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Unto Christ - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott shows us that as Christians we are always to set Christ before us, and our concern should be to serve Him more and more.

Transcript

[Music] Relationships are a fundamental part of our human experience. Human life consists of a whole web or network of relationships. And human maturity consists very largely in an ability to establish, stable, loving, responsible, enriching relationships with other people.

And all of us, I think, without exception have some difficulties in our lives in learning to establish these relationships.

[Music] Welcome to the Bible for today with John Stott. As the most respected clergyman in the world, according to Billy Graham, and one of the 100 most influential people in the world, according to Time magazine, there's perhaps been no one who has raised the standard of biblical teaching in the 20th century as John Stott.

An extremely humble man, known affectionately to many as Uncle John, he was a pastor to pastors and a servant of the global church. From his home church of all souls, Langen Place in central London, he preached over 600 sermons. And during this his centenary, we're bringing you some of his very best teaching from nearly 60 years of ministry.

[Music] Being a Christ-centered Christian was a seven-part series of messages in which John Stott spoke on what it means to live unto Christ. And how being in a right relationship with Christ will benefit the relationships we have with one another. As John will be frequently referring to the Bible, you'll find it helpful to have yours open to Romans chapter 14.

We come today to the fifth installment of a July, August series entitled "The Christ-Centered Christian". We're then subtitled in inquiry into the theology of prepositions. Because what we are doing is seeking to discover together what a beautiful and many

splendid and many-colored thing a Christian's relationship to Christ is like a diamond of many facets and many colors.

For the Christian lives through Christ, in Christ, under Christ, with Christ, unto Christ, for Christ, and like Christ. And these are the seven prepositions that we're looking at on these Sunday mornings. Today, as we've been reminded already, our topic is unto Christ.

The Christian lives his life unto Christ. Now the English preposition unto the normally renders a simple "datative" in the Greek sentence. As Christians, we are to set Jesus Christ always before us and to live our lives unto him.

We are to keep him constantly in our minds, constantly before our eyes. Our life is to be directed towards him. Our ambition is to serve him and to obey him.

And our concern is to please him more and more in all aspects of life. Unto Christ. That's the glorious theme.

Now the particular aspect of the theme I want to develop from the New Testament, and I will ask you in a few moments to turn to the first text. The particular theme I want to develop from the New Testament may surprise you. It is that only when we learn to live unto Christ can we learn to live with one another.

In other words, our horizontal relationships with one another depend very largely on our vertical relationship with Jesus Christ. Now I am very well aware that relationships are a fundamental part of our human experience. Human life consists of a whole web or network of relationships.

And human maturity consists very largely in an ability to establish, stable, loving, responsible, enriching relationships with other people. And all of us, I think, without exception, have some difficulties in our lives in learning to establish these relationships. And I have no wish to oversimplify a complicated situation.

But I do not hesitate to say that at least a major secret of harmony in our relationships with one another, whether at home or at school or at university or at work or in the church or in the world, is to learn to live unto Christ. And when we are living unto Christ, when that adjustment has been made, it is marvelous how other adjustments naturally follow. Well, that's my theme.

And I want to bring you three examples of the theme from the New Testament, which today will involve us in three separate texts. Firstly, our relationships in the church. And for this, I ask you to open your Bible, if you will, in the New Testament section.

And in a moment, I'm going to read some verses from Romans, chapter 14. But before I do, let me introduce it like this. The local church is meant to be a church family.

That's a phrase we love here at all cells that Michael Bourness introduced. The church is a church family whose members, no one another, are related to one another, love one another, support one another, etc. That is what the local church is meant to be a family.

And it is a strange and unhappy fact that many churches, many, many, many churches in many parts of the world, instead of being characterized by loving acceptance of one another, are characterized by critical rejection of one another. And are not the happy family that they are intended to be. Now let me read you from Romans 14, because this was a situation in the first century in Rome, as it is in the 20th century in London, and in many other parts of the world.

Romans 14, as are the man whose weak in faith welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions. One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats and vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains first judgment on him who eats, because God has welcomed him.

And the argument is if God has welcomed him, we'd better welcome him too. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls, and he will be upheld, but his master is able to make him stand. Again one man is steamed one day, is better than another, while another man is steamed all days alike, that everyone be fully convinced in his own mind.

He observes the day, literally in the Greek, observes it unto the Lord. He also who eats, eats unto the Lord. Since he gives thanks to God, while he who abstains, abstains unto the Lord, and gives thanks to God.

None of us lives to himself, none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live unto the Lord. If we die, we die unto the Lord.

So whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. To this end, Christ died and lived. Rose again, that he might be Lord of the dead and living.

So why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or why do you despise your brother? You know that's so obvious, isn't it? I don't know that I need to draw out and elaborate the theme more than for a few moments. In Rome, there were some Christians strong in faith, and some Christians weak in faith. The strong and the weak lived together in the church.

Some had strong, well-educated consciences, and were convinced that they had liberty to eat meat and even idle meats. Meats that had previously been offered in sacrifice to an idol. They were so strong in their Christian conscience and conviction, they knew the idols were nothing.

So food couldn't be contaminated by being offered to an idol. So they had liberty in their conscience and conviction to eat. In the church too, they had weak Christians who had

an overscrupulous conscience.

Converts from paganism, and they were vegetarians. And in particular, they abstained from meats that had been offered in sacrifice to idols. Now Paul says these are trivial differences in the local congregation.

There's nothing wrong in a congregation having trivial differences. He's not talking about the major things. You see, we're all agreed on the major things about the great God, the creator of the universe, the sustainer, the judge, about Jesus Christ, the God-man who died on the cross and rose again, ascended to heaven, sent the Spirit, is coming back, and we're all agreed on the major truths of the Christian faith.

But there are trivial differences, or there were then in Rome between them. We shan't agree about everything until we get to heaven. So we'd better learn to be tolerant of one another in the church family.

What disturbed the Apostle Paul is not the existence of trivial differences, but the intolerance of Christians on account of them. They despised one another, they passed judgment on one another. How did Paul deal with that situation in the church? He dealt with that problem as he dealt with every problem, theological.

Don't despise theology. The life of the church is a reflection of the doctrine of the church. Paul didn't just appeal to them to be nice and kind to one another.

He reminded them of a doctrine which they had forgotten, and which they were denying by their practice, namely that Christ had died and risen again in order that he might be the Lord of the living and the dead. That is those who were alive on earth and those who died before he returned, so that if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die before he comes, we die to the Lord, so whether we live or die, we are the Lord's, and we live our whole life to him. That is the direction of our life through his death and resurrection.

Now every Christian is a servant of Jesus Christ, the Lord. Every Christian is going to give an account on the judgment day of himself or herself to the Lord. So Paul says, "Who are you to start passing judgment on one another? What business have you to interfere to despise and judge one another?" "Oh no," he says, "we live to the Lord and we must allow one another to live to the Lord." Now do you get this? The real secret of harmonious relationships within the church family is to be found in the doctrine of the Lord's ship of Jesus, and that we live our Christian life unto him and not unto one another.

We are not one another's Lord and Master. Oh we're brothers and sisters before a heavenly master, that's the theme. Now there are many minor issues that divide Christians today.

How should we dress in church? I look around today, I see a young man here with a very

bright scarlet shirt that I find myself breaking the tenth commandment over. (Laughter) I see one or two ladies in their smart shopau, they're not very many. People are very different, they dress.

Some men have ties, some haven't, some are wearing funny ecclesiastical robes and some are not, some wear dressed in different ways. That's one of the ways in which we disagree with one another. Or again there is a disagreement, you know, as to whether we should touch any alcohol or not, whether we should be total abstainers.

There is a disagreement among even jellical and biblical Christians about the precise volume of water that is needed in order to validate baptism. (Laughter) There is a difference of opinion among Christians about how old testament prophecies are fulfilled or will be, etc. trivial differences among us in comparison with the great things that unite us.

Now to judge or to despise a fellow Christian on these trivial matters is not only an unbrotherly act or an unsystemy act and a breach of Christian fellowship, it is far worse than that. It is a denial of the lordship of Jesus. It is a presumptuous attempt to usurp the prerogative of Christ.

But who am I to cast myself in the role of the Lord and the judge of other Christians? He is our Lord and judge, and we must live unto him, and we must let our fellow Christians live unto him. And when we get that clear, it will liberate us from all this factious criticism and rejection of one another. So that's the first thing you see.

Our relationships in the church are right when we're living unto the Lord. Second, our relationships at work, assuming that we are not one of the unfortunate unemployed, but assuming that we have work of some kind, whether indeed at school or university or in a job, an employed job, our relationships at work also come right and are adjusted when we are living unto the Lord. Here my text, if you'll kind of turn to it, is a little further on.

Colossians 3 beginning at verse 22. Colossians 3, 22, is slave. So, "Be in everything, those who are your earthly masters." Not with eye service, as men please, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord.

Whatever your task, work heartily, literally, as unto the Lord. And not unto men or women, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward for you are serving the Lord Christ. And again, chapter 4, verse 1, "Mustest treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven." Now, there's no justification in this paragraph for the institution of slavery itself.

