

Colossians: The Family Part 1

Colossians 3:18-19

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on August 27, 2023

Love and Marriage

Maybe you've heard the old saying about marriage: if you want something said, ask the husband. If you want something done, ask the wife. While that may be humorous, there have been moments when I wonder why I am asked about things at all concerning our nuclear family structure. I often don't have the vital information required to usher my children from event to event. More than once I saw the disappointment in the eyes of other adults at my daughter's dance classes when I walked her inside rather than Danielle.

"Is your wife coming today?" they'd ask. "Nope. Just me. I'm the dad." I liked to remind them that I do have a part in the raising of my children. Barely containing their displeasure, they would resign themselves to muster up, "Well, we will text her." To which I always happily reply, "Great idea! She loves texts. I get several every hour!" And then I remind them that I am the dad again.

This works for our family structure. Over time, we have figured out the appropriate rhythms and tasks for each one of us. And over time, we have discerned how best to move forward and grow as a Christian family.

Over the next several weeks, we are considering three sets of exhortations that the Apostle Paul gives to the family. There is 3:22-4:1 dealing with servants and masters. We see one in 3:20-21 to children and parents. But this morning we turn our attention to wives and husbands in 3:18-19.

This morning, there is the potential that some of you may shut down your brain and not listen so carefully because you think that these words don't apply to you. Because this morning, we turn our attention to Paul's teaching to Christian wives and Christian husbands concerning their relationship with each other in the family.

As a teenager, I remember being less than connected to sermons about marriage. If you are here this morning, don't shut out the counsel of God's Word. There are not parts that are just not for you. All of God's Word matters to each and every person.

It is true that some portions of the text will land in different ways in our lives. Passages dealing with marriage and family may not resonate now for you, but that doesn't mean that they will never ever resonate. That is how this book is living and active. It isn't static and flat. As we grow, as our lives change and seasons end or begin, the Scriptures that we ignored suddenly become our lifelines. Let's keep this in mind as we read. I invite you to Colossians 3:18-19. (read text)

How To Have a Full Family Life

We have spent time considering previously in Colossians the fullness of Christ, who created and is currently sustaining the universe by his power. We have further considered what it means to have access to His fullness for every area of our lives. Now we will look into the domestic fullness to be found in Christ. To put it simply: we are moving from the religion of the cosmos to the religion of the living room. Christ is the fullness of the universe. He must also become the fullness in each home.

Colossians 3:18-19 is, without doubt, domestic. It deals with the home. More specifically, it is dealing with a Christian home. This is Paul teaching about the relationship between a *Christian* husband and a *Christian* wife. This is not making a comment about men's and women's roles in society or in the business world or in the political realm. There are other texts in the New Testament that give some guidance concerning those things. But this is not one of those texts. Applying these few verses to an area it was never intended does Scripture a great disservice. No, the teaching here is aimed at Christians who want to live as Christians within the home and furthermore to experience the fullness that God intended for them.

Let's also be crystal clear that this teaching is desperately needed today for the Church. Marriage has suffered from lowering opinions. A seven-year-old girl who had just seen the movie *Cinderella* decided to test her neighbor's knowledge of the story. The neighbor wanted to impress the little girl and said, "I know what happens at the end." "What?" asked the little girl. "Cinderella and the prince lived happily ever after!" The little girl thought for a minute and said, "Oh no they didn't! They got married!" While that cynicism was unwitting and innocent, others are much more calculated.

William Congreve once wrote, “Every man plays the fool once in his life, but to marry is playing the fool all of one’s life.”¹

These Scriptures are radically elevating. “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and don’t be bitter toward them.” This teaching flies directly into the face of the ancient world. Life was not sunshine, lollipops and rainbows for women in the ancient world. William Barclay writes:

“Under Jewish law, a woman was a thing; she was the possession of her husband, just as much as his house or his flocks or his material goods were. She had no legal right whatever. For instance, under Jewish law, a husband could divorce his wife for any cause, while a wife had no rights whatever in the initiation of divorce. In Greek society a respectable woman lived a life of entire seclusion. She never appeared on the streets alone, not even to go marketing. She lived in women’s apartments and did not join her men even for meals. From her there was demanded a complete servitude and chastity; but her husband could go out as much as he chose and could enter into as many relationships outside marriage as he liked and incur no stigma. Under both Jewish and Greek laws and custom, all privileges belonged to her husband, and all the duties to the wife.”²

The domestic rules Paul sends to the Colossians were vastly different from Jewish and Greco-Roman culture in that day. Wives were not only addressed equally with their husbands, but they were addressed first. Both radically new approaches. The fact that Paul would even include women in his teaching and allow them to sit in his teaching sessions was a radical approach that no Jewish teacher would ever permit.

