

Live Like Christ's Slave (Or: How to Live with Reality)

Col 3, 1 Cor 7

Turn to Colossians 3. This sermon is for whoever's daily life does not give them chances to serve Christ. Your daily life has few of the things that matter to the Lord. Your daily life had been taken over by the needs and demands of people. Nothing left for Christ.

This is for any of us who think like that. The short story is, it's not true. We are wrong. We *are* free to serve Christ, our daily lives are *full* of things that matter to the Lord. Every one of us. There is not one believer on earth for whom this is not true.

This teaching today is one of the basic principles of following the Lord. We have all sort of known this all along. But this is the first Sunday of our church year, so let's begin by openly agreeing to this together before the Lord.

We'll go through two paragraphs that Paul wrote about slaves. Real slaves. Slaves were owned by other people, they worked all day, for almost all of them it was not an easy life. Many of them in church, probably on average one quarter to one half of every NT church was slaves.

Their daily lives had been completely taken over by the needs and demands of their owners. Slaves had no chance to do what we might call the spiritual things, devotional habits, ministry opportunities. None of that. What does our God say to people like that?

Colossians 3:22-25 *Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.* ²³ *Whatever you do, work heartily, as working for the Lord, not for human masters,* ²⁴ *since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.* ²⁵ *Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.*

V22 *Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything.* There is no part of life that does not come under this.

V22 *Do it ... with reverence for the Lord.* Everything we do can show respect for the Lord. God calls us to this.

V23 *Whatever you do, work heartily, as working for the Lord.* Working heartily does not mean we have to strain at everything we do. It means no pretending, it means I don't find a way to make it look like I'm working, but I'm not, I'm just pretending. A real temptation for slaves.

If this is true for slaves, it is true for all of us. This affects two parts of our life particularly. (1) How do we do the things we don't want to do? And (2) how do we treat people? This teaching does not shape only these two, but for me at least, these two parts of my life come to the top.

How do I do the things I would not choose to do? How do I treat people in my daily life? The answer from God: do everything with reverence for the Lord. Whatever I do, work heartily, as working for the Lord.

V24 *You know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.* We are all on the Lord's payroll. He's paying attention, he takes our service as serving him, and he rewards us. It's called an inheritance, and a reward, because it is not the same as earning a wage. But the basic truth here is that the Lord watches every slave, and each of us, and rewards this service.

Human slaves never got paid. They were given clothing and food, that's it. And they certainly never got *an inheritance* from anyone. But from the Lord, they would get an inheritance. And just as impressive as what believing masters received. Big deal for slaves.

V24 *It is the Lord Christ you are serving.* We are NOT just serving Christ when we think about this, or when we decide to serve him. He died to buy us. God tells us in 1 Cor 7, *we are not our own, we were bought with a price.* He owns us, and we are always serving him.

He's the Creator, so he already has full rights to every human. But when we trusted in the Lord and became one of his people, he got us a second time. He bought us back with his death.

We ARE serving him all day, every day, whether we want to be or not. We're his. We may be submitting to him, or we may be rebelling, but either way he assumes full rights to our lives, and does what he wants with us. Since we're his, we are always serving him, poorly or well.

And always remember that belonging to the Lord is the best thing that could happen to anyone. We give thanks in everything because we know that the most miserable believer is far more fortunate than the most carefree pagan. We were called to inherit a blessing, and it has already begun. But, once we are a believer, we ARE serving the Lord all day, every day; we are his.

V25 *Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.* I think Paul is already beginning to talk to masters here, those in authority.

Either way, it is the Lord Christ we are serving. He does not care if we are master or slave, parent or child, employer or employee, giving orders or obeying orders. The Lord does not care. We're all his. He rewards good service, and there will be consequences for ignoring his ways.

Persis. I want to introduce you to Persis. Persis is an imaginary person. It is a woman's name in Romans 16:12, but the rest of this I pulled out of thin air. Persis is a 17 year old slave. Imaginary Persis lives in Corinth.

