

In all things, serve the Lord Jesus

Colossians 3:18-4:1

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In the previous verses, Paul had exhorted the Colossians to do everything in the name of Jesus Christ. That is quite a challenge, but that was the goal. He was not teaching them the truths of Christ so they could merely be more religious. He was teaching them about Christ so that they might learn to walk with Him and become like Him.

Like one who has been in prison for the last 40 years, it is not enough that they now have freedom. They must also learn to walk in it. So it was with the Colossians. Many had come from a pagan or legalistic Jewish background. They had found freedom in Christ. Now Paul was teaching them how to take hold of this freedom and to live like Christ in their daily lives.

In Colossians 3:18-4:1, the Apostle Paul made his teaching very practical. He applied the Christian faith to the most personal of relationships. In Paul's day, relationships were often one-sided, and those of less power were often abused and taken for granted, but the Christian ethic was different. Husbands had responsibility just like wives. Parents had responsibilities just like children. Masters had responsibilities just like servants or slaves. This was a totally new way of living that the Christians had to get used to as they began to live out their faith in their most personal of relationships.

Paul continues with these words in Colossians 3:18:

¹⁸ Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

The word "submission" has taken on a negative meaning in our day. We see it as inferior and weak. We see it as forsaking our rights and letting another rule over us as they please, but that was not what the Apostle Paul was referring to in this verse.

Christ submitted to God the Father. Christ was not weak or inferior in any way. He yielded to God the Father as an equal, which is fitting in the midst of their relationship in the Trinity. Jesus was God and yet understood the importance of submission. As Christians we are called to do the same. Paul, in Ephesians 5:21, tells us all to *"submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."*

Philippians 2:5-8 says this: *"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of*

men.⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Christ's was a willful submission so that the purposes of God would be accomplished.

In this verse where wives are instructed to submit to their husbands we see purpose as well. It is a submission between equals for the sake of carrying out God's purposes. God has established different forms of authority in our world. God established governments to enforce justice and to provide protection in a society. God established pastors and elders to lead and shepherd churches. God established husbands to lead, love, protect and nurture their families. God established parents to raise and direct their children. In each case God-honoring leadership and submission work together to accomplish God's purposes.

God created marriage as a spiritual analogy of Christ and the church. For help understanding marriage's role we can look to Hebrews 8:5, where it talks of *“a copy and the shadow of heavenly things”*. God has created certain realities in this life to help us begin to understand the reality of heaven and our eternal relationship with Christ. Marriage is an earthly copy of a spiritual and eternal reality as well. Marriage is an example of our relationship with Christ and His relationship with the church, as His bride.

Christ first submitted to the Father. He then instructed the husbands to submit to Christ (1 Corinthians 11:3). Then only would they be prepared to lead their families.

Paul then continues by speaking to the husbands:

¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

To us this seems like a logical idea, but in Paul's day it was not. According to marriage customs and laws of ancient times, the husband was the unquestioned ruler of the home and the wife was the servant to bring up the children and cater to the husband's needs. The woman was considered a possession, much like flocks and material goods. Jewish women had no legal rights and Greek women rarely even left the home, living almost totally in seclusion. It was even the norm for husbands to be unfaithful to their wives. In both the Jewish and Greek cultures the privileges belonged to the husband and the duties belonged to the wife.

The Christian faith changed all of that. Marriage was now a partnership where both were to be made complete in one another. The woman was now to follow her husband's leadership as an equal, and the husband now was to love his wife as Christ had loved the church. It was through sacrifice, servanthood, courage and gentleness that Christ had loved the church. This was drastically different from the harshness and bitter resentment with which husbands treated their wives of their day.

Christ submitted first to the Father. Now He was calling husbands to submit to Him as their Head and to be the men and the husbands that He requires. Only then are they prepared to lead their families.

Pray that we fathers would lead, not out of brute strength, but instead out of wisdom, humility and godliness. For this to happen, husbands must submit to Christ as their Head. Pray that we will not be husbands who are lazy, selfish, angry, lustful, bossy, irritable, greedy and prideful. But instead, as we

submit to Christ daily, we would be servants. That we would lead by going first. By apologizing, first. By serving, first. By forgiving, first. By speaking a kind word, first. By being patient, first. By praying, first. By encouraging, first. By having faith, first. Only then will our families be drawn near to us and be prepared to follow our lead as we follow Christ.

