

Lastly, tucked away at the end of his comments about the duties of slaves is the interesting verse 'the one who does wrong will be paid back for their wrongdoing, for there is no partiality' (3:25). God's lack of partiality in dealing with people of whatever status was a favourite theme of Paul (Rom 2:11, Gal 2:6, Eph 6:9 etc.), and although we think of this comment as being firmly attached to the previous verses about slaves because of the position of the end of the chapter, we should remember that the chapter ending and beginning was not part of Paul's writing, but came from the editing of Scripture centuries after the time of its writing. A careful reading of the text shows that it could just as well apply to the following comment about masters treating their slaves fairly, as to slaves. Indeed, it makes more sense if it does, for it fits with the theme of what Paul tells masters, which is to act with fairness and justice (4:1).

With this in mind, it is entirely possible that this small section of Paul's letter, which some scholars feel is quite out of place, was a difficult but necessary part of the letter setting the ground for Paul's later appeal to Philemon in his letter of that name. Onesimus was a slave on the run who had been converted, but if a run-away slave was found, in Roman society he could be punished by death. Paul did not want to see such an appalling thing happen between Christian master and Christian slave; it would have sent a out terrible message about the integrity of the early church. His words were well chosen to avoid this happening and maintain the honour of the church.

### Application

There are controversial issues represented within this text, and the theory that the last few verses represents Paul's initial attempt to ensure Onesimus' safe return to Colossae is hardly the stuff of 'application' for us today. Nevertheless, the whole passage contains Paul's attempt to explain the practical implications of his insistence that we must live our lives 'as to the Lord'. How far we take the details of what he said to heart is debatable, but we can at least learn from Paul's serious intent that we should live our lives as with the Lord present with us at all times.

Personally, I do believe that Paul's advice about the relationships between men and women has something to teach us, and if we pursue what verses 18 and 19 mean, we will certainly be led to examine very carefully some critical issues about the relationship of men and women which need to be addressed. There is too much breakdown of marriage today for us to ignore what the Bible has to say. This passage deserves far more than a casual reading, together with what follows about children and parents. The advice to fathers is also important for a world in which parents frequently allow their own troubles to spill over into the lives of whole families, creating unhappiness and unrest in many children. Lastly, we live in days when although slavery is largely abolished, few of us are unaware of the terrible forms of slavery which exist now. I am not sure that the world has any answer to the exploitation and degradation that this represents. However, God does; and we, His people, should be at the forefront of confronting it.

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does the advice about slavery have any relevance to us today? If so, what?
2. What are the main problems between men and women in society today, and do Paul's words help us address them?
3. Is it possible or wise to try to make our children 'obey' us in everything (3:20)?

### Discipleship

Do you find it easy to do the work you do and maintain a sense of the presence of Jesus all the time? In what things that you do does Jesus slip into your consciousness, or out of it? If you think about these questions, then I suggest that the best way to follow through what you discover is to try and find ways to remind yourself of the Lord at those times when he passes from your consciousness; a picture on the wall, listening to Christian songs or hymns, for example. All can be used by the Lord, and we will be enriched if we are able to work 'as to the Lord'.

### Final Prayer

Lord, I turn my eyes towards You, I look for Your help, I seek Your advice, and I long for Your presence in every moment of my life. Remove the unseen barriers, O Lord, and break into my consciousness with Your liberating power, I pray, and encourage me. Thank You, Lord: AMEN

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, You knew what fear was like as you came near to Your death. Help us when we face fear to turn to You and gain our inspiration and hope from You. Help us to confess our fears and be prepared to accept Your help, for You alone know the fears of our hearts. Help us, dear Lord, to trust You and leave fear behind. AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Ministry to the elderly

Pray for all those who are cared for in homes for the elderly in your own neighbourhood. Some are cared for well, and some are not. If possible, find out if these homes are visited by any clergy who offer help and counsel to the dying, or who conduct services of worship. Pray for those who live in these homes, and see if there is any way that they can be spiritually helped.

### Meditation

This is the Lord's will, this is His way:

To cut the giants down to size and raise up those who feel powerless;  
 To love without distinction or favour, and value those who are rejected;  
 To wash away the filth of human sin and expose the beauty of holiness;  
 To laugh in the face of human fashion and promote the power of truth;  
 To love and care for the world's forgotten and demonstrate equality for all;  
 To oppose outright the evils of greed and avarice and fight for justice;  
 To offer salvation to all who will hear it and cut across all religiosity;  
 To bring an end to the power of sin and death and recreate the world;  
 To show God's glory in a new creation; the resurrection from the dead!

