

# CHRISTIANS IN THE WORKPLACE:

## Colossians 3 v 22 – 4 v 1

See also 1 Corinthians 7 v 21-22, Ephesians 6 v 5, 1 Peter 2 v 18

The 11<sup>th</sup> January 2001 was a day of exceptional difficulty for me. My mother's dementia had been getting worse, and it was no longer safe to leave her on her own. We had tried over the previous couple of weeks, working with Social Services, to put in place a care package that would allow Mum to continue living in her own home. But everything had failed. Reluctantly, Social Services came to the conclusion she needed to be in a Care Home. They had phoned me to say a place had become available. It was not an easy thing to take Mum and leave her there. All sorts of questions and accusations invaded my mind and my conscience. But in my heart of hearts, I knew every other option had been explored. No other choice was left available to us.

The next day, we hurried back; anxious to find out how Mum had got on. Would it have been a disaster? Would she be upset, crying in a corner, wanting to return to her own house? Would she even know where she was? Well we asked her if she was ok, if she was happy. And a long pause, she lowered her voice and, pointing at the Care Assistants, said to us confidentially: *"I don't care much for the maids!"*

You see, my mother's mind had gone back to the 1920s. Back then, a young girl in uniform who brought you your tea was called a maid. That was not an insult; that was the correct name for the job; And indeed, dependant on who exactly who you were a maid for, it could be quite an important job, highly desirable. Well with our current employment and health and safety legislation we would be horrified at the terms and conditions such people worked under then. Starting work at 14 – No GCSEs or "A" levels to worry about, on call 24 hours a day; just half a day holiday a year (a Sunday afternoon on which you were allowed to cycle home to see your Mother – the origins of our "Mother's Day" – or so my own mother would tell me.) Paid virtually nothing but given free board and lodging. Such a working life would be completely unacceptable in today's culture.

But back then it was not so bad. It was not seen as wrong. It was better than life as a pauper or a beggar. Of course, you could be mistreated. But in the vast majority of cases life was tough, but in the context of the times, fair. So with this story in mind I'd now like you to turn with me and read perhaps one of the most surprising passages in the New Testament: Colossians 3 v 22 – 4 v 1 [NIV]. The section on "Slaves and Masters"

**Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.**

## Paul, Peter and Slavery

This is one of several passages in the New Testament where the relationship between slaves and masters is addressed. The other passages, which we will refer to briefly as we go through, are in 1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 6 and 1 Peter 2. And the obvious question is why didn't Paul

(and Peter) fight against slavery? Just write: “Masters – let your slaves go free” and have done with it? It would certainly have saved Wilberforce a considerable amount of work some 1800 years later.

I would be a fool to suggest I have a 100% complete answer to this question, but I want to suggest the answer something is to do with the fact that the culture of slavery Paul was addressing then was nothing like the evil that Wilberforce saw in 17<sup>th</sup> / 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain, when men were taken by force from one continent to another just because of the colour of their skin.

I am not for one moment suggesting there was nothing wrong with the 1<sup>st</sup> century culture of slavery – and neither was Paul – else he wouldn’t have found it necessary to address the subject and lay down a different set of expectations for the church community. But I do remember from my schoolboy days that the Latin word for slave is “*servus*” – from which of course we get today’s word servant. So in some cases a slave was more similar to how we would understand the concept of a servant. In fact going right back into the Old Testament we find that Abraham’s slave or servant in Genesis Chapter 24 is even entrusted to find a bride for his son. A task we note the servant takes most seriously, and prays for clear guidance at the appropriate moment. (Genesis 24 v 12). It is in fact a very senior position.

Returning to Colossians, what then, is the application for today’s passage? Shall we just put a red line through it and write in the margin “slavery now abolished - this passage is no longer applicable”? No. We know that *“all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”* (2 Tim 3 v 16). We can not assume that this or indeed any other passage has no cultural relevance to today at all.