Indeed, the demand in chapter 4, verse 1, that slaves be treated with justice, is a revolutionary principle which led in the end to the abolition of the system of slavery and should have led to its abolition centuries previously. But what we have in this passage is

instruction while the evil system lasted. Instruction, "Huslaves and slave owners" should treat one another.

And the principle of their behavior to one another, which Paul elaborates, is equally applicable to all modern situations of employment. What is that principle? Verse 22, "Slaves be obedient to your earthly masters." Not with eye service, not only when the boss is watching, as if your ambition was to please him, but in singleness of heart, fearing and pleasing Christ. Verse 23, "Whatever you do, and slaves have to do some very menial and dirty jobs.

Whatever you do, do it from your heart as unto the Lord." And not unto men, similarly masters, verse 4, "Creat your slaves with justice, knowing that you have a master in heaven." Now, I'm very anxious that we should all follow quite clearly that the teaching in birth cases is, in principle, precisely the same. Both the slave and the slave owner had the same master in heaven. And they were to live unto him.

And their treatment of one another would be transformed if they lived and worked unto Christ. It was knowing that which would transform the relationship. Did you notice the repetition of that phrase, verse 24, "Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance for your serving the Lord Christ." Chapter 4, verse 1, "Knowing that you have a master in heaven." So that if only you could both know and remember and acknowledge the truth that you have a master in heaven, then your relationships and your work will be changed.

Each, the slave and the slave owner had to see behind one another the Lord Jesus Christ. And then that treatment of one another would be changed by their treatment of him. The slave would be more conscientious.

The slave owner would be more just in his dealings with his slaves. Why? Because his eye was on Christ. And it's exactly the same in employment today.

Just there, but a hundred years ago, there was a young boy called Samuel Chadwick who later became a Methodist minister of some renown who was converted on a Sunday school anniversary of his church. Some of you may have heard me tell this story before. And on the Sunday school anniversary, the visiting teacher or preacher said that John Newton had once remarked that if he were a shoe black or a shoe shine boy, he'd be the best china of shoes in the village.

Because he would shine shoes as if Jesus Christ was going to wear them. Now Sam aged 10 in the Sunday school parents trying to get hold of this and tell it to your children later if they're downstairs or somewhere else. Sam aged 10 pricked up his ears.

Because it was his job at home to clean his dad's boots and he hated it, especially having to clean his wellingtons, his rubber boots. The anniversary Sunday was a wet day

and boot cleaning was on Monday morning at its worst. So young 10-year-old Sam began with the wellingtons on the principle that you get the worst job done first.

And he got through in a kind of a way and then suddenly they're flashed into his mind what the teacher had said the previous day and he looked at the half-finished job and he asked himself, "Would those boots look well on the feet of Jesus?" And for an answer he picked them up and cleaned them a second time. And he said in later life that it was the most, it was a very simple thing to do, but it was the most important thing I ever did in my life. "I got into the habit," he said of learning to do the simplest duties as unto Christ.

Now George Herbert got hold of this and to him we're going to sing at the end of the service, "Teach me, my God and King, in all things thee to see." And what I do in everything to do it unto thee, all may of thee partake. Nothing can be so mean that with this tincture for thy sake will not grow bright and clean, a servant with this clause makes drudgery divine, who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine. This is the famous stone that turneth all to gold, for that which God doth touch and own cannot for less be told.

Now let's apply to ourselves, it is possible to sweep a room, clean a room, as if Jesus Christ was going to visit your home that day. It's possible to visit another person's home as if you were visiting Jesus Christ, possible to type a letter as if Jesus Christ was going to receive and read it. It's possible to serve a customer in the shop as if Jesus Christ had gone shopping that day.

It's possible to nurse a patient in hospital as if Jesus Christ was in that bed. It's possible to cook a meal as if you were Martha and Jesus Christ was going to eat it. It transforms everything when you learn to do it as unto Christ, not unto men.

You've been listening to the first part of a message by John Stott from Romans chapter 14, which will continue at the same time next week. Romans was probably John's best loved book in the Bible, which may account for the fifty-sevens he preached from it. John also wrote over fifty books in his lifetime, including his best-selling "The Radical Disciple", which deals with much of what we've heard today.

Details of this and all his books can be found by visiting premier.org.uk/JohnStott. The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world. Today, Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries, thanks to the vision of John Stott, who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership. To find out about this and other ministries, John Stott found it, go to premier.org.uk/JohnStott. Join us at the same time next week for more from the Bible for today with John Stott.

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