they are to be just and fair. And this was to be done in a spirit of goodwill. It is possible coldly to administer justice, rather like judges with no particular empathy with the person receiving the justice.

We have a fine example of employer and employee relationships in the book of Ruth in the Old Testament. It is Boaz, Ruth's future husband, and the great grandfather of King David. We are introduced to him in Ruth 2. He was a wealthy employer with a big workforce (Ruth 2:1). It is evident that he had a remarkable relationship with the people he employed. It was one of mutual respect. His sense of justice and fairness is seen in the way he treats Ruth who was the lowliest of his employees. But he also is remarkable in another way. He worked with his employees. He worked in the fields with them and he even ate meals and slept in the same building with his workers during the harvest time (Ruth 3:7). In other words, he was close to those he was responsible for and knew and treated them well. People who take on the role of employer or boss often allow these positions to make them distant and detached from those who work for them. Boaz led by example. He was not afraid to do the same work or to spend time with those who worked for him. In so doing he gained the respect and affection of his employees. We have a Lord and Master in heaven who was never afraid to do the work of a slave and worked alongside His disciples for three years to train them in true service. Equally, the Saviour in heaven now supports us in our service for Him. He is a just and fair Master. Christian employers are in a unique position to demonstrate the features of Christ as they serve Him in this capacity.

This great subject of service in our everyday lives is so important to the witness we have in today's world. The service towards each other in the vital relationships of wives and husbands, parents and children, and employees and employers demonstrates true Christianity in a world where such relationships are breaking down. Let us not be afraid of being obedient to God's word but prove the greatness of His ability to bless us in these areas of our lives. This is summed by some words I read recently, "When all that you are is available to all that God is, then all that God is available to all that you are" (Major Ian Thomas, 1914-2007).

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