These are God's guidelines, but oftentimes in our fallen world they are the goal but not the reality. In those times we seek God's best in the midst of our situations.

There will be some homes where the men refuse their role of spiritual leadership. There will be other homes led by single parents where the one parent has to be the head. There will be some homes where only one spouse is a believer and they have to prayerfully figure out how to live out their part of God's calling in their marriage, even though the other spouse does not share their faith. There will be days when we war with our own selfishness and pride and fail to obey God's will for us in our marriage. In the midst of these different situations, the first step is to know His good and perfect will for our marriages. The second step is to surrender to God as we seek for it to become the reality in our lives.

Paul then continues by addressing children and fathers:

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

In the ancient world the children were under the dominant rule of the parents, especially that of the father. One example was that of the Roman *Patria Potestas*. It allowed the parent to do anything he wanted with his child. He could sell the child into slavery, make them a servant on his farm, or even condemn them to death. The power belonged to the parents and the duties to the children.

Here, once again, the Christian faith gave a responsibility to both parents and children. The children were to obey their parents and the parents were to nurture and cherish their children. As scripture tells us, they were to raise them in the ways of Christ, so that when they were older, they would not depart from it. Parents were to nurture the children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). The parents were to pass on the faith to the next generation, as we see in Deuteronomy 6:6-9:

⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

The parents were to bless and nurture the children as a living example, with words and deeds. The fathers were not to provoke their children, causing the children to resent the parents. Instead, like a stringed instrument, they were to gently draw the love and goodness out of them and not loudly force it into them through fear and intimidation. It would be a melody and harmony between nurturing and discipline. In the same way that God's kindness led us to repentance (Romans 2:4), we earthly fathers should help our children be drawn to Christ through our love and kindness.

At times, those we love most, we treat the worst. Behind closed doors, in private we treat our family more harshly than we do those with whom we interact in public. That should not be so. As Christians, it is with our families that we should be most like Christ.

We hear the stories of those who were discouraged because of their father's treatment. John Newton, the former slave trader, who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace*, said this, "I know that my father loved me –but he did not seem to wish me to see it." What kind of love is it, if it cannot be discerned by the child?

Martin Luther, the great reformer from the 1500s, wrote of how his earthly father was so stern and strict that all his days he found it difficult to refer to God as Father, even in prayer. When Luther thought of the word "father" he thought of nothing but discipline and punishment. Barclay recounted Luther's remedy with these words: "Spare the rod and spoil the child. It is true. But beside the rod keep an apple to give him when he does well."

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

This word translated "bondservant" was also the word for "slave". In the Roman society of Paul's time, almost 1/3 of the Roman empire were slaves, and another 1/3 of the population had been slaves at one time or another. Many of them would be slaves for the rest of their lives. They were considered as the master's property. Bondservants and slaves had no rights and could even be put to death if the master desired.

Some were highly trained as doctors, businessmen, or teachers, but had been defeated in war and taken as slaves and purchased by wealthy families. Convicted criminals became slaves of the government and worked in the mines or rowing big ships until they died. Others were slaves because of debt and other reasons.

Slaves were so normal in the culture that some of the Christians in the church in Colossae owned slaves and saw nothing wrong with it. The gap between freedmen and bondservants was so big that it was very difficult for even Christian freemen as they first heard Jesus' and Paul's teachings. Especially when Jesus said things like, ***"the greatest in the kingdom of God must be the servant of all."*** Or when Jesus washed the disciples' feet and then told them to do likewise. But that is what Christianity does. It goes against the current of the ways of man.

Scriptures describe us as either slaves to sin, or slaves / bondservants of Christ. Romans 6:22 says it this way, ***"But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life."*** This was such a humbling idea for especially the freed men of that day, but that was what Christ demanded, total devotion and lordship. In that, believers found freedom and a burden that was light (Matthew 11:30).

Now imagine that you were a new believer in the church in Colossae who also happens to be a slave. You likely had been mistreated for years and were tempted daily to do less than your best to in some way get even with your abusive master.