So I want to use this passage to talk about a scenario where one person has a degree of authority, or power, over another person. Power of course is not wrong (since God himself is all-powerful) but it needs to be used wisely and rightly. There are lots of situations where a person has some authority over another. Over the last two weeks John has spoken from the preceding verses which address authority within family relationships. But I think the nearest analogy of “slaves” and “masters” – if you can make the mental leap with me – is the workplace. The authority or power a boss has over his or her staff may not, thankfully, be absolute. But it can still be considerable. Our livelihood can be dependent on it. It can cause us a lot of grief. For bosses, it’s an authority that can be used properly or badly. And for staff it’s an authority that we can be constantly resisting, or willingly accepting.

Now of course I don’t want to take this too far. I’m not pretending that a slave could hand in his notice and seek another position. Neither, in reality, could a maid who was “in service” in Britain just 100 years ago. But the reason why I told the story of how my Mum confused a modern Care Assistant with an old fashioned maid was to demonstrate how, just in the space of one person’s lifetime, there has been a fundamental shift in what might be regarded as an acceptable pattern of work. So let’s read the passage again, but this time we will substitute the word “slaves” for “staff” and substitute the word “masters” for “bosses”, and let us just see what the passage starts to say to us.

**Staff, obey your earthly bosses in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism. Bosses, provide your staff with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a boss in heaven.**

## **Bosses and Employees in the Same Church.**

As I start to talk about this, I'm mindful of the fact that even in County Church, we have a situation where some people are actually working for another person in the church. We also have at least one situation where someone works for a person who is a Christian in a different church. That is exactly the same as Paul would have had in Colosse. Just as we have employees and bosses in the same church, there would have been both "slaves" and "masters" in the Colossian Church. Slaves get to hear how their masters are supposed to treat them. And it's pretty radical stuff given the culture of the day. And Masters get to hear what Paul has to say to the slaves about how they are supposed to work. And it's not necessarily what the slaves might expect or hope for. Then, just to rub it in and impress on everyone our equality before God, we find in the 1 Corinthians 7 21-22 passage Paul tells the masters they themselves are now *slaves* to Christ and the slaves they are now *free* in Christ.

So whichever side of the employment divide you sit on, I want you to listen to both parts of the talk, just as it was in Colosse, where slaves and masters heard Paul, addressing each other as equals in the Church and before God, giving them quite different and very specific instructions on how to work out their Christian faith in the context of their current situation.

### **1. Employees**

- Don't just work hard when the boss is looking (v22)
- Do what you are asked to do to the very best of your ability (v23)
- Understand that if you cheat on your boss, you are cheating on God ("*It is the Lord you are serving*" – (v24))
- And if you work hard and loyally for your boss, even if he or she doesn't notice, God does. (v24)
- Even if you have a difficult boss, you must still, as far as is possible, to accept their authority and work with commitment, honesty and integrity (1 Peter 2 v 18)

I would also like to add some points of my own, based on my personal experience, which I hope you will agree are consistent with the passages we are considering: Firstly, don't think your primary purpose at work is to spend as much time as possible talking to other people about being a Christian. You will of course get such opportunities, and we must of course constantly pray for them. But I do hope you ensure that any really long or deep conversations are moved to outside work time, so that when you are at work you are fully focussed on the job at hand and not cheating on your boss or your company.

Can I also query the attitude I come across amongst Christians from time to time, who want a job as mindless as possible, or with as few hours as possible, so they can spend as much time as possible serving God in some church capacity outside of work time. Similarly, some people have the view that their job is just a mark-time function, which they are doing on a temporary basis, until God calls them into some more "fulfilling" Christian leadership role. There may be one or two occasions where God has clearly spoken to someone and this is genuinely the case. But for the vast majority of us, we must understand we need to be at work, we need to see it as a long term commitment, we should work hard and be focussed, enjoy our job as much as we can and as far as is possible, without putting ourselves under too much stress, progress in our chosen company and / or career. In 1 Corinthians 7: 21-22 Paul tells slaves that if they get the chance to win their freedom they should take it. Presumably some slaves had been querying

this and thinking they should perhaps stay where they were. I take this to mean it is fine to get on and move up the ladder if and when we can, without compromising our values.

