



Colossians 3:18-21 | Reflecting God's Unity & Love in Marriage

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In two verses, we have some of the most contested commands and presuppositions of Scripture in our day.

1. Headship and submission in marriage
2. The assumption that marriage is only between one man and one woman
3. The assumption that there are only two genders
4. When connected to 3:5, any form of sexuality outside this presumed definition of marriage is sin

This is going to be an exciting Sunday!

We are dealing with contemporary ideas of an ancient institution—marriage.

And while a lot can be understood about the early church and its doctrine by noticing what does not have to be explained in their letters, we are going to back it up and see the earliest findings from where we get those presuppositions.

Marriage is as old as dirt.

OLD AS DIRT

Marriage that is, not your spouse!

Marriage is pretty much as old as dirt... or at least it's within three days of the dirt of the land being drawn up from within the seas by God (v9-13)!

So, to understand the commands we are given in Colossians 3 on marriage, we have to do what all the NT authors do when they seek to ground the teachings of marriage in prior truths of Scripture...

We have to go to Genesis.

So, we are going to spend some time there before we actually get to the instruction of Colossians 3:18-19.

Are you ready? Let's go way back to see what marriage looked like as it was designed by God.

Genesis 1:26-28, 5:1-2; 1:31; 2:7-9, 15-17, 18-25

Genesis 1:26–28

²⁶ And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

²⁷ So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

²⁸ And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Genesis 5:1–2

¹ This *is* the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; ² Male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created.

Genesis 1:31

³¹ And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, *it was* very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

Genesis 2:7–9

⁷ And the LORD God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

⁹ And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Genesis 2:15-17

¹⁵ And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

¹⁷ But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

Genesis 2:18-25

¹⁸ And the LORD God said, *It is* not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.

¹⁹ And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought *them* unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name thereof.

²⁰ And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.

²¹ And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof;

²² And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.

²³ And Adam said, *This is* now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.

²⁴ Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

²⁵ And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

God created Ada'm male and female.

God created male Ada'm first, commanded him not to eat the forbidden fruit, and had him name the animals that God brought before him after creating them from the ground.

In the Hebrew way of understanding things, communicating how he assigned the names was an expression of Ada'm's authority and headship.

Last of all, God said that male Ada'm being alone was not good, and He created female Ada'm from Adam's own body instead of from the ground.

Ada'm was thrilled, and he excitedly announced her first name: Issa'h: woman/wife!

Later, he meaningfully names her Eve. So, when I talk about them as individuals, I will call them by how they became known: Adam and Eve.

There are a number of things for us to observe about Adam and Eve.

The healthy authority that existed between Adam and Even prior to the Fall is given by God.

1. Adam being created first,
2. Adam being the one to receive the commands from God,
3. Adam being the one to name both the animals and the woman,
4. Adam being the one from whom Even was made by God, and
5. All of these realities being grounds for the headship of the husband as it is taught in the NT.

The clear distinction between male and female and between Ada'm from the animals is divinely established.

- The creation of animals is bracketed by the creation of male and female humanity.
- God brought the animals to Adam to name them.
- The Woman is made from the Adam to make absolutely clear their shared equality as image-bearers of God, their shared authority over all creation and the animals within it, and their distinct differences as male and female.
- The Woman was made from Adam to be his “Ezer” “Neged,” or “Strong Opposite Help.”
- This means Male and Female Ada'm were created to compliment one another in their differences as they unite in their love, knowledge, and obedience to God's commission.
- Together, Ada'm was commissioned to represent God into all the world as they multiply, exercise dominion, and spread the Garden all over the earth.

But instead...

- Adam failed to guard God's commands and to protect Eve from the Serpent,
- The serpent challenged the God-given created order within their marriage,
- They both gave into temptation and rebelled God's rule with their transgression, and
- **In their sin, they both became as the animals they were supposed to kindly rule.**

In the provision of creation, it seems the space and capacity to rebel against God's good rule was also created.

God knew this would happen, and according to His wisdom, He saw and permitted it. Nothing that takes place is outside God's sovereign authority, wisdom, and good rule.

The created universe itself is like a cosmic temple in which God would enter at times and fellowship with Adam and Eve.

It seems God's provision of space that was to some extent veiling God's glory opened the room **for the serpent to attempt a coup against God.**

Being called the Serpent in the NT, we understand the serpent of Genesis 3 to be Satan.

Satan is a created, powerful spiritual being that lifted himself up in pride against God after the "very good" creation was complete.

So, Satan targeted the very beings made in God's image so as to recruit them as "gods" against the One True God.

