

Dear Friends,

In this study passage, Paul teaches the Colossians to follow Jesus' Sermon on the Mount teaching. Think of yourselves as the Lord's "salt and light." (Matthew 5:13-16) In the first century, as today, salt was used either as a flavor enhancer or as a preservative. When you pick up the salt shaker, always be cautious. Do not over-shake too much salt. You can't "Unsalt" a dish. It is possible for believers to "Over-dose" their friends and neighbors with their faith, turning them off rather than inviting them to investigate the faith more fully. According to Solomon, a believer can be "over much righteous." (Ecclesiastes 7:16-17)

It is a common criticism in our present growing anti-Christian culture for unbelievers to harshly and unjustly criticize the faith. Many of us have heard unbelievers accuse Paul of being anti-woman, in fact a woman-hater. In keeping with this week's study passage, occasionally I've heard unbelievers accuse Christians of being weak on human rights, not as strong anti-slavery as they should be. Both accusations are groundless. Unbelievers fail to understand the New Testament (God's) strategy in dealing with cultural moral wrongs. By being the Lord's salt and light, believers show the way, set the example of kind, godly conduct toward all our fellow-men. Instead of demonstrating, or lobbying for laws, Christians simply lived their faith so fully that they manifested in lifestyle the kind grace of the faith-way of living. That faith-way often shined the light of the Lord's approval so brightly that unbelievers who were inclined to practice unkind or abusive conduct toward other people were either shamed out of that behavior or even convinced that the faith-way was a better way to live. It is far more effective to transform a person's lifestyle than to attempt to legislate or coerce him into reluctant change.

Have you ever engaged someone in a Bible discussion and made the point that we cannot possibly live a perfect, sinless life, so we, in fact, never act so as to deserve anything good from the Lord? While technically true, this attitude is not the Bible way to motivate a Christian lifestyle. A loving parent teaches his child the right way to live, and often adds incentives or "Rewards" to the right conduct, to motivate the child to make that good conduct a habit. A parent doesn't raise and train his child based on a labor contract! He builds a life-relationship with the child based on love and kindness that transcends "Wages" earned. And, should the child stumble and fail, the parent will not call the police and file criminal charges against the child. He will lovingly and quietly teach the child why the conduct is wrong, and show the child a better way to deal with life's problems the next time a similar situation arises. It is this training that often finds itself interwoven into the fabric of Biblical teaching on the rewards the Lord bestows on His children.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

A Reward for the Lord's Own

Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons. (Colossians 3:22-25 KJV 1900)

In an earlier study on this theme, I made a distinction between our eternal life, an inheritance, and Biblical rewards, temporal, blessings in time for faithful service. Our present study passage blends

the two words into one thought. So does this mean that our eternal life is an earned reward? No, of course not. The many passages that describe our eternity with the Lord as a gift, not a wage earned, and as an inheritance, affirm the principle. Our eternity with the Lord is an inheritance, based on the will of God for His chosen family. One passage will serve as a suitable example.

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:23; the contrast between “wages” and “gift” is dramatic. Paul here affirms that the basis for people being sentenced to eternal separation because of their sins is not at all the same as the basis for people spending eternity in glorious fellowship with the Lord. One is a wage, justly earned; the other is a gift, graciously given)

Words could not more clearly distinguish the difference. Eternal punishment, the just “wages” of sin, fully earned by all who shall be sentenced at the last Judgment to eternal separation, is death. In sharp contrast, all who shall be taken to glory for eternity with the Lord shall be there on the basis of a gift of God, not an offer, a wage, or a reward.

Context and “Rightly dividing” Scripture answers the many doctrinal questions that confuse believers. What is the context of our study passage? It is a detailed and quite specific lesson on how faithful believers should live their present lives to the glory of God, and not for themselves, not for personal gain. The word translated “Servants” in this passage was translated from a Greek word that means a slave far more than it refers to an employee. That said, even in our time and culture, we occasionally see employees in work situations where they suffer grave and brutal abuse, not much different from first century slaves.

In the first century, labor unions and governmental agencies did not exist to protect and to define how employers treated their employees. In fact, other than the societies such as the Jewish culture, which practiced stewardship, “Servants” were most often closer to slaves than employees.

While the Greek culture nurtured a fierce sense of personal freedom and looked down on slavery, most other first century cultures practiced some form of slavery. I am thankful that the New Testament follows the Greek theme in this point. Consider the short book of Philemon. A slave of a believer, at the time himself not a believer, runs away and tries to disappear into the background of a big city. He encounters Paul, hears Paul preach, and is converted to the faith. Small world, Paul happens to be good friends to his former master. Paul sends the slave back to his master, but not as a returning slave; as a restored brother in Christ. Thus, for Paul and our New Testament moral principle, all believers are brothers and sisters in Jesus, and degrading, inhumane slavery is eliminated.

Despite the Christian rejection of slavery, the dominant cultures of the time continued to practice it, and Paul, and other New Testament writers, include in their moral teachings the godly conduct of believers who find themselves in this state for the time. In Philemon, Paul, wisely taught by the Holy Spirit, demonstrates the only effective way to change a culture. You never truly change a culture by legislating behavior through laws. You change it by teaching people to transform their lives, as Paul changed Philemon from slaveowner to forgiving brother.

