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“A Surrendered Life to Jesus”

Colossians 4:1–9

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Slavery has unfortunately been common in many civilizations, including the Roman Empire during the first century A.D. But Paul gave instructions to both slaves and masters, elevating “bondservants” to equal status within the body of Christ. Then he used the same term “bondservant” to describe himself in his relationship with Jesus. The Bible encourages all of us to understand what it means to live a surrendered life to Jesus, our Master. In this study, we will view the historical and practical application of what it means to be a “bondservant of Jesus Christ.”

1. **Colossians 4:1–9** – “[1] Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. [2] Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; [3] meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, [4] that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak. [5] Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. [6] [Let] your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one. [7] Tychicus, a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord, will tell you all the news about me. [8] I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, [9] with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will make known to you all things which are happening here.”

2. Context

- a. Paul's exhortation to masters in **Colossians 4:1** better fits at the end of chapter 3.
 - i. At the end of chapter 3, Paul gives instructions on interpersonal relationships.
 1. One of these instructions discusses the way a “bondservant” should treat his master.
 - ii. Chapter and verse delineations are helpful, but they are not part of the inspired Word of God.
 1. Chapter and verse delineations were added later to help people locate Bible passages.
 2. Chapter delineations were added around A.D. 1,200.
 3. Verse delineations were added around A.D. 1,551.
- b. **Colossians 3:22** and **Colossians 4:1** use the Greek word **doulos**, meaning “bondservant, servant, or slave.”
 - i. The ESV and NKJV use the word “bondservant.”

- ii. The KJV uses the word “servant.”
- iii. The NIV uses the word “slave.”

3. Instructions to employees and employers

- a. Instructions to employees (or bondservants)
 - i. **Colossians 3:22–23** – “[22] Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. [23] And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.”
 - ii. Employees should respect their employer’s authority, even amid a negative work environment.
 - 1. **DISCUSS:** What does it mean to treat an employer with respect? How can you show respect to a difficult employer?
 - iii. Employees should work in the fear God (verse 4).
 - 1. We should not work “with eyeservice,” but rather work hard whether or not our employer sees.
 - 2. We should be motivated by our desire to please God, not to gain a promotion or raise.
- b. Instructions to employers (or masters)
 - i. **Colossians 4:1** – “Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”
 - ii. Employers should remember that they also have a Master.
 - 1. An employer should treat employees fairly, including by giving them a fair wage.
 - 2. An employer should treat employees with dignity, honor, and respect, because that is how our Master treats His children.

4. The Roman context

- a. The universal problem of slavery
 - i. Like many cultures, including our own, the first-century Roman Empire practiced slavery.
- b. The distinctives of slavery in the Roman Empire
 - i. Slavery was not based on race or ethnicity.
 - 1. Slaves were primarily prisoners of war.
 - 2. Criminals could also be punished with slavery.
 - ii. Slaves who entered slavery because they owed a debt could regain their freedom after their debt was satisfied.
 - 1. If you owed a debt, you would become the slave of the one who paid your debt until you had paid him back in full.
 - 2. Some debt-slaves chose to stay after paying their debts because their master had been good to them.

- iii. Some slaves could buy their freedom.
 - 1. Many of the slaves were skilled in some trade and became tutors, shopkeepers, doctors, artisans, accountants, and the like.
 - 2. These skilled slaves were allowed to keep a portion of their work income, which they could then save to purchase their freedom.
 - c. The high concentration of slavery and its effects
 - i. Statistics
 - 1. There were roughly 50 million people that made up the first-century Roman Empire.
 - 2. Of that 50 million, 10–20 percent of them were slaves. That means the Roman Empire had 5–10 million slaves in Paul's day.
 - 3. Within the capital city of Rome, slaves made up to 30–40 percent of the population.
 - ii. The economy
 - 1. The Roman economy was so dependent on slavery that it began to decline when the empire stopped expanding and taking the prisoners of war as slaves.
- 5. Paul's stance on slavery
 - a. The evil of slavery
 - i. Though some have tried to twist the Bible to argue in favor of slavery, the Bible neither sanitizes nor condones slavery.
 - 1. Paul lumped slave traders with liars, adulterers, the ungodly, and murderers of their fathers and mothers (**1 Timothy 1:9–10**).
 - ii. Paul's exhortations simply provided guidance in a culture where he knew slavery was deeply embedded.
 - b. The elevation of the slave
 - i. Paul said slaves had the same value and worth as free men and women.
 - 1. **Colossians 3:11** – *"There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all."*
 - 2. Paul commended the slave Onesimus (**Philemon 1:8, 15–16**) as *"a faithful and beloved brother"* (**Colossians 4:9**).
 - 3. **DISCUSS:** Think of the people our culture disregards. How can we show them the love of Christ and treat them as valuable?
 - c. The abolition of slavery
 - i. Paul's teachings attacked the root belief of slavery, laying the groundwork that would eventually demolish the practice.

