

Jesus has authority over everything, and that fact alters our relationships with everyone. Paul has been reorienting our very understanding of those most intimate relationships, those within our own households, under the lordship of Jesus. In each of the roles discussed, wife/husband, child/parent, slave/master, there is an appeal to those who are in the role of submission to their role in relation to Jesus as the Lord. In other words, wives are not to submit to husbands because it teaches them something of God, children are not to obey their parents because it will make their lives easier, and slaves are not to answer their masters' call because they will garner greater wisdom or a more fruitful life in this world. They are all commanded to submit because Jesus is the real Lord, not their husbands, not their parents, not their masters. Jesus is their true husband, and He is good. God is their true father, and He is good. The Lord is their true master, and He is good. Therefore, because Jesus is the Lord, we can, each of us, serve the lesser lords over us, knowing something which is already true and known by us: Jesus is Lord.

This reality, that Jesus is sovereign and Jesus is Lord, is the eternal truth, the weightier reality, the thing that lasts forever and ever. You will not always be married, but Jesus will always be Lord. You will not always be children, and some of you will not ever be parents, but Jesus will always be Lord. Your social freedoms and power of self-determination may come and go, but Jesus will always be Lord. Every husband must answer to Him on how he cared for his wife, because she belongs to Jesus forever. Every parent will answer to God for how we parented our children, because they belong to God as His children forever. Every master will be called to account for how

he shepherded and treated those whom he had power over in his social roles, because they are God's servants first and foremost.

In fact, the image which Paul uses to overshadow all of these roles, whether those where we have the role of authority or submission, is the role of ambassador for Jesus Christ. 3:17 tells us to do everything whether in word or deed, in the name of Jesus Christ. That phrase, "in the name", is a word of ambassadorship. It is a phrase which means that we are called to do things for His purposes, for His honor, for His renown, in His ways, at His behest and command.

Therefore, we are to submit to those in authority over us as His ambassadors. As such, we are working for Him and His honor, because He is our Lord. This is why our submission to our husbands, our parents, and our earthly masters, is limited. There are times that we should not submit, where we seek the help of higher authorities, and we do so because we are ambassadors of Jesus. When parents abuse their children, we intervene because Jesus is Lord and we are His ambassadors. We appeal to higher authorities than the parent because we are ambassadors of Jesus. When husbands demean their wives, and are using them, rather than seeking their honor, we speak out as ambassadors of Jesus and seek the help of fellow ambassadors, the Church, appealing to the dignity which Christ Jesus has verified with His own sacrificial act for the thriving of women and not that they would be abused.

Submission is limited because of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and even when there is no earthly justice, and our loving and resistant actions bring the swift pangs of injustice upon us now, we endure the sufferings of righteousness, knowing that this world is not all that there is, and that our King will return to make all things right and new and

gloriously good when he eradicates sin from our presence and experience. The lordship of Jesus enables us to righteously resist wicked and destructive authority for the sake of others.

And any authority which we have is to be shaped differently because we are ambassadors of Jesus. While those in the roles of submission, wives, children, and slaves, are each commanded to submit or obey, those in the roles of authority are conspicuously not commanded to rule or exercise authority in these passages. You would expect that to be the case, but it isn't. Rather, they are only admonished on how to do so. Thus, husbands are not commanded to exercise authority over their wives. Instead, they are commanded to love them. The command gives shape to the expected position in society. Fathers, you are not commanded to rule over your children, or even to discipline them in this passage. Rather, it is expected that you will, but that this oversight should take the shape of God's oversight and parenting. It should be to build your children up, to avoid overseeing them in such a way that causes them to "lose hope." And masters, in the household code of the Roman world, are not commanded to be masters, or to exercise discipline over their servants, but rather to exercise their authority in a different manner than the world, to see such slaves as those under their care, to treat them fairly and judiciously and honorably. In this way, the roles of authority in society are not commanded, but assumed by Paul, but the shape which this authority takes is to be cruciform, like that of our crucified Lord, laying down our honor and lives for the sake of those under our care.

