

## ***House Rules*** *Colossians 3: 17-4:1*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**November 11, AD 2018  
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

---

The Greek and Roman culture in the days of Paul placed a huge emphasis on the household. The home included the husband and wife, the children and the servants. Such a household was a miniature economy. The whole society was built on these households functioning well. If you read famous philosophers like Aristotle, you will see that there was a definite plan for how these households should work. The male head of the house had responsibility to rule wisely as he ran the whole economy. The burden was upon him and all the authority rested with him. So Aristotle in his wise counsels addressed only the men who were husbands and fathers. The women, children and servants really had no say. They were not expected to read philosophy about how to live a good life. The heads of the house were instructed to expect submission as they ran the house.

This passage we have before us today has the form of a typical Greek household code: instructions to the male head about how to run the household wisely. On one level, it looks pretty conventional: everybody in their place. But when you look closely, you realize Paul is revolutionary. Because Paul addressed not only husbands as heads of households. He actually addressed the wives as people worthy to be considered. He assumed they had worth and choice and the power to serve the Lord even in the current culture where they had little social standing. Paul addressed children as if they were fully persons who mattered. He also considered that the children had a choice about their attitudes and actions, and thus had the dignity of making these choices. Paul addressed the bondservants, those who were legally slaves, asking them to make choices to obey as if they actually had the freedom. Wildest of all, this letter was to be read to a gathered congregation. Paul assumed that men, women, children, both slave and free, were *all gathered together* in worship. They shared a deeper, radical equality created by being each and together, sons of God in Jesus Christ. The Christian church was like no other social gathering of its time. All ages, genders, and social classes were considered one in Christ. Fellow heirs of heaven. Everyone mattered.

Paul instructs the Colossians that traditional roles should continue. He does not suggest the anarchy of overthrowing the productive, peace-keeping order of the society. Rather, he suggests a free choice for that order, done in an attitude of mutual submission to each other. This becomes a different kind of revolution. Such

free consecration to each other was based on a shared devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord of all. Paul resets the whole discussion of relationships in the key of living first and foremost for the Lord Jesus. Bowing the knee to Jesus, the knee of the heart, keeps everything in harmony. 8 times in these ten verses Paul frames his instructions with phrases like “for the Lord.”

So, as we navigate these pairs of household relationships, we’re going to sail down the deep middle. We’re going to set aside the extreme cases of abuse and neglect. We’re going to leave alone for today the distortions made of these verses. We want to use our very little bit of time to consider how Paul’s household instructions apply in our present day lives.

1) **Husbands and wives.** “Wives submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” I think one of the best ways to understand this passage is to bring in what Paul wrote in another letter when he wrote about “submitting *to one another* out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5: 21) and then explained, “Let each one of you love his wife as himself and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” *Love and respect in the context of mutual submission.* That seems to be the heart of it. We make a resolute decision to turn our faces towards each other and not away from each other. To lay down our lives for each other, in the ways that meet the deep needs of our spouses.

Emerson Eggerichs’ book *Love and Respect* is my favorite book on marriage. The subtitle says it all: “The love she most desires. The respect he desperately needs.” Of course both husbands and wives need to be respected and to be cherished. But there is a difference between men and women. And a difference in what we most deeply want from our spouse. A man needs to be believed in, to be undergirded with admiration, to know his wife is behind him. A wife needs her husband to regard her with tenderness, to listen to her and to show by his focus and his actions that she is the jewel beyond compare. There’s very little more destructive than a wife who undermines her husband by ridiculing his ambitions, denigrating him to her friends, nagging him in private or disrespecting him in public. There’s very little more destructive than a husband who stops noticing his wife, who belittles her feelings, ignores her emotions and leaves her emotionally abandoned in the world.

Last week I watched a beautiful scene unfold. I had gone downtown to get a breath of air and a Jimmy John’s sandwich. I was walking back to eat at my desk. I saw a woman from our church waiting on a corner. So I crossed over to greet her. She was waiting for her husband. They only had time for a quick coffee but wanted

to meet midday, just to see each other for a few minutes without kids. I'm all in for that. Anytime you can snag a mini-date with your mate, do it. He was a few minutes late. I didn't really want to leave her alone on a corner. Then we saw him coming down the street. I called out to him, "Hey, if you're late, I'm gonna make time with your girl!" We shook hands and he said, "I'm glad it's you. I was wondering who I was gonna have to whup!" I rejoiced all the way back. That's right, man. You guard that girl of yours. You notice her. You watch her. You protect her. Let her know she's the only girl in the universe for you. And that's right woman. You go see him midday and let him feel how proud you are of him. Let him know you believe in him and want to be with him more than anything. Lend him some strength. You two fight for time together. Respect and cherish, guard and give. Yes, yes, yes!

I have no problem affirming that a husband is called to be the spiritual leader of a household. For we know that to truly stand and lead, you first to have kneel and pray. A man who gets it about spiritual leadership knows he has to consecrate himself to Christ. To submit to Jesus. To offer his life to Jesus. To ask Jesus to lead him. Spiritual leadership in the household is about manning *up* enough to bow *down* your head in submission to Christ. That will translate to the way a husband deals with his wife day to day. For the Biblical pattern of leadership was given to us by our Lord Jesus who said, "I did not come to be served but to serve, and to give my life..." Paul elsewhere writes that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved his church, laying down his life. In a marriage, that is not usually one grand gesture of sacrifice. It is usually the years of daily dying, daily giving yourself to attend to your wife. To protect her with cherishing and noticing. To lead, first by example and then when it's needed by stepping forward.