1. **DISCUSS:** How do **1 Timothy 1:9–10**, **Colossians 3:11**, and **Colossians 4:9** attack slavery at the root? How do those verses affect how you treat others?
 2. William Wilberforce used **1 Timothy 1:9–10** to argue against slavery.
 3. On his deathbed, Wilberforce got word that the British Empire had abolished slavery.
6. A bondservant of Jesus Christ
- a. Identifying as a slave
 - i. Slaves were looked down on as:
 1. Property
 2. Second-class citizens
 - ii. Despite the stigma of the term, Paul often used the term “*bondservant*” to describe himself.
 1. **Romans 1:1a** – “Paul, a **bondservant** of Jesus Christ . . .”
 2. **Galatians 1:10b** – “If I still pleased men, I would not be a **bondservant** of Christ.”
 3. **Titus 1:1a** – “Paul, a **bondservant** of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ . . .”
 4. **Philippians 1:1a** – “Paul and Timothy, **bondservants** of Jesus Christ . . .”
 5. **2 Corinthians 4:5b** – We are “ourselves your **bondservants** for Jesus’ sake.”
 6. **1 Corinthians 9:19a** – “Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a **servant** to all.”
 - iii. Paul used a cultural negative (slavery) to illustrate a spiritual positive (a life surrendered to Christ).
 - b. Behaving as Jesus’ bondservant
 - i. Loyalty
 1. As Christians, we are owned by Jesus.
 2. God calls us to surrender all in complete allegiance to Him.
 3. Jesus used slave terminology to illustrate that His followers should not have split loyalty.
 4. **Matthew 6:24** – “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”
 5. **DISCUSS:** Is God your Master, or are there other things distracting you from following wholly after Him?
 - ii. Identity

1. Christ made us His own when He purchased us with His blood.
 2. We bear the name of our Lord.
 3. **1 Corinthians 6:20** – *“You were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”*
 4. **DISCUSS:** How has Jesus redefined your identity? How has knowing you belong to Jesus anchored you?
- iii. Humility
1. **Philippians 2:5–8** – *“[5] Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, [6] who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, [7] but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”*
 2. Jesus came to earth as the Suffering Servant.
 3. We must follow Jesus’ example of humility.
 4. **Isaiah 53:11** – *“He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.”*
 5. **Matthew 20:28** – *“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”*
 6. **DISCUSS:** How does Jesus’ condescension shape your mindset when you are serving others?
- iv. **DISCUSS:** Which of these areas is God calling you to submit to Him as His bondservant? How can you put this into practice?

7. The Jewish context

- a. The influence of the Old Testament
 - i. Paul was shaped by the way Jewish Scripture spoke of slavery.
- b. Slavery in the time of Moses (around 1,450 B.C.)
 - i. Knowing that slavery was embedded in the culture, God made provision for slaves to gain their freedom and be treated with dignity.
 - ii. **Exodus 21:1–6** – *“[1] Now these are the judgments which you shall set before them: [2] If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing. [3] If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. [4] If his master has given him a wife, and she has borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s, and he shall go out by himself. [5] But if the servant plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’ [6] then his master shall bring him to the judges.*

He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever."

- iii. Slavery in Israel occurred for one of two reasons:
 - 1. To pay back a debt.
 - 2. To pay back the value of a stolen item.
- iv. Sometimes a slave chose to stay with his master.
 - 1. When the day of freedom came, a slave could voluntarily, out of love, choose to serve his master forever.
 - 2. If a slave chose to stay, he would go to the judges and have his earlobe pierced with an awl.
 - 3. The pierced ear became a symbol of serving forever.
 - 4. Jesus willingly, out of love, came as a servant and laid down His life for us.
 - a. **Isaiah 53:5b** – *"By His stripes we are healed."*
 - b. **Psalms 40:6a** – *"Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; My ears You have opened."*
 - c. Some translations say *"pierced"* instead of *"opened."*
 - d. **Hebrews 10:5–10** applies **Psalms 40:6–8** to Jesus.
 - 5. **DISCUSS:** How does the love of Jesus compel you to serve Him (**2 Corinthians 5:14–15**)? How will you serve Him this week?

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New King James Version (NKJV).