The slave had no rights and there were no written laws protecting their work and living conditions. When the slave grew old he could be put out to die. The slave was not able to marry, and when they were forced to cohabitate for the sake of reproduction the child would become the property of the master. Similar to all of the previous situations mentioned in these verses, the person in the position of authority held all the rights and the weaker was responsible for all the duties.

In the midst of this situation Paul writes to the bondservants and slaves in the congregation to work as unto Christ. Their work ethic was not to be based on the conditions of their workplace or the behavior of their master. As Christians everything had now changed. Jesus was their master. Doing everything in the name of Christ was their goal. Christianity was not a promise that life would be easy, but that you would never be alone. That God's grace would be sufficient. That your work was now for more than just making money. It was now to glorify God, sharpen your character, and to be a testimony of Christ to the world. Work was now purposeful, and even more so when it was difficult.

The Christian slaves were surely familiar with abuse and unfair treatment. The worldly way to respond would be to steal, escape, or at least do poor work, in keeping with how they had been treated, but Paul writes a new ethic for them as Christians. Let's look again at Paul's words:

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.

These words must have sounded so "wrong" to their ears at first. Did Paul have any idea of their situation? How could Paul say things like this? Was this all Christianity had to offer? But then Paul's words began to take hold.

Stop working just to please your earthly master, and from now on work for your Lord with a sincere heart. Fear the Lord. Whatever you do, do it for the Lord, and not for men. No matter how your master treats you, he is not ultimately in charge. Work for Christ, the One who sees all things. From Him you will receive your inheritance and reward. You are serving the Lord. Also, know that the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong that he has done. Christ does not play favorites as earthly men of power do.

Think from a heavenly perspective. Work as unto Christ in whatever you do, knowing that He will reward those who do good and He will bring justice on those who do wrong.

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

Paul then turned his attention to the slave owners in the church. Some would argue that Paul should have condemned slavery and slave owners immediately. From scripture we can see that Paul did not

approve of slavery, but in this moment he wanted to call the slave owners to accountability and instruct them how their faith were to affect all relationship, even those with their bondservants.

The law was on the sides of the masters. They were free to do anything that they wanted to their bondservants, but Paul calls them to a higher standard. In Christ, they, too, now served the ultimate master. The same master as the Christian bondservants. Together, they now were to serve the Lord, do everything in the name of Jesus Christ, and love their slave and bondservant as themselves.

Paul was familiar with the effect that Christianity was to have on slaves and their masters. In this very letter, in chapter 4 verse 9, Paul was sending Onesimus, an escaped slave, back to his master, Philemon, in the church in Colossae. We have the whole explanation in the book of Philemon.

Philemon was a slave master in the church of Colossae. Philemon had a church that met in his house. Onesimus had been his slave, who had escaped and run away to Rome. There Onesimus had encountered Paul, in prison, and had come to faith in Jesus. Onesimus' faith was now motivating him to return to Philemon, his master, who legally could have had him beaten or even killed. But Philemon was a follower of Christ. Because of that, Paul appealed to Philemon's faith pleading with him to receive the "transformed" Onesimus back, not as a bondservant, but now as a brother.

Faith in Christ was to impact both Onesimus' and Philemon's responses to the situation. This was the change that Christianity was to bring. A new perspective. A new ethic. A new way to live, where we no longer take advantage of others but live in partnership, submitted to one another under Christ.

We now work as unto Christ in all things. Whether we be at home, work, or play, we perform for an audience of one. We have one ultimate Lord and Master who sees all things and will reward all things.

All relationships are lived in the Lord. Christ is ever-present as we relate with others. May we be aware of His presence and His Spirit within us that empowers us to live like Christ.

We are stewards, and even in moments when we are in positions of leadership, we are merely stewards of the responsibilities which God has given us. May we live completely as unto Christ.

Discussion questions:

1. What from this sermon did you find interesting?
2. In what kind of relationships do people find it hard to be like Jesus?
3. Do you treat your family better or worse than most people you encounter in your daily life? Why do you think that is?
4. Without Christ, why do many people abuse the power they have over others?
5. Why should belonging to Christ affect the way we treat others?
6. What were the reasons that slaves were to be good workers?
7. What do you think you need to remember from this sermon?
8. What are you supposed to do in response to it?
9. How can we help you with that?