Also called "Slanderer and Divider," the Satan attempted to divide Ada'm against God, but...

First, Satan had to divide Ada'm.

How?

Satan attacked the harmonious order given by God that was to be prized between Adam and Eve.

Adam had been given the commands and was to lovingly lead and protect Eve—his strong opposite helper.

Satan knew this.

1 Timothy tells us that Eve was deceived and not Adam. This is not referring to her eating the forbidden fruit—they both did that.

Eve was deceived by the Serpent when the Serpent bypassed Adam in his questions about what God had commanded.

The deception was in the division and disorder.

The first deception was in the division and disorder brought between man and woman, husband and wife.

As his first step, the Serpent confounded the complimentary relationship and good order between the two genders God gave us... just as he has continued to do throughout human history in various forms.

Rebellious as he is, Satan despises God's good created order and rule, so he attacks it in every way he can.

This makes sense doesn't it?

Whether it is through abusive domination, crafty subversions, or powerful seductions, men and women have been in hostility towards one another instead of in unity.

And the same with gender and marriage themselves.

These are two gifts of God to provide order, harmony, and love, but Satan has carried out all-out attacks on these!

We are at the point now when we wrongly are afraid to openly affirm what we all know to be true: God created two genders.

This is harmful, divisive, and disordering.

And, I say this with kindness, knowing that those *presently* affected most adversely by all this confusion are those who are deceived, forced, or coerced into participating in the trendiness of this deception.

That is what makes it a sensitive topic—not being afraid of the cultural pushback.

We should grieve for be kind towards so many who are being harmed by these satanic lies.

We cannot merely condemn the ideology and actions; we have to lovingly offer the solution of Christ and His wisdom to them.

But, Satan is a ruthless liar.

He targeted God's good order in his efforts to lift himself up against God.

In doing so, Satan recruits deceived people into rebelling against God's good, wise rule.

Let's go further to see how this attack and its fall-out plays out.

Genesis 3:1, 6-16, 17-19, 20, 21-24; 4:7; 3:16

Genesis 3:1

¹ Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

Genesis 3:6-16

⁶ And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

⁷ And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.

⁸ And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.

⁹ And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where *art* thou?

¹⁰ And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I *was* naked; and I hid myself.

¹¹ And he said, Who told thee that thou *wast* naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?

¹² And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest *to be* with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.

¹³ And the LORD God said unto the woman, What *is* this *that* thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.

¹⁴ And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou *art* cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life:

¹⁵ And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

¹⁶ Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

Genesis 3:17–19

¹⁷ And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life;

¹⁸ Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

¹⁹ In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Cain...

Genesis 4:7

⁷ If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee *shall be* his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

Genesis 3:16

¹⁶ Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

So, we have seen humanity, gender, and marriage in harmony before the fall in sin and then in hostility after the fall in sin.

What does it look like to get back to what it was like before the Fall?

How do we get there?

What is the essential difference?

What are the essential commands?

GOOD AS NEW

Now we are almost ready for our text in Colossians.

But first, we have to establish a huge factor of Colossians 3...

It is being written to people who are believed to have been “risen with Christ.”

Colossians 3:1-4

¹ If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. ² Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. ³ For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, *who is* our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.

In response to the declared gospel, they have responded with repentance from their own way of rebellion and on to faith in God’s salvation and righteous rule.

They believe the Messiah Who was promised in Genesis 3:15 has come, and they have been united to Him in His death and resurrection by faith.

Christ is their life, identity, and King.

What He says, they trust and do.

They have been instructed to put to death the existence of idolatrous, immoral sin in their lives.

They have been told to put off divisive hostilities among themselves as the redeemed people of God.

They have been commanded to put on virtues of Christ that are supplied by the Spirit and bonded together in love.

They have been instructed to be ruled by the peace of God, indwelt with the word of Christ, and characterized by the name of Christ.

These are not simply fallen humans.

They are expected to live as Christ.

Their lives are being shaped by the Spirit to represent Christ.

Their differences are being ruled by the peace of God.

Their marriages are to be what marriage was always created to be according to Ephesians 5—a glorious illustration of Christ’s love for the church since before the Messiah had ever come and since before we ever fell in sin.

Marriage is one way God makes known that unconditional love and redemption was always God’s plan in creation.

And marriage has been woven by God into the fabric of human society to give this illustration of the Messiah and the church through all generations.

And, this is why Satan hates and attacks marriage so much.

And, this is why Christ’s church must love and protect it so much.

How?

Live out its foundational qualities.

Foundational Qualities of Biblical Marriage:

1. Distinction
2. Order
3. Love
4. Lordship

Colossians 3:18–19

¹⁸ Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love *your* wives, and be not bitter against them.