Persis is part of the church because her owners, husband and wife, are part of the Corinthian congregation. This young slave woman has heard Paul himself. He taught in Corinth the kind of things he wrote to the Colossian church.

Persis cares about this stuff. She loves the Lord Jesus, and trust him. As much as she can, she obeys her master with reverence for the Lord. Persis is a house slave, she answers to the wife.

When her owners became Christians, her life improved a little bit, but not that much. Her owners are believers but are still pretty rough around the edges. She works from the time she gets up until she's too tired to do much else, every day.

But she loves the Lord, and trusts him, and obeys because she's obeying him. Sometimes she's lazy and grumpy, doesn't handle life well, but her basic direction is clear. She's serving Jesus the Lord. I have made up Persis, but every NT church in the Roman world had women and men who were slaves like Persis, and who believed and lived like Persis.

Let's summarize where this is going. We'll look at two more Scriptures, but they are saying the same thing in different words. This teaching of God does three things for us, for me. Correction, Call, and Encouragement

(1) Correction. I get funny ideas about when I am serving the Lord, and when I am not. We decide that honouring the Lord means private devotional habits, or doing something in church, or volunteering at some kind of charity, or going overseas to hold babies, to use a nice line I heard yesterday.

Those are all good things, but Persis cannot do any of those, and she still serves the Lord reverently every day. She has no private devotional habits. She prays off and on while she works, or before she sleeps, and she's part of the church. That's it. She does not volunteer at any charity, and she does not do mission trips.

But as best she can, she serves the Lord in all she does, and as best she can, she treats people as the Lord called her to do. She wants her whole life to honour the Lord. And the Lord is just as impressed with her as with the most Spirit-filled prophet and teacher of the Corinthian church. Before the Lord, she is at no disadvantage whatsoever. This still startles me, but it is true.

(2) Call. There is a call here to us. Everything we do is serving the Lord Christ. This is not negotiable. We belong to him. So, work genuinely, especially what we do not like, because we are working for the Lord. And treat people well in all our ordinary days, because everything we do with people is serving the Lord, either well or poorly. Let's serve well.

(3) Encouragement. We can honour him and please him every ordinary day. Every task we don't like can be done in way that's worthy of the Lord. Everything we do with people can please the Lord and bring a reward from him.

No believer ever has a meaningless day. We may not experience fulfillment or meaning or significance, but that's us. We don't have to be busy to do this. Persis has too much to do. That's her situation. Some of us have too little to do. That's our situation. Paul and others spent years in prison! No end of boredom, and feeling useless. Both ways, the day can be lived worthy of the Lord. No believer is ever sidelined from what really matters.

Slavery was awful. It always has been inhuman, a terrible way for sons of Adam to treat each other, for daughters of Eve to treat each other, where one becomes the property of another, and treats them like objects to be used. But it was their reality. This sermon is called, "Live like Christ's Slave." It could also be called, "How believers live with reality."

There is another side to this, though. In the parables that Jesus taught, his favorite picture of his followers was slaves. Sometimes we are sheep, or seed, or branches on a vine, and so on, but he uses "slave," *doulos*, more often than any of those. Jesus found slavery a useful reality to teach us about the kingdom of God.

But do not take any of what I say today to mean slavery is okay. It is not. But it was the reality of Persis and many in the early churches, and we can learn from how God taught them.

I was going to speak from Ephesians 6, but that paragraph basically repeats Col 3. I will note one verse from Eph 6, then go to 1 Cor 7.

Ephesians 6:6 *Slaves, obey your masters not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ. Do the will of God from your heart.* In some Christian circles, people seek the will of God for their lives. But: In the Bible, I'm not sure anyone ever seeks the will of God for their lives. God takes some in a different direction, but they were not asking for that.

The will of God for us is NOT outside all the ordinary common jobs of daily life. God's will for us is that we would do what we do as slaves of Christ. The will of God for us in the Bible is almost always how we live our ordinary daily lives. And we don't have to seek that, God has told us the same thing in many different ways, right through the Bible.