This past summer I got to hear of the strength of a sixty-year marriage rise to the surface amidst the pain of loss. The infection that took the life of Rhonda's brother came on quite suddenly. Though Richard had struggled with health problems, no one expected he would succumb in a matter of a few days. There were lots of decisions to be made. Both Rhonda and her sister made it quickly to the Asheville hospital. So her father Dick was there with his girls-- his wife, Jeanne and his two daughters--as his son was critically ill. Dick has never played being the husband as being a dominator. Jeanne has never played being a wife as being a doormat. But as heartbreaking decision after heartbreaking decision had to be made in those days, it became clear. These words weren't spoken aloud, but wife and daughters communicated, "Dad, we need you to take the lead. We've talked through the options. Now go ahead and say what you know we should do. And we'll follow." And he did. And they did. Husband and wife worked together

in tearful tandem with beautiful trust and tenderness. And the daughters supported them. I heard about the day in the hospital. I watched it during the week of the funeral. I've seen it in the grieving days since. Love and respect. Cherishing and guarding. Leading and supporting. When it came to the clinch, a husband and wife did not turn away from each other but towards each other. This rippled through the extended family. I've never seen us talk more deeply, love more truly and just plain get along together.

I know how I want to be when next my life comes to the clinch. I've seen it. But I also know that it doesn't happen by magic. How I respond in crisis will be directly related to what I do day to day and moment by moment. Today, I need to pray. In a season of relative calm, I need to lay down the habit that will be at the ready in crisis. This day, every day, I'm called to offer myself anew to the head of the church, our bridegroom Jesus. Today, I need to turn towards my wife. Towards my loved ones. Today I need to listen. Today I need to carve out time. I need to turn my face toward Rhonda. To incline my ear. To stretch forth my arms.

**2) Parent/child relationships.** "Children, obey you parents." Not because everything they ask you to do makes sense or is even sensible. Obey them because this pleases the Lord and makes your life fit right. Obey them not because they can make you do it, but because you choose to obey—in that action, you will not only please the Lord, you will feel a sense of power and independence and freedom you never knew was possible. Obedience by choice is freedom within and releases joy. Fathers (and mothers) don't spew your frustration and anger on your children in discipline. Don't discipline in anger. Don't set your expectations so high that it creates impossible demands and leads to failure, perfectionism or outright rebellion. Rather, encourage, enthuse, inspire even as you show a better way.

### **3) Working Relationships**

We can follow this right to work: Don't work for people. Work for God. Then it doesn't matter whether or not your boss is worthy of your labor or not. Then you go to work not because you fear getting fired but because you desire to glorify God by the way you do what you do. Conversely, don't treat employees like discardable commodities. Treat them like co-heirs in Christ Jesus with whom you will spend eternity on equal footing. Then watch how this way of thinking about people inspires them to work.

Paul writes, "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. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive your inheritance. You are serving the Lord Christ.” The issue for us is not the question of slavery. Paul did not affirm slavery, but he also knew he could not change it in his lifetime. The point was, given these present realities, how do you work in such a way as to be free even when you are a slave, and to glorify God even when a man rules you? The secret, as we have said, is the phrase, “As for the Lord.” You can demand that I do a project at work that I don’t want to do. But if I undertake it willingly, heartily, as if for the Lord himself, then I am free from your demands. I am a free man making a free choice to serve God joyfully while I do what you think you’re compelling me to do. This works whether it’s homework or ditch-digging, chemical mixing or account management. No matter how demanding your boss is, if you work for the Lord, you work as a free person.

So much of keeping good relationships at home and work is just a matter of getting ahead of the curve. It’s a matter of being intentional. Do deliberately what you have to do anyway. Look, you’re never going to get through a whole Sports Center or Hallmark Christmas movie without being interrupted, so get up off the couch without being asked and do something willingly for your spouse and see what happens. You’re never going to have a job where you only do things that you like, so go ahead and do the nasty job now with joy because you are serving the Lord Jesus. You can’t escape your chores as a child, so do them as a choice before you get nagged.

I’ve shared with you before a prayer I found in a Church of England prayer book that followed a reading of a Psalm 20. It reads,

*Merciful God,  
purify our hearts in the flame of your Spirit  
and transform our toil into an offering of praise,  
that we may reject the proud rule of might  
and trust in Christ alone,  
for he is our Lord for ever and ever.*

There’s the secret. We submit, respect, love, cherish, obey, rule, manage, and work always and ever for the Lord Jesus Christ. You may not want to listen to your spouse and be supportive and admiring on any particular day. But you can ask yourself, “If this were Jesus telling me about his day, would I be interested? If this were Jesus asking me to do this task, would I be happy to do it?” Well, the truth is, it is Jesus. Every duty is unto him. When we get this, then we have an internal

freedom. We have an equality even with those who hold great power over us. For we are heirs of Christ and sons and daughters of the high king. Even in the tedious relating we face, we spin gold. We turn straw into gold when we lead with this prayer: transform our toil into an offering of praise. In this way, the households of God become a robust, vibrant economy of grace.