With this in mind, can I also make the point that as far as possible (and I appreciate not everyone gets the choice), you should do the job you want to do. Just the other week at a Christian conference I heard someone suggest that we church leaders should be encouraging young people to choose university courses and careers in areas such as the media and politics where they can be most effective for the kingdom. I don't really subscribe to this view. I believe you are going to be most effective when you are following your natural inclinations and opportunities and God-given interests and abilities. Yes there will be opportunities to be effective for the Kingdom of God whatever your job. There is even likely to be one or two occasions when you may have to make a clear stand for the Kingdom of God. But I'd like to think the best way of being effective for God is to be good at our job, doing something that interests us, and for our loyalty, commitment and enthusiasm for the job to be beyond doubt. When this is the case, anything you do get the chance to say about your faith or your values is likely to be far more effective, be heard far more clearly, and come across as being far more genuine.

In winding up the section on employees, let me acknowledge there are many issues I don't have time to cover today. e.g. people who have simply been unable to find a job. People who try as they might can not find any enjoyment or fulfilment from what they are currently doing. People having a mid-life crisis, considering a career change etc. Or those who want to help their work colleagues through taking responsibility within their trade union. I cannot cover every situation but I hope I can leave you with the principle that for Christians at work "*whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord*" (v23).

## **2. Employers**

Firstly, and everyone should hear this, both bosses and employees alike: It's not wrong to want your business to prosper. Don't think the only businesses God will bless or take an interest in are those that sell so-called "Christian" products. To use the Advertising Standards Authority's phrase, if it's legal / decent / honest / truthful – then it is ok to ask God to bless your endeavours and to expect him to do so.

But, Paul says to the Colossians: treat your staff "right and fair" (v1). In fact in today's rather more complex society, we can add to that also treat your customers, suppliers, creditors and debtors "right and fair". So what does "right and fair" mean? I would like to suggest it means treat people with honesty and integrity. Pay staff a fair wage for the job commensurate with your company's ability and the overall market. Don't bully or threaten people (Ephesians 6 v 9). Pay bills when they are due. Don't trick or cheat on staff, customers or suppliers.

The phrase "no favouritism" in verse 25 also occurs in Ephesians 6 v 9. Here it is clearer to see that what Paul is saying is that both bosses and your employees (masters and slaves) stand as equal citizens before our master in heaven.

But none of this means you have to accept shoddy work or poor commitment, or give people as much time off as they would like, or never take anyone to task just because they are a church member. And it doesn't necessarily mean you have to tell everyone everything that's going on. There will be times when you must keep things to yourself or close advisors or confidants. Neither does it mean your staff and business associates will like every decision. Sometimes you have to make tough calls, and unpopular calls just to survive. And sometimes, with hindsight, you'll realise you got things wrong. But if anything I would encourage Christian business people

not to put off difficult or unpopular decisions out of a concern as to how this will be seen by people who know you are a Christian. If you are acting with honesty and integrity, let me assure you God knows your heart; he will be standing with you, even if people who can't understand the constraints your business is under are unable to understand the decisions you need to make.

When Jesus said "Seek the Kingdom of God first" (Matthew 6 v 33) I don't think that means look for every opportunity to overtly spread the gospel, have texts printed on your carrier bags or invoices or give away a free Bible with every order etc. I think he simply meant that the kingdom principles of honesty and integrity must always be a higher value for you than the business itself succeeding. Get that right, and he will add all the other things to you.

And my perception is that is exactly where the business people we have here in County Church stand. Do pray for our business people in our Church community. Struggling to survive in a cut throat competitive market is not easy, especially if we see competitors getting an advantage over us perhaps by compromising on some of those key values.

But if your business does grow and prosper, as I hope and pray it will, do remember to attribute your success to God standing with you. Obviously, your own God-given entrepreneurial skills and passion have been absolutely crucial as well. But let's not forget Abraham, the great man of faith, also rather successful and extremely rich farmer / businessman. The Bible is in no doubt that the author of his prosperity is God. (Genesis 24 v 1; 13 v 6)

### **3. Managers**

Middle Managers both have people working to them, but at the same time, they work for someone else. This means they are responsible for the conduct and operation of their team to their boss. As such, everything I've said about employees applies to managers. You are there to do a good job, manage your team well, and help your people develop and grow. But also virtually everything I've said to employers also applies to managers. You are responsible for treating those that work to you "right and fair". You may not have responsibility for ensuring the entire company is built on a foundation of integrity, but you can at least ensure that goes for your own function, and for the people who work for you.