### Bible Study - Colossians 3:18-25

<sup>18</sup> *Wives, accept the authority of your husbands, as is right in the Lord.*

<sup>19</sup> *Husbands, love your wives and do not treat them harshly.*

<sup>20</sup> *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord.*

<sup>21</sup> *Fathers, do not provoke your children in case they become disheartened.*

<sup>22</sup> *Servants, obey your earthly masters in everything; not to get yourselves noticed as people-pleasers, but in generosity of heart and fearing the Lord.* <sup>23</sup> *Whatever you do, put your whole self into it as for the Lord and not for others,* <sup>24</sup> *knowing that you will receive the compensation of God's blessing from the Lord, for you serve the Lord Christ.* <sup>25</sup> *The one who does wrong will be paid back for their wrongdoing, for there is no partiality.*

<sup>4:1</sup> *Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you have a Master in Heaven.*

### Review

This is a fascinating passage of Scripture, which is sometimes passed over for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the social laws within it reflect generally enlightened opinion of the day, as we can easily discover by reading Stoic and Jewish writings of the day. Secondly, these social conventions are foreign to us because they accept slavery within the life of the Church, and as we have just celebrated Wilberforce's Act for the abolition of slavery, this seems somewhat unhelpful. Thirdly, the very first verse of the passage talks about the submission of women, and although it is partially balanced by the duties of a husband in the next verse, the very mention of subordination is for some people, a reason to pass this text by. We should not do so, however, for if we look carefully, a whole range of issues come together which make it a fascinating text.

In the previous verse, Paul had said 'whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus' (3:17), and this sets the tone for this reading which is an explanation of how this ethic should work out in the everyday life of Christians. What Paul said was therefore a unique insight into the social life of those days, supplemented by his distinctive teaching. Everything that a Christian did was to be committed to the Lord, and this was applicable to almost every sphere of social life (3:18,20,22,23,24 and possibly 25).

It was necessary for Paul to speak in this way about the social order of households, for his general teaching was that by baptism, all people who were saved were one 'in Christ', and in his letter to the Galatians, Paul declared his standard teaching: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28, see also Col 3:11). This would sound to some people like advocating social anarchy! Repressed wives could see in this teaching a chance to claim liberation from the repression of their husbands, and slaves would see an invitation to revolt, for example. But such lawlessness was not what Paul had in mind! His social stance appears at first glance to be simple; retain the same standing as you already have in society, but devote everything you do to the Lord, and live as if He was your Master. This was to apply even to the masters of slaves (4:1) and the relationship of husbands and wives (3:18,19), but it was not as simple as it may have seemed, as we shall find out later.

This is an ethical teaching with some merit, but this passage goes even further, and the details of its originality only becomes clear if we look more deeply at the social context in which Paul wrote. You will notice, for example, that most of the advice given in this passage concerns the work of slaves and implies a great deal about justice (see verse 24). It concludes with a generally egalitarian statement about 'no partiality' before God which seems difficult to understand unless it means masters as well as slaves! A little detective work within the rest of Paul's letter to the Colossians will reveal the reason for this interest, but we should be wary of passing over a text such as this because our first reading does not excite us. That is usually a good reason to dig deeper!

### Going Deeper

The passage easily splits into two sections, about giving family advice, and about slaves and masters. In the first, we will have to examine carefully the charge that the text condones male domination, and in the second, we will discover some fascinating possibilities about why these words were written!

#### **Family matters (vv18-21)**

When we read verses 18 to 21, it is wise to keep in mind that this is not the main focus of the passage, and this comes later with the section on slaves (3:22-25). This will not shed light back on the family issues mentioned, but it does make it clear that it was not Paul's primary intention at this point to explain the relationship between husbands and wives and fathers and children in any depth. He does this at least a little more fully, elsewhere (see Ephesians 5:22f., 6:1f.; 1 Tim 3:4f.).

The passage starts from the ancient social assumption that women were made in a subservient role to men, in which women are required to accept the 'authority' of their husbands (3:18). However, this is not offered to us with the thought that women are in any way inferior to men, indeed, their submission could be thought of as qualified by the phrase 'as is right in the Lord', for it is not clear whether what is 'right' is the nature of submission itself or the way in which it is to be practiced. Certainly if it is the latter, then issues of authority between men and women should all be subject to the Lord, which is Paul's general point anyway.