Paul is also clear that both husbands and wives had duties, obligations in a Christian marriage. It wasn’t all on the wives.³ Verse 17 lays the context for these verses. There Paul makes it clear that the totality of their lives was to be regulated by the name of the Lord Jesus. The reminder in verse 18 that they were both admonished “in the Lord” calls back to 17.

¹ Michael R. Tucker, *Live Confidently* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1976), p.61

² William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1959), pp.192-193.

³ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), pp. 218-219

This idea of being “in the Lord” means that both husbands and wives are first and foremost under the Lordship of Christ as equals. This means both men and women receive immense dignity in Christ. This understanding that both men and women have equal claim to life in Christ’s Kingdom raised the position of women in the ancient world significantly.

And while there is a sense of equality in the Lordship of Christ, these verses also established a definite order or system of organization. As F.F. Bruce wrote, Paul “does hold that there is a divine instituted hierarchy in the order of creation, and in this order the place of the wife comes next after her husband.”⁴ Paul places a woman’s and a wife’s essential dignity on an unshakable foundation.

Nowhere here or elsewhere in Scripture does it imply or express that the wife is naturally or spiritually inferior to the husband, or the husband inferior in any way to the wife. There is an order in the Trinity, and yet equality. Orthodoxy teaches that the Son is simultaneously *equal* to the Father because they share the same nature or divine essence. And yet, the Son relates to the Father in such a way as to be submissive to Him. Likewise, equality and submissiveness can coexist in human relationships, including the marriage relationship.

Fullness through the Wife

Christ’s word to the woman in the Christian home is: “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” (v.18) Of all the statements made in Scripture, I am not sure you could find one that would raise the temperature of a modern assertive, rights-seeking, power-seeking culture than this one Paul made. And if you are struggling with it yourself, remember this is God’s Word. We need to resist the temptation to explain this statement away, to wash it away or diminish it. This is God’s design for fullness in a Christian home. Are there qualifications? Of course. For example, submit is not a synonym for some servile, menial bondage. Paul is appealing here to free, responsible people and the teaching has to be followed voluntarily.

Fullness through the Husband

Paul provides the counterpart in v.19.

⁴ F.F. Bruce and E.K. Simpson, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 289-290.

“Husbands, love your wives and don’t be bitter toward them.” Now it may not seem this way at first blush through, but this is as radical a teaching for men as v. 18 was for women.

The word Paul used was *pikraino*. It literally means bitter tastes and is used to describe angry tempers or even harsh and miserable circumstances. We see this word four times in the New Testament, once here and three times in Revelation. All three of those uses describe bitter tastes. There is a sharpness to its usage here by Paul. This word is both the literal and metaphorical opposite of “sweetness.” This is a call to husbands to rid themselves of harshness or bitterness. This was radical in the ancient world because no such command or exhortation appears in any of the extra-biblical household rules of the day.⁵

Husbands were commanded to love their wives! What a great idea! I wonder where Paul came up with that. The word that Paul used here for love was not *eros* (to erotic love) or *phileo* (to friendship love). Instead Paul used *agapao*. This word was not used in any other household code in Greco-Roman culture to describe how a husband was to feel toward his wife.

Love is largely absent in Hellenistic and even Jewish discussions of marital relationships. Paul using this word means he calls Christian husbands to an unceasing care and to loving service for the wife’s entire well-being. In a parallel passage from Ephesians, Paul provides the model for the type of love he calls for here in Colossians 3. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her.” This radical command to love is only fulfilled when a husband loves his wife in an imitation of Christ’s love.

This means that a husband’s love for his wife must be incarnational. A husband and wife must experience the unity that comes with this biblical understanding of “one fleshness.” Genesis 2:24 tells us that “a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Jesus’s incarnation was a divine union of both his human and God natures. It is in this context that a husband is called to love and unite with his wife. Genesis lays out a sort of mutual incarnation.