Now, I know that one of the big accusations levelled against the church is that it seems to condone slavery by the passivity which it addresses the very institution. **But, if you**

look at what Paul is doing here, though he never explicitly seeks to tear down the institution of slavery in his time, he does actually work to subvert it by reshaping it, and the result, especially if you look at how he does this in his letter to Philemon, is to lay out the greater ethic of honor towards other human beings so that the institution itself, in the words of F.F. Bruce, “could do nothing but wilt and die.” Paul is planting the seeds of redemption into the soil of the hearts of both slaves and masters of his day which could do nothing else but spring up to love and the dissolution of all abuses of power.

OK, let us turn now to the specific admonition of this last relationship between slave and master. The first question that might arise is why this category, slave and master, which seem so distant from the familial relationships which bind the other two together. The answer to this is that in the Greco-Roman world all three of these relationships are what constituted a “household” and they were bound by “household law”, or *oikonomia*, a word sometimes translated as “dispensation” in the English translation. These ‘household laws’ were spheres of authority, where the Paterfamilias, the head of the household, had authority, and corresponding obligations, over the entire household. Thus, it was the Husband, Father, and Master of the house (that’s stuck in your head now, isn’t it?!) who had authority and responsibility for the household, and his law was the law within it.

This particular social view of the household in the Greek and Roman world was delineated by Aristotle, who wrote in his work *Politics*, **“The parts of household management will correspond to the parts of which the household itself is constituted. A complete household consists of slaves and freemen. But every subject of inquiry should**

first be examined in its simplest elements; and the primary and simplest elements of the household are the connection of master and slave, that of the husband and wife, and that of parents and children. We must accordingly consider each of these connections, examining the nature of each and the qualities it ought to possess.” (Politics, 1.1253b)

Therefore, these three sets of relationships are addressed by the apostle Paul in regard to authority because they were the three sets of relationships which Greek and Roman households would consider to be constituent elements. His recognition of them and adjudication of them is not a wholesale affirmation of them, as if his commands to slaves were somehow an affirmation of the institution of slavery, anymore than his commands to wives and children are a command that a woman must be married (a woman does not need to be married to fully please the Lord!), nor that every adult should become a parent. In fact, when it comes to slaves, we have only to look at 1 Corinthians 7 to see that Paul admonished slaves that “if an opportunity arises for you to gain your freedom, then take it!” It is better to be free than to be a slave, but remember that you are an ambassador of Christ Jesus in whatever condition of society that you find yourself. Thus, all the commands of 1 Corinthians 7 are rooted in this same idea to the Colossians: you are an ambassador of Christ, so remain in the condition that you are in for that purpose, unless a legal and honorable means of escaping it are presented. Remember, Christ is your ultimate Lord, and wherever he has placed you is your embassy of His kingdom in a world with opposing purposes, values, and virtues.

Where the apostle does choose to differentiate himself from Aristotle and the common Greek understanding, however, is that he addresses the subservient members in his

admonition, something which was not normal, because Aristotle considered only the Master of the house to have a “fully rational soul.” Aristotle taught that women, children, and slaves did not have fully rational souls and therefore would gain nothing by being addressed. But Paul, knowing the revelation of God and that the self-sacrificial lordship of Jesus dignifies all people equally, knows the full dignity and rationality of all three, and therefore gives to each of them commands to follow, assuming upon their full rationality and their desire to please the Lord and live for Him with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength. The fact that he addresses these groups at all would have been a major surprise for the hearers of this letter who grew up in the context of Aristotelian society. Thus, the gospel changes how we view and treat all people, the powerful equalizing consequence of God’s redemptive plan summed up in His Son alone.

And, while we do not currently live in a society where slavery is a socially accepted, or legally defensible, household relationship, it is also true that all work is, at least at times, an enslavement, a violence to our wills, and for some of us is always drudgery, brutalizing, and humiliating. Therefore, though we are not 1st-century Roman slaves or masters, we have much to gain from these words in Colossians 3. In fact, one could argue that if this command is given to slaves, who had no legal escape from their working conditions, then it should be even more applicable to you who do.