[Subject]Wives, [Present][Imperative][Middle]submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. ¹⁹ [Subject]Husbands, [Imperative][Present][Active]love your wives, and [Imperative][Imperative][Passive]be not [be made] bitter against them.

FROM HUNTING TO HELPING (v18)

Remember the link between Adam and Eve after the fall and God's warning to Cain?

Because of sin... the tendency will be to be hunted and ruled by sin and to hunt and rule one another.

Women will try to hunt, subvert, and rule men, and men will try to abuse, mistreat, and domineer women.

So...

Colossians 3:18

¹⁸ Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord.

The word for *submit* here means for the wife to willingly recognize and put herself under the God-given leadership of her husband.

This involves the wife honoring, respecting, and responding positively to the order God established in marriage.

Such harmony reflects some of what we see in the love and order within God's eternal community of love—
Father, Son, Spirit.

The Father plans and accomplishes through the Son and by the Spirit. He always does the authorizing and sending forth of the Son. The Spirit is sent forth from both. Scripture never shows any reversal of direction in the order of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Yet, Scripture makes clear the complete equality shared between Father, Son, and Spirit.

Authority and submission is simply an expression of God's eternal order, love, and unity.

And, so it is in how God created men and women... and marriage specifically.

While we are entirely equal in value and personhood, God has embedded reflections of Himself and an illustration of Christ's love for the church in how He designed marriage with this order.

“As it is fit in the Lord” qualifies the basis and the extent of the submission.

This statement grounds the submission to the Lord's ultimate headship and design rather than to culture.

1 Timothy grounds this submission in the creation order that we already considered in Genesis.

It also qualifies the extent of the submission—as fit in the Lord.

If the husband is expecting things that are not fitting or proper as a follower of Christ, then the submission has reached its limit.

We know from the next verse, as well as many other passages on this subject, that an abusive misuse of this authority extends beyond the authority the husband has been given by the Lord.

All authority ends where it goes against God's.

The husband's God-given authority is to have the responsibility to lovingly lead His wife as Christ loves the church.

And... it is under that leadership to which the Christian wife is instructed to willingly be her husband's “strong opposite helper.”

Instruction is given for wives who are married to unbelieving husbands to submit to them as well, but similarly, that call to submission only extends so far as the husband is not expecting her to be disobedient to the Lord or to the extent there is need for other authorities to hold him accountable—family, the church, government.

It should also be noted that ὑποτάσσω (hypotasso) is not synonymous with obedience.

Children are told to obey their parents. If God wanted to instruct wives to obey their husbands, He could have used that same Greek word in the instruction, but God never does that.

As is said about Sarah in 1 Peter 3, one can submit *through* obedience, but that does not make the two the same.

As the “strong opposite helper,” wives are expected to sharpen and improve the leadership of the husband.

When combining the understandings we gain through Genesis, Ephesians 5, 1 Peter 3, and others, we understand that the emphasis being given is for the wife to *strongly help* her husband lead as they unitedly seek to represent the Lord and to obey His commission.

So, what is it wives are being instructed to do?

To have a general attitude of respect for her husband’s God-given authority while being his strong opposite helper.

Connecting it back to Genesis and to the previous parts of Colossians 3, believing wives are told to *put off* the hunting, subverting instinct that fights against her husband’s headship and to *put on* the strong helping mindset toward her husband.

The believing wife is instructed to make known her trust in the Lord through her submissiveness to her husband’s loving leadership.

As the redeemed church submits to Christ, the wife submits to the God-given authority of her husband—as fit in the Lord.

Q: What could you personally apply from God’s instruction to the wife?

Coupled with the wife submitting to the loving leadership of her husband is the need for the husband to be a loving leader...

FROM DOMINEERING TO DELIGHTING (v19)

Hostility goes both directions.

As wrong as it is for women and wives to “hunt,” seduce, or subvert, it is wrong for men and husbands to abuse, misuse, and domineer.

Interestingly, while the expectation of wives to submit to their husbands was common in the Greco-Roman world, the exception of husbands to love their wives was not.

Actually, it seems to be largely unique.

Colossians 3:19

¹⁹ Husbands, love *your* wives, and be not bitter against them.

Love (ἀγαπᾶτε) as God loves us with unfailing affection, care, and righteous deeds.

There are passages in the Scriptures which make clear that both the husband and the wife are to submit to and to love one another.

But, there is a particular submission the wife is to have for the God-given authority given to the husband, and there is a particular love the husband is called to give to the wife—as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it.

The wife gets to submit like how Jesus submits to the Father and how the church submits to Christ.