God does call some to a different life, Jesus sends workers into his harvest fields, and things like that. But those people were already doing his daily will. He sets them in a different direction, but it is not more godly or devoted. The will of God is this: do everything as a slave of Christ. This is part of the Correction we get from this.

From your heart: We've read this urging several times. We get grumpy. Persis got grumpy, because she was required to do things she didn't like, for people she didn't like. There were good reasons for her not to like what she had to do, and good reasons not to like the people who wanted it done.

But Persis and we have a higher call. At the same time as we are doing what we don't like for people we don't like, we are serving the Lord. We are always the Lord's servants, the Lord's slaves. Let's get a firm grasp of this. Col 3:24 *It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

We don't need to be clever to think like a Christian. Thinking like a Christian is bringing the gospel into our daily lives, letting the gospel steer us in our daily lives. The core of the gospel is: Jesus is Lord. *It is the Lord Christ we are serving.*

Turn to 1 Cor 7, our third text. Think about "calling," about God calling us. Christ called the twelve to be apostles, and he called Paul to be an apostle. What's our calling?

1 Cor 7:17-24 does something important with calling. It begins with two kinds of call. One is the call of the gospel: repent and believe and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. That is a call from God to us, and we have answered. That's the first call.

The second call is: how will we live after that? John and Peter and Paul were called to be apostles. What is our assignment? What is our call? 1 Cor 7 is very clear: *wherever we find ourselves*. Our situation is our call from God, our situation is our God-given assignment.

What this Scripture does is blend those two. The call to trust Christ for salvation, and the call to serve Christ wherever we find ourselves, is one calling. We receive these two calls at the same time. The Corinthians needed correction. They thought God's assignment would be something that looked more special. They had to do things to make their life look more holy and godly.

No, says Paul. You stay as you are, that's your assignment from God. Your situation is your calling.

1 Cor 7:17-24 *Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. [Paul taught this to every church.] ¹⁸ Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not try to change that. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not try to change that. ¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. ²⁰ Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.*

²¹ *Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. [If we can get freedom from something unpleasant, then get freedom! By all means. But you won't be serving the Lord any more richly. In the kingdom it is a horizontal move, we are no farther up the holiness and devotion ladder.]*

²² *For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. ²³ You were bought at a price; do not any of you become slaves of human beings! We all are Christ's slaves, and: we've all been freed.*

If we feel like our lives have been taken over by unpleasant people, we are insulting the Lord. When we said “Jesus is Lord,” we walked away from thinking like that. There are certainly unpleasant people, and they do harm us and shape our days.

But they have not taken over our lives, ever. Jesus is Lord, we were bought with a price, we do not belong to ourselves, or to unpleasant people. Jesus is Lord. He has taken over our lives, and does not let go. *Do not any of you become slaves of human beings!*

²⁴ *Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. Our situation right now is our assignment, it is our calling.*

Correction: we can serve the Lord faithfully where we are, we can live reverently in our ordinary daily tasks, we can do the will of God from the heart, by how we do unpleasant jobs, and how we treat people. Our situation right now is our assignment from God, our calling. It has all the possibilities to please the Lord that any situation will ever have. Let's learn from Persis.

Call: it is always the Lord Christ we are serving. Let's be honest servants, and live in a way worthy of the Lord. How we do unpleasant tasks. How we treat all the people in our lives.

Encouragement: same as correction: we can serve the Lord faithfully where we are, we can live reverently in our ordinary daily tasks, we can do the will of God from the heart, by how we do unpleasant jobs, and how we treat people.

Our situation right now is our assignment from God, our calling. This is not a lesser calling. It is always the highest possible calling from God. It has all the possibilities to please the Lord that any situation will ever have.

It is always the Lord Christ we are serving. And that is the best thing that could happen to anyone. Amen.

God our Father, This teaching is from you to us on this very day. Keep us corrected, because we get wrong ideas about your will, and what it is that pleases you. Don't let us get deceived about these things. Help us to live each ordinary day as those belonging to Christ. Work in us so that we will want to do this, and so that we will do it. And thank you for encouragement, that each of us can honour and please you in our situation. Thank you that belonging to Christ makes us the most fortunate people on earth. Amen.