Further, the famous story of Genesis (2:18-25) in which 'woman' was made from the rib of 'man' was not as male dominated as we might think. As the place of women in ancient society was often little more than slaves, this story (and our text today) emphasises the interdependence of men and women in work, social life and sex; and in this sense, is a profoundly liberating text. This view is supported by the first story of the creation of humanity in Genesis 1 in which both male and female are described together as the 'image' of God; 'So God created humanity in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female ...' (1:27). Yes, the society of Paul's day and also the church was strongly male dominated, but what he said and what the Bible generally says is far less authoritarian than we think.

The instruction to husbands given by Paul is to 'love your wives' (3:19) to which he adds the phrase 'and do not treat them harshly'. This is not just an attempt to smooth over the issue of male domination, for one of the main problems in husband and wife relationships is the manner in which love is shown particularly by the man to the woman. If I turn verses 18 and 19 on their heads for a moment, you may see what I mean. Some of the most serious breakdowns in marriage occur when a man stops showing or has never shown the practical and tactile love that a woman needs in order to know deeply that she is loved. On the other hand, it can equally be said that men often give up on relationships when they feel, rightly or wrongly, that what they say is countered or dismissed. Many complex issues are involved in the breakdown of relationships, but the needs and expectations of both men and women are different; and instead of ignoring these verses because of the issue of male domination, it is possible to read them as reflecting some of the genuinely godly facts of life, which are that men and women are different, and each should minister to the other's needs; the woman by accepting her husband's decisions, and the man by showing real, practical and tactile love to his wife. There are some blurred edges around this, but the advice is, I believe, valid.

If we look at verse 20 and 21, it is important that we should take them liberally in the same way, for it is when we make absolutes out of Scripture's general guidance that we make mistakes when handling family issues. The obedience of children is an important principle, but we all know that there is a process of growing through which children move towards adulthood, and the breaking of ties between parent and child can be a complex social phenomenon. In reading this text, however, we should remember that the Greek word for 'children' applied, in a Jewish family, to children under the age of about 12 or 13. We all know that household discipline for children under this age is quite a different matter to discipline for teenagers! But this passage is not intended to be a formal discipline; it is general advice for how things work best, as is clear from verse 21 in which fathers are commanded not to 'provoke' their children because of the way in which this can destroy trust within a family.

These verses are best read as general advice, but they still need our careful attention, even though in Paul's letter to the Colossians, they merely set the reader up for what comes next!

#### **Servants, slaves, masters, Onesimus and Philemon!**

Why should Paul write so much about the duties of slaves in the letter to the Colossians? To find the answer, we should look at Colossians 4:9; 'he is coming with Onesimus ... who is one of you'. This appears to be no more than a snippet of personal information, but it is more than this. It directly implies that either with this letter or just after it, Paul will send Onesimus to Colossae, which according to this verse, is his home. Now, in Paul's letter to Philemon, he writes about a slave called Onesimus (the same person!) who he is returning to his master, Philemon, with a plea that he should accept his slave Onesimus back home after he had run away. His plea is that Philemon should accept his slave back without severe punishment because he was a Christian, moreover Onesimus had become a Christian himself, and Paul pleads for master and slave to be reconciled in Christ!

Putting this together, it is highly likely that Philemon was a member of the church at Colossae, and upon reading this letter of Paul would hear that his lost slave was indeed now a Christian serving Paul, and was shortly to be returned! If you want to know more, then read Philemon, where you will find that the whole issue was extremely complicated and required Paul to do some very careful letter writing. It is most likely, therefore, that the passage we have here in Colossians about slaves was designed by Paul to set out his preliminary view on the treatment of slaves before he set in motion the tricky business of sending Onesimus home!

If this is the case, then it explains much about our text. There were many types of 'slaves and servants within Roman society, and they could be anything from menial working slaves or highly trusted servants who had charge of important business for their masters. All such servants and slaves were fed and housed in the wider family setting of a master's household, and it was not a practice that was going to change, as it was the accepted way that society was organised. In this context, however, Paul urged that both slaves (3:22-24) and masters (4:1) act with godly integrity in whatever role they had, however, there is within Paul's advice something of a libertarian attitude towards slaves. He urged that they work to please their true master who was the Lord, and not seek approval from others (3:22,23).