Once a person made an appointment to come and see me, and asked me for a job. His CV didn't make good reading. He had made some poor choices, and ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time, and was facing redundancy from his own department. But I asked him why he had come to see me directly. In our company, as he knew, all job applications were processed through our HR department. And he said to me: "*I've heard you are a fair and honest person. I thought you might give me a chance*". Now, I'd never met this man before, never even heard his name. But it is interesting isn't it, that other people were telling him the manager of a certain department is fair and honest. More people were noticing and hearing about my values than might have seemed obvious at the time.

Even if you are not treated well by your own boss – that's no excuse not to ensure you are treating your own people well. My motto has been always treat your own staff better than you yourself are treated. If you are not doing that, you are not really adding value, which is what a middle manager is there to do. Take a look at the harsh words Jesus had for the unmerciful servant in the parable at Matthew 18 23-35. He treated his colleague far worse than he himself had been treated – and Jesus was not at all pleased.

## The Conscience Issue

Very occasionally a genuine conscience issue arises at work. If I can be controversial, I believe the most important issues are not whether I am allowed to wear Christian jewellery or pray for people I meet in the context of my job. I think the key questions to be asking are *“is the product or service my company offers fair and honest?”* and *“am I given the freedom to deal with my staff, customers, suppliers and other contacts truthfully and honestly?”*

If the answer to either of these questions is “no” then we could well have a problem. If this applies to you can I genuinely encourage you to talk through the issues you are facing with a mature Christian, perhaps someone with business experience. I say this just because once or twice people have spoken to me about so called issues of conscience when they haven’t really considered the other side of the coin.

We do need to understand businesses are under a lot of constraints. Insider Trading rules, client confidentiality rules, staff confidentiality issues and equality regulations issues are all things that mean sometimes businesses have to act in a certain way to keep on the right side of the law.

I must say that in my own career I think I have been rather fortunate. There have been times when I had to make a stand and perhaps got a black mark against my name. But on balance I think there were rather more occasions when being known as a person who was truthful and honest has actually given me opportunities that my bosses were perhaps reluctant to give to other so-called more dynamic people.

## The Good Boss

I’ve worked for some extremely good bosses in the past, and I’ve also worked for some absolutely appalling ones. I’ve found, incidentally, that it is possible to “do well” in both situations (Philippians Ch 4 v 12). But I guess we all prefer the “good boss” scenario. Sometimes, when the “good boss” moves on to another department, or even another company, we think *“this is such a good boss, - I wonder if I could move to the other department or company too, so I can continue to work for that person.”*

And surprisingly, if we go right back to Old Testament times, the same concept arose with slaves and masters. A slave could say: *“this is such a good master, I never want to be set free. I willingly want to carry on being a servant or slave to this person forever”*. And there was a special procedure a slave could go through to make that statement. It’s a bit gory, so I’ll not go into details. But you can read it in Exodus Ch 21 v 5. A slave could become a bondslave – voluntarily giving up any chance to ever be set free.

Elsewhere, Paul uses the Greek word for “bondslave” – which I’m told is *doulos* – in describing his relationship with Jesus. He refers to himself in Romans Ch 1 v 1 as a servant – bondslave – of Christ. Someone who has found something so good he never ever wants to be parted from it. You see, as I said right at the beginning, power in itself is not wrong. It is there to be used “right”. And the most powerful being in the universe is God himself. No-one out-ranks him. No-one comes above him.

Fortunately, not only is God all powerful, he is also all-good. So in closing, I want to leave you with this thought. It may be that you’ve reached a point in your life where you are ready to say: *“I voluntarily surrender myself to Jesus. I know he is very powerful, but also so very good. He is*

*like the good boss. He always treats me fairly and wants the best for me. I'd be a fool to ever let myself become enslaved to anyone else or anything else. What do I have to do to make sure I can belong to Jesus Christ for ever?"* If you are asking yourself those kind of questions, then the good news is it is all very simple. You can in fact give your life to Jesus today.

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