

# **COLOSSIANS: THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST**

Part 7: “Restored Relationships”

Colossians 3:18-4:1

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Sunday, June 6, 2021 (Ordinary Time)

## **Scripture Reading**

*“Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. 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 the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven” (Colossians 3:18–4:1).*

## **Introduction**

The passage we are looking at today is a controversial one. Some critics view this passage as a text that upholds cruel hierarchy and subjugation.

This morning, I actually want to challenge that thesis. In fact, I intend to argue that what Paul is writing here actually represents the most radically pro-woman, pro-children, pro-vulnerable, pro-image-of-God line of thinking in the ancient world.

In fact, I would argue Western society has grown to develop what we call human rights did not happen despite the influence of Christianity but because of the influence of Christianity.

To understand why we need to understand a little bit more the situation of the ancient world. And the social situation of ancient Rome was the true definition of patriarchy, wherein the male head of a household held unchallenged and unaccountable power over all people within his household.

The head of a Roman household was known as the *“Pater Familias.”* And he had the right to wield unquestioned authority over his wife, his children, and the servants who lived and worked within his house. The Pater Familias had autonomous control over the finances of his family. He could beat his wife, as a way of enforcing discipline. He could beat his children and even sell his children into slavery, if he desired. He could physically or sexually assault a servant with no legal recourse.

His authority was so great that there are even some instances wherein the Pater Familias could put his own child to death or order his child to be put to death. To give you one haunting example, here is a portion of a letter written by a Roman soldier in the year 1 B.C. to his wife: *"I am still in Alexandria. ... I beg and plead with you to take care of our little child, and as soon as we receive wages, I will send them to you. In the meantime, if (good fortune to you!) you give birth, if it is a boy, let it live; if it is a girl, expose it."* By "expose," he literally means throw the child away and let her die by exposure to the elements.

This was a truly horrific and broken way of life. And it was the normative way of life for many in Roman society, as Paul ministered the Christian gospel.

But as Paul planted churches and preached the gospel, he was also able to call the church to offer a distinctively different vision of human life. He challenged the church of Jesus Christ to display the countercultural kingdom of God in the way they allowed the gospel to transform the way all of their relationships worked.

Our passage today is very brief, with little commentary or explanation. But it does give us a glimpse of "Restored Relationships" that are made possible only because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Specifically, there are three types of restored relationships that Paul envisions: the relationships between *1.) Wives and Husbands, 2.) Children and Parents, and 3.) Servants and Masters.*

Now, before I dig into this passage, let me say that each one of these points has the potential to be both complex and riddled with controversial landmines. In fact, when I preached through the book of Ephesians, I preached a single sermon on each of the three topics that we will explore today. I welcome you to reference those sermons if you'd like a deeper dive into these subjects.

But today, I want to do what Paul has modeled for us in Colossians. I want to briefly discuss each of these three relationships, and I want to explore how the gospel transforms and restores them all.

## **Exposition**

### **1.) Wives and Husbands**

In every age of human history and in every culture, marriage has been a foundational pillar of society. In this way, marriage itself is not a uniquely Christian idea or institution. However, Christians have always connected their understanding of marriage to the gospel itself. As Paul writes in Ephesians, *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church"* (Eph 5:31–32).

Christian marriage is a spiritual mystery that testifies to the union that Christ shares with his body, the church. This is why Christians care about how the Bible defines

marriage. This is why Christians believe marriage is more than just an arbitrary social construct. Christian marriage one of the ways that the church gives witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The question is, what are our marriages testifying to the culture around us? Are our marriages reflecting the image of Christ's love? Or are our marriages reflecting the image of the world?

The world around us is filled with selfishness and pettiness. The world around is filled with relationships defined by manipulation, abuse, and passive-