The husband gets to love as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it.

The problem many women find themselves in is that far too many men and husbands are content with disobediently not leading or loving.

Either they prefer to not take up the responsibility, having their passions set on others things, or they desire to control and dominate, without loving and without leading.

Sometimes young men and adult men truly want to lead, but they desire male mentorship they never received.

Church, this is an important role of the church—for both women and men.

This is largely why we emphasize community and discipling relationships so much—the church is the vehicle through which believing individuals and families are to be taught and mentored.

Making disciples involves biblical mentorship in life, marriage, womanhood, and manhood.

Biblical manhood calls for a striking balance of leadership, gentleness, and love.

I know “gentleness” may not be in the top three you would pick for manhood, but it seems to be that way with how God emphasizes it.

The command to the husband is clear... love your wife, and...

Do not allow yourself to become embittered (passive) **against your wife.**

"Keep yourself from becoming embittered" is an alternate way of saying: kindly, affectionately, love your wife.

It is saying, “Don’t let yourself not love your wife. Don’t let yourself get cold, despising, harsh, or mean toward her!”

Other Greek writings use the root word of this “bitter” as a way of describing “harsh” treatment.

This combined with God’s frequent instruction for fathers to not provoke and discourage their children goes well with the fruits of the Spirit to which we are called and which include “gentleness.”

God is wise in instructing men to strike this balance: strong leadership, gentle posture, and loving sacrifice.

Husbands are forbidden from allowing themselves to become hard, bitter, or cold toward their wives.

So, husbands are to gently and lovingly lead... delight in their wives. Not dominate.

Delight, lead, love, not become bitter toward.

Stay warm-hearted toward!

It takes a lot more Christlike “manliness” to keep a warm heart toward your wife than to allow it to become short, cold, hard, and bitter toward her.

What is worse is when we allow ourselves to be warm and kind-hearted toward other women and not our own wife!

May God help us commit ourselves to the calling of warm-heartedness!

Our natural sinful tendencies fight against the instruction given to both husbands and wives.

Do you not see the beauty in this instruction?

Would any true believer push back on being told to submit to Christ?

No! Christ is gloriously loving.

Well, believers are called to both of these Christlike characteristics: submission and love.

If believers will live led by the Spirit, we have no reason to push back on this instruction.

We are to embrace it!

When lived out in marriage, it glorifies Christ to a world who needs to see Him in us!

Q: What could you personally apply from God’s instruction to the husband?

FROM CONCEITED TO COMPLIMENTARY

Genesis 2:18

¹⁸ And the LORD God said, *It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.*

Several biblical presuppositions undergird the commands of Colossians 3:18-19:

1. Marriage was designed by God prior to the Fall as an essentially fundamental provision for the enjoyment of God's original commission to humanity.
2. This provision of marriage necessarily involves one man and one woman uniting as one in a covenant with God.
3. Humanity is created by God as male and female, who together image Him with their complimentary distinctions and order.
4. Since the fall in sin, men and women have despised God's authority and continued hostile toward one another, going against the way God designed us.
5. In Christ as promised, God has been forming a new humanity of redeemed men and women who embrace His authority and peacefully compliment one another.
6. Marriage is the only institution given by God that transcends both the pre-Fall and post-Fall worlds.
7. Marriage unites male and female into one in a way that both draws from God's own Personal community of love and illustrates Christ's unfailing love for His church.
8. Not everyone is to be married, but all followers of Christ must support and defend the biblical gift of marriage through our teaching, conduct, and ministry to one another.
9. Christ now reigns through His church, so single and married believers alike participate together in God's commission for the new humanity to multiply all over the earth by the Spirit with the gospel.

Q: How has your view on gender and marriage been shaped by Scripture? By culture? By sin?

Just because marriage is as old as dirt doesn't mean it's not as vibrantly relevant today as it was then.

Actually, like the existence of the earth, marriage is an enduring provision of God that declares His wisdom, order, and love to all the world.

As followers of Christ, we must embrace this ancient witness of God—whether we are single or married.

And, as Ephesians 5 makes clear to us, the order and love seen in a Christ-honoring marriage directs all our eyes to to the saving, sacrificial love of Christ.

Marriage confronts us all with our need for Christ as Savior.

Marriage confronts the church with the need to be faithful amidst Satan’s rebellion against God and his efforts to turn us to be “animalistic” toward one another.

Marriage confronts each believer with the need to be Christlike in our submission and love toward one another, as to be uniquely modeled in marriage.

Colossians 3:18–19

¹⁸ Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love *your wives*, and be not bitter against them.