Before we move on, let me take a few moments and address the context of 1st century Roman slavery. Because it is true that during the 18th and 19th centuries in the Americas and England, these verses were ignorantly used by those within the Church, to justify the institutional slavery of African peoples in England and the New World.

Willfully and wickedly, ignoring the greater command to love your neighbor, they refused to obey the Lord and treat others with mutual honor or dignity. Such claims were not an affirmation of Scripture, however, but a denial of it. They had to act against the gospel command, not according to it. Such kinds of brutalizing and racist slavery is not supported by the Scriptures at all, and certainly not the brutal racial vicious dehumanizing institution of the African slave system which deeply scars our own people in this country. But 1st-century slavery was different on some significant points than that chattel barbarism.

First of all, Greco-Roman slavery was not based upon race, nor did it presume upon ethnic dehumanization. Most slaves were of the same ethnicity as their owners, in fact. This is unlike the New World slave system, which was based upon race and ethnicity. This does not mean that racism or cultural elitism was not present in society, of course, but merely that it was not the basis for enslaving a person. Secondly, Roman slavery was not seen as permanent. In fact, freeing slaves had become so common by the time of Augustus that he decreed a slave could not be released until the age of 30 in an effort to bolster the power of the Roman empire, built largely upon the labor of slaves. Lastly, in the Roman slave system slaves had some legal rights. During Paul's day, a slave could take his master to court over certain civil issues. Slaves could even own other slaves and own land and property. Even though it technically belonged to their masters, they were given control of it for their own use and could purchase their freedom out of those very assets. All of this, of course, does not imply that Roman slavery was good, but simply that it was quite different than the monolithic behemoth of brutality that New World slavery would later become. And let us not forget that

although some so-called Christians justified New World racial slavery by abusing the Bible, they had to neglect the Scripture in order to do so. It is also true that no historian can deny that it was also evangelical Christians who overturned the institution of slavery in England, led most prominently in the fight by William Wilberforce, Hannah More, John Venn, and the other Clapham Saints, and that others of like mind across the Atlantic worked to overturn the institution in America as well.

In the era of which Paul wrote, slavery was a major part of Roman society. During the reign of Augustus it was said that almost 30% of the Italian population was slaves. A person could be become a slave in three primary ways: as a soldier taken captive in war (the major way during the Augustan period), by being born to a current slave (children born into slavery were slaves, thus Paul's illustration of this in Galatians chapter 4), or by selling oneself into slavery in order to pay off a debt.

Slaves were considered the property of their masters, thus they were not merely indentured servants. They, as we saw from Aristotle, were considered less rational to the Roman socialite. At the same time, those who were taken in war often had great expertise or skill in particular subjects and thus became well-known for their work in Roman society as lawyers, philosophers, accountants, artists, etc. They could perform any job in society except for political office, and they did so for the sake of their master's name and honor. They were not free, but neither should we confuse the Roman view of slavery with the horrifically brutal New World view of slavery in the American continent. It is also the case that slaves were not able to be differentiated by sight in the 1st-century. They did not dress any differently than a free person. Thus, they could not be classified by sight or mistreated on sight, something which the darker

skin of racial slavery in the United States could not claim. Therefore, in the 1st century, a slave was, for the most part, treated in the marketplace and in the street just like a freedman. The holistic segregation of African-ancestry peoples and European-ancestry peoples in New World slavery was far more humiliating and destructive to the other-honoring ethic of the Lord in such distinctions.

Even acknowledging this differentiation, we must not sugarcoat the fact that any form of ownership, and certainly of the view of a person being “not fully rational”, is not the seeking of human flourishing which the gospel calls us towards. And while the gospel does not call us to overturn social institutions by coercion, any more than we ought to justify violence against abortion doctors or clinics, what it does is call us to work for is to overturn the hearts of men within these social systems so that those very systems, though codified in social law, are eventually subverted and overthrown, where they can “do nothing but wilt and die”, because men are genuinely caring for one another, not as people-pleasers, or just to be seen by others, but because they are genuine and authentically loving other human beings. **What Paul does is treat such slaves in the Church as dignified humans, with fully rational souls, and brothers in Christ Jesus. This relationship, brothers in Christ Jesus, is how Paul appeals to slaves to honor their masters on this earth and how such admonition subverts the very institutions whose constituents he addresses.**

Look at how he does this: he does it in two primary ways. First, he mentions four times to slaves that they are serving the Lord, not men. Their service is a service to Christ Jesus, who is the Lord over their earthly lord, the MASTER over their earthly masters.

