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A new creation focus through Colossians ...

Working Like Slaves

Some estimate as many as two-thirds of the first century Christians were slaves. Onesimus, featured in Paul's epistle to Philemon, was a slave run away from a Christian master, and men with names such as Tertius (#3) and Quartus (#4) show up in the writings of the new covenant. Since some Christians were slave masters, and since some Christians were slaves, the word of God is going to have some instructions for both.

It is comparatively easy for moderns to look back at the Roman Empire days and say that the Christian slave owners should have simply released their slaves. Slave release was not easy to accomplish without the slaves being conscripted by someone else. Hence, often the best solution was for the slaves to remain with their kind and Christian master. "Were you called as a slave [did you become a Christian when you were already a slave]?" Paul posited in addressing the Corinthians. "Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that" (1 Corinthians 7:21). If a slave, follow the instructions for slaves.

▲ **Upbeat obedience** — It is almost incomprehensible that God's long-term plan should include massive numbers of Christians being slaves. But thus it was, and thus the instructions. "Slaves," exhorted Paul, "in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord" (Colossians 3:22). The Lord would be the One inspecting all the work, even that which could not otherwise be seen. He is the One who is the Master in heaven, not merely one of the "masters on earth." Slaves were therefore to be respectfully obedient to their masters, and to do their work correctly at every level.

▲ **Work heartily** — The concept of "slaves" and "slave labor" go together. If there were no work to be done, there would be no economic reason to have slaves. Slaves were there to work; hence the scripture gives the instruction: "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Colossians 3:23,24). Those first century Christian slaves were to have a great attitude in their work; how much more, then, those who freely choose their employment or do their housework at home! The Lord does not like it when there is a lot of complaining and general bad attitudes. The record of the sons of Israel in the wilderness shows clearly that God wants His children to be positive and upbeat, understanding that their circumstances are part of God's overall and long-term plan. "Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the Lord," noted the inspired record, "and when the Lord heard it, His anger kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp" (Numbers 11:1). "Whatever you do, do your work heartily!"

▲ **Consequences** — Because Jesus Himself is the Big Boss, brethren must remember that He knows whether the job was done correctly or whether it was sloppily done by way of mere "external service." "For he who does wrong," the apostle informs the brethren, "will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality" (Colossians 3:25). Sobering thoughts, designed to move the saint over to full and quality production.

No matter what the saint's circumstance, he is working for God and he is to do his job well and with a great attitude. The best accolade is worth striving for, the words from the Lord Jesus at the culmination of judgment: "Well done, good and faithful slave!" (Matthew 25:21). It is indeed from the Lord Himself that faithful saints will receive the reward of the eternal inheritance, and it is because it is indeed the Lord Himself that they serve.

JAY WILSON