

Colossians 3:18-4:1 Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. ²² Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. ^{4:1} Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Colossians 3:18-4:1 | Households

We've been in this letter for the whole summer moving through it about a paragraph each week. This is a wonderful way to share a letter as a church so that we can encounter the richness of it, but that can be challenging when we're trying to piece the letter together as a whole. This is not a long letter, you can probably read it in about 15 minutes maybe 20. This shows us that the ideas that Paul is communicating he does not think of as far from one another, and therefore we shouldn't either.

This is a cosmic message that Paul is articulating. As grand in scale as any possible story. But Paul understands that the truth of the experience of the gospel doesn't matter unless, like Christ himself, it becomes the scale of the human life and transforms where we live every day. This grand message shows itself in the ordinary contours of our existence and that takes place most of all in the relationships of our homes and our work. Paul connects the gospel right down into our lives in three relational couplets. Wives and husbands, children and parents, bondservants and masters. In his ordering we see levels of relational priority. Let's begin at the deepest, wives and husbands.

1. Wives and Husbands

Colossians 3:18-19 Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

You'll notice first of all that his instruction is simple and pointed. What many have attempted in books, Paul accomplishes in only a few sentences if only we would heed his instruction! Let's begin with wives.

Instruction: He calls wives to submit to their husbands. This means that the orientation of the home is sought to be preserved and supported rather than ignored or subverted. And in this submission the home is able to become a well ordered place of meaning.

Order: This instruction reveals an implicit ordering of the marriage relationship as it is wives who are to submit to their husbands and not husbands who are to submit to their

wives. The ordering of this relationship is not a Pauline idiosyncrasy but the description of the marriage relationship throughout scripture.

A husband and wife are to fit together like a question and an answer. Like potentiality and actualization. Like leader and follower. There is no contradiction here with Paul's explanation of the male and female equality before the Lord, but their equality does not eliminate their distinctiveness nor make them interchangeable. Paul is calling on wives to participate in this structure, not subvert it or invert it, because in this structure the relationship becomes thriving and meaningful. When our ultimate submission is to the Lord there is no loss of dignity by participating in the patterns of His world.

Now we must notice that this always functions as a couplet. The husband and the wife become meaningful in their cooperation with the biblical pattern. And the husband here is called to love their wives. Now love is critical to grasp here as that which celebrates what they see God doing in the other person. This is not a pursuit of mere obedience, or a desire to dissolve the other person's humanity into your own so that you face no obstacles. When you love another person you uphold them before the Lord. This is why Paul sees the opposite of this love as harshness.

A husband's harshness is the misuse of the position which he has been given in the Lord as leader of his wife. Rather than receiving that position from the Lord, a husband tries to grip it for himself and crush the goodness of his wife, whom he has also received.

As we understand that the husband's reception of his leadership from the Lord allows him to participate properly within it, so too we see that the wife's submission to the Lord allows her to properly participate in her relationship to her husband. We must see that this relationship is always governed by an ultimate submission to the Lord. Therefore a wife is never honoring the Lord when she supports the sinful actions of her husband. Either towards herself or towards others. Her submission only makes sense in the context of her submission to the Lord. Likewise a husband is not glorying in his own submission to the Lord by denying the calling to leadership that he has for his wife.

2. *Children and Parents*

Colossians 3:20-21 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

In the home we see children are to offer a comprehensive obedience to their parents. That is because parents are the authorities in the home. Of course as before, Paul addresses children in this because they stand before the Lord as children. God has placed the authority of parents into the lives of children as a real thing. The Bible understands the reality of parenthood and childhood. These are real patterns of life that are to be

embodied. We ought not to fear crushing the childhood of our children by expressing Godly authority in their lives. Rather we are drawing them into the full participation of their creatureliness. They ought to be fearful of their parents as parents, and understand the complete love that their parents offer them.

How incredible it is to see here, where even complete obedience is required of the subject, Paul speaks directly to Father's as well. It is not a blanket authority but an authority under the Lord which therefore ought to express the Lord's character. Paul's word here, "Fathers" is likewise the word for parents, so it is not a neglect of mothers. But it is to be noted that the emphasis and power of provocation is deeply held by fathers. Provocation is a way of once again denying that this is a received authority and rather living as though this is an authority which must be manufactured. Our parenting is not to demonstrate our own power, but to participate with God in his forming of the child who belongs to God. We ought to seek to encourage their hearts. Oh how hard the world is, let our children be encouraged by their homes!

3. Bondservants & Masters

Colossians 3:22 Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

It is important to note the distinction that unlike husbands and wives or children and parents, nowhere in scripture is slavery as such stated to be a divine ordinance. A man owning another man is not pleasing in the eyes of God. But Paul does not neglect this aspect of the roman household. It is estimated that in the first century about 1/3 of Roman society was made up of the slave class and slaves made up a large proportion of the early church. In Colossians Paul dedicates the majority of his household instruction to slaves and masters. I'll explain the reason for this shortly.

While Paul offers the same comprehensive call to obedience that he calls children to for their parents, he qualifies the masters by designating them as earthly. It is Paul's way of saying that these are not necessary masters as wives and children are relationships of covenantal necessity. These relationships are temporal and contingent. But his initial call is still towards obedience, but one which is not as conditional and contingent but as an obedience that were dedicated to the Lord. Not just people pleasers but sincerely, perhaps even exceeding the expectations of a master. Paul shows us that he is here applying the principle he articulated just before this, which is that in all things we should act in the name of Jesus. He basically repeats himself here.

Colossians 3:23-24 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Now look at the subversion that Paul is introducing to the slave class. Imagine a Christian slave hearing from his master. Incredible work! What skill and care you've shown! And the slave saying, I didn't do this for you, I did it for the Lord. And the promise that is in the slave's mind is that God sees, and will reward his service as though it were done to Christ. There is no true service that goes unseen. It is all recognized and rewarded by God. What a comfort to the man or woman who is the most unseen in society. The subhuman in this regard is actually operating as more human than their earthly masters. And Paul offers this universal warning.

Colossians 3:25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

There is no escaping the blessing or the judgement of God. So the slave who of all people has reason for resentment for the wrong they are experiencing can know that they are not invisible but will be avenged.

Colossians 4:1 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

And just as with the other couplets Paul directly addresses the masters. And here he calls them to an understanding of their shared master who is in heaven. The bondservants are to be treated justly and fairly. Consider those words. Justice is the highest stoic virtue, and fairness implies equality among humanity. He is saying that within this institution you must operate as though it isn't present.

Now why the focus on slaves and masters in this letter. Well this letter was to be delivered to the Colossians with another letter not addressed to the church as a whole but to one man in whose home the church met, his name was Philemon. Paul's letter to Philemon is a letter of advocacy for one of Philemon's slaves named Onesimus. Onesimus had run away from Philemon, and by providence met Paul and became a Christian. Paul writes to Philemon to receive Onesimus back.

Philemon 15-16 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Chains shall he break. For the slave is our brother. And in his name, all oppression shall cease.

Look at what the gospel can do. Seek this in your life, might you be conformed to his calling and order. Return to the position of function.