Their service as ambassadors of Jesus, the Lord, is a service to Him who loves them and gave Himself up for them.

Your service, too, therefore, in all of its drudgery and monotony and humiliation and thanklessness is a service to Jesus. This is how you can honor those in authority over you who don't necessarily honor you. Because you are serving Jesus, the worthy one, even if your husband or parent or master is proving to be unworthy of respect. Your service is "to the Lord." In fact, in v23 the ESV reads, "work heartily, as for the Lord", but the reading is actually "as to the Lord." That directional word "to" is quite appropriate, for that is the direction which I am aiming, of which I am laboring, to which my face is turned as I labor and struggle and sweat and groan. My face is turned to Christ Jesus. I work toward Him and not toward man. I don't seek to please man, but to please Christ Jesus.

The second thing that Paul shows the dignity of slaves and also gives them hope as they serve the Lord is that he says, in v24, that they should obey their earthly masters "knowing" something. What do they know, in v24, that can empower them to obey their earthly masters? Knowing that they will receive the *inheritance* as their reward *from the Lord*.

What will they receive for their work as humble ambassadors of Christ Jesus? What will slaves receive? The inheritance from the Lord! Don't miss this! Slaves in 1st-century Rome could not have a family name. Children that were born to a slave were born under the household name of the master. So, what Paul is saying is tremendously encouraging. Your identity is not one of slave to your earthly master, but one of heir to the Lord over all creation!

That is their true identity. They are not slaves of their earthly masters forever. It's a role, an ambassadorial mission, that will end one day and they will be rewarded for doing. And that reward is the familial inheritance of God from Jesus Christ their elder brother. They belong to God and His family, not as mere slaves, but as sons, with all the dignity and honor and rest which that includes.

Paul gives these workers something which makes their humiliation, their drudgery, their intense labors, their inhibitions, in spite of the fact that they were 1st century slaves, bearable, that their labors have meaning and significance and a glory which far exceeds the humiliation they are enduring. If what he explains to them helps them, then it can surely help you.

Your career is not your identity. Your recognition by your boss is not what gives you belonging or significance or a place in the world. Your identity, if you are united to Christ Jesus by repentant faith, is "child of the King." Therefore, though you may be assigned to work as an ambassador in an embassy with no earthly honor, or belonging, or rest, you have an inheritance coming from the Lord God Almighty! Work, therefore, for Him. Work heartily towards Him! He sees you and knows your efforts and rejoices at your work performed heartily.

You see, these roles of submission here are not to be performed *so that we might receive some reward*. No! They are to be performed because we already know that we are going to receive the reward! "Knowing this", Paul says. Knowing that something is already true, it radically alters the manner in which we work in each of our respective roles, and we can fulfill our role with dignity and hope because Jesus is Lord.

I'm not sure if you noted this already or not, but Paul devotes 9 words to wives, 10 words to husbands, 13 words to children, 10 words to fathers, 18 words to masters...and 56 words to slaves. This is quite significant, because in most Greek and Roman household codes the subservient persons were not even addressed. Why would they be, they're not fully rational beings? But Paul addresses the slaves first, and with a significantly greater amount of words and of reasons. We are all slaves of God. We are all the bride of Christ. We are all children of God. We have a much greater likeness and affinity to the slave than to the master, and Paul's direct address of those in lower positions is an honoring break from his social norm. And if you read the letter to Philemon you will see that it is about Paul calling Philemon to accept back Onesimus, the slave in his household, as a brother, requesting that he set him free as Paul's dearly loved child and not merely as a slave. It is a call to reorder his mastery according to the gospel, which unites both slave and master as brothers, as equal heirs of Christ, as ambassadors for the purposes of our one Lord, Jesus.