⁵ Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971), p. 158 n. 28: “Pre-Christian antiquity knew of the terms ‘to love/love’...but in the Hellenistic world these terms do not occur in rules for the household.”

With that in mind, Paul wrote “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it” (Eph. 5:28-29). This is a high calling for a husband, and it may seem impossible, to become one with your wife and then love your wife more than you love your own self. Practically speaking, this means a husband must do all that he can to understand his wife’s world.

In his book *Mortal Lessons: Notes in the Art of Surgery*, Dr. Robert Seizer writes about performing surgery to remove a tumor in a young woman’s face. To do so required the severing of a facial nerve which would unfortunately leave the woman’s mouth permanently twisted. Dr. Seizer wrote: “Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamp light, isolated from me, private. The young woman speaks, “Will my mouth always be like this?” “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” She nods and is silent. But the young husband smiles. “I like it,” he says. “It is kind of cute.” Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.”⁶ This was a husband who loved incarnationally, loving his wife so much he would enter into her world and express his love for her in powerful ways.

Christ’s example for a husband’s love was also sacrificial. Christ died for us. For a husband to love like Christ, he must be willing to die for his wife. This also includes daily placing emphasis and significance on your wife. A Christian husband must learn to first live for Christ and then to live for his wife, loving her more than he loves himself.

A husband who loves his wife as Christ loved the Church will also intercede in prayer for his wife. Christ prays for us perfectly. Husbands should strive to pray with the deepest understanding and knowledge of their wives that is possible. When we fail to love our wives like Christ loved us, our intercession will struggle and weaken.

The Apostle Peter put it this way: “Husbands, in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker partner, showing them honor as coheirs of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered” (1 Peter 3:7).

⁶ Richard Seizer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1976), pp.45-46.

If we struggle to pray for our wives, it may be due to failing in our most fundamental personal relationship. We must pray for our spouses in intimate detail, not just with a blanket catch-all. As I have wized with age, and my temples have grayed, I have become convinced more and more that I am called to take every prayer request from my wife with the utmost importance and regardless of where I am or what I am doing, I take a moment and pray. I have interrupted staff meetings or counseling sessions with “Hang on, I need to check this from my wife.” That is followed by a quick intercession. Intercession for her is not merely an interruption in my day. It is my calling in Christ as a husband. It supersedes ANY other calling I have except to Christ.

A Christian husband should praise God for his wife’s strengths and lay her needs before his own to the Lord. She needs detailed prayer for what she faces each day, for how she relates with the children, for her interactions at work, with the neighbors. A Christian wife needs prayer for her many obligations and duties as well as for challenges, troubles, disappointments, insecurities, anxieties and fears.

Paul has revealed two radical calls. One call is to wives: submission. The other is to husbands: to love as Christ loves. These are not to be read in isolation. They go together. It is horribly off the rails for a husband to demand submission from a wife if he is not already radically loving her. It is also broken and sinful logic for a wife who is not submissive to demand such love.

These two verses are only 19 words long in the Greek. And yet, these brief verses provide the pattern for fullness in Christian marriage - full love, full commitment, full blessing. This morning, if you are still in the beginning stages of marriage or if you are decades along the road, make these verses your marriage goals. Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. And husbands, love your wives and don’t be bitter toward them.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Church Family Meeting Wednesday at 10:30AM. For those who are interested in the future of the church, in lieu of the usual Wednesday morning Bible study in Mark, we will take a one week break to consider together some important information pertaining to the direction the Lord is leading us. Pastor Craig and Pastor Jason will be there to share. It will also provide a chance to ask questions you may have.

Women's Ministry Bible Study: Launches Tuesday evening September 5th. 6-7:30PM. Led by Cindy Gresham at the church building. The study is *Abide* by Jen Wilkin.

FBC Kids Resumes Wednesday Night Sept. 6! See Pastor Jason for details!

MESSY KIDOLYMPICS! Saturday September 9th. 10AM-Noon at Ridge Road.

SUNDAY MORNING SCHEDULE BEGINNING SEPTEMBER 10th:

9AM: Biblical Community (Bible studies, Sunday school for all ages)

10:30AM: Worship Service

Until then, we will maintain the summer schedule of 9:30AM Bible study and 11AM worship.