Whatever the condition or the culture or the time, often believers in Jesus may find themselves for a season snared in a less-than-ideal situation. Consider our COVID-19 disruption of the last seven months. COVID-19 does not have the moral repulsion of slavery, but both problems impose external stresses and problems onto believers. As sad and tragic as it is, a few cultures in our broken world still practice some form of slavery. Believers today should be as wise and as morally opposed to this sinful and demoralizing practice as Paul was in Philemon. Preach the faith—in the face of the sinful practice—so as to eliminate any thought of it! How are believers in Christ to conduct themselves when confronted with any disruptive moral wrong? Do we focus on the problem and try to fight against it with equally carnal tools and weapons? Or do we follow Paul’s example in Philemon, and preach the gospel so that believers will learn to repent and transform their lives to the “High road” of godly faith?

I grew up on a small farm in the deep agricultural south of this country. My family didn't have enough money to hire workers. Our family had to do the work required to run the farm. Our parents taught us to be fully as devoted as faithful employees with our farm work. Through my professional career, I was often blessed far above my expectations. While other employees watched the clock and "Punched out" on time, I practiced what my parents taught me; if there is a job that needs to be done, stick with it till you complete it.

If first century Christians had made a public protest against slavery, the Romans would likely have eliminated them immediately. However, by preaching the gospel in the face of all errant cultural wrongs, urging all believers to practice the lifestyle of Jesus, they transformed the culture far more effectively in the end. We cannot imagine the present state of human treatment of other humans, had these past Christians not preached and practiced the gospel of Jesus with conviction and clarity. The state of less economically favored people, women, children, the sick—you name the class—would suffer far more than they do. No culture has converted to the faith, so no culture, our own included, has solved all of its immoral cultural problems, but the influence of Biblical faith has wrought far more improvements than we could imagine otherwise. Our only substantial hope to improve our present culture is the same. The more faithfully believing Christians practice their faith toward each other the more they shall become "Salt and light" to transform the culture.

Paul thus devotes this lesson, along with other similar teachings, to the right, the godly, way of all classes of believers, including "Servants."

...not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God. Whatever the work environment, how should a sincere believer in Jesus conduct himself/herself as an employee? Paul answers the question. Serve in the job description "*...in singleness of heart, fearing God.*" In most situations, such a godly believer and employee will earn the employer's respect. The harder they work the more beneficial they are for the employer. While such dedication often produces advancement or promotion, Paul offers a far better outcome than anything an employer can give.

And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men. More than a few times in my employment, I witnessed employees putting on the appearance of conscientious employees, but actually doing as little as they could, "Eyeservice," "Menpleasers," not faithful to their position. They quickly lost my respect.

Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. Consider this lesson in its context. A believer in a debasing situation is taught to make the best he can of a bad situation by viewing it through the lens of faith and not from the perspective of human assessment. Trust your God more than you trust yourself or your "master" or employer. And serve in whatever your state so as to honor your faith and your God. According to Paul's inspired encouragement, what outcome might we realize? Instead of being paid an appropriate wage by your employer or master, you receive a far richer blessing from the Lord.

What is this "**reward of the inheritance**" of which Paul writes? Preachers' Homiletical Commentary describes it, "The reward of the inheritance is in generous disproportion to the service rendered." In the end, do we prefer to receive "What I have coming" from man or what the Lord gives us? Do we trust man or the Lord more to do the right thing?

In an earlier chapter, we studied the Lord's faithful abundance in His blessings upon His obedient, faith-walking children.

For brass I will bring gold, and for iron I will bring silver, and for wood brass, and for stones iron: I will also make thy officers peace, and thine exactors righteousness. (Isaiah 60:17)

Here, I believe, we learn the significance of Paul's point. When a parent works to encourage and teach his child, he will often try to work out a highly motivating system of "Rewards and punishments" to urge the child to his/her very best. If the child is taught to do work that an employer

might regard as “Minimum wage” menial work, will the parent grudgingly give the child this or less? Or will the parent find a way to give the child something of far greater value than the actual work assigned?

Isaiah’s point affirms a loving parent’s approach to encourage his child. Whatever the child does for the parent, the parent does more for the child than the work deserved. If the Lord only gave you in blessing what your mixed obedience deserved for attending church service, how motivated would you be next Sunday to go back to church? In the symbolism of value that Isaiah describes, you give the Lord your brass, but, in return, He gives you His gold! You give Him your iron, but He gives you His silver. You give him your wood; He gives you His brass. You give Him your stones; He gives you His iron. In every case, what the Lord gives to you exceeds the value of what you gave to Him. Applying this principle to Paul’s lesson, what do we have? The Lord’s response to our obedience as His child is not the “Reward” of a master or an employer, or even of a righteous judge. It is the response of a loving Father, a family response, and so the term, “*the reward of the inheritance,*” a reward that a loving parent might give to his child.

Elder Joe Holder