There is an equal shock when Paul addresses masters, because to be commanded to treat a slave with "justice and equality". In fact, it literally reads, "Masters, cause justice and equality to be brought about to the slaves." What he means is that masters should be treating their slaves as they would treat themselves! That is exactly how he puts it to the Ephesians, "Masters, do the same things to them." That is equality language! The Roman historian, Seneca, wrote, "Always treat your slaves like enemies." Fear and power and humiliation will keep your power and strength and honor secure! That's the way of the world, but not the way of Christ. Because you who have authority on earth are also slaves of God! That's the idea of no partiality. God will not treat your

slavery or your mastery with any deference at all. The gospel brings people into such a situation that the belittling and dehumanizing aspects of social and economic orders can only come crashing down in the light of the gospel.

All of your work falls under the sphere and umbrella of Christ Jesus' lordship. He is sovereign over all. Your pastor has no more nearness to Christ Jesus than you do. Your Sunday School leader has no more inherent honor or holiness or glory which would somehow draw God's affection towards him than you do. **You are in Christ in the same way, and you are all under His lordship!** Therefore, the lawyer and the toilet scrubber, the academic and the ditch digger, the coal miner and the physician, all have the same dignity and honor in their labor and all have the same sacred and sanctified calling upon their work. Your work is sacred. It is worship. It is an offering to the Lord whom you serve, the gift of your hands and head and heart, which you offer as one who has been united to Christ Jesus, by faith alone, and through whom you receive the inheritance as sons. On nothing else is this inheritance based and nothing else can this inheritance be taken away but Christ Jesus alone...and if He gives it, it can never be taken away, lost, or destroyed.

Every illiterate son receives the same Lord's inheritance as the well-read son. Every humiliated daughter receives the same Lord's inheritance as the dignified one. Every brutalized son receives the same Lord's reward and honor as the daughter of gentility. For our reward comes of Christ Jesus, and it is an inheritance based not upon our performance, but upon His performance.

This hope is your hope, too, my friends. Your retirement, your recognition, your party and a gold watch is not your inheritance. Your career is not your lord, nor those who

serve in authority over you. You serve the Lord Christ, and it is from Him that you will receive the reward for your work, your service, the humiliating, brutal, difficult, violence of your labors. This means that your work, no matter what it produces here on this earth, is not for your earthly master primarily, but for Christ Jesus. You serve Him and your sincere and hearty work is an honoring of Him, and you will receive an inheritance from Him, a family name, a place of belonging, of rest, of honor as being known throughout creation as one of the Almighty's sons or daughters. Keep seeking the things above, keep reckoning this truth as more significant than your earthly rewards, because these eternal things cannot be shaken, lost, or stolen.

This is how you can labor hard for your earthly employers, how you can honor them even when they don't honor you, and how you can conscientiously object, to resist when they command you to do something that you cannot do in good conscience. Because you have a Lord who will answer for you, and to whom they will have to give an account.

And remember this as you consider your ambassadorial role for Christ Jesus: Jesus is the Master, and He is the only master who will die for your sins, while you were still an enemy, hating him and opposing him. He is the Lord of life and death, the triumphant King of glory. He is your real Master and He will grant to you the crown of life and glory and rest and joy. Knowing that He is the Lord over all changes everything. Knowing that He has united His own life to your life in the richness of His generosity changes your attitude towards your work and changes your attitude towards earthly honor and recognition. It changes your relationship to everything, freeing you from

such slavery by chaining your soul to the expulsive power of hope in the resurrected Lord.

I want to close with God's Word to the Philippian church:

“You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had, who though he was existing in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be held onto,⁷ but he emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave,¹² by becoming like other men,¹³ and by sharing in human nature.¹⁴⁸ He humbled himself, by answering the call as far as death – even death on a cross!⁹ As a result God has exalted him and given him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow – in heaven and on earth and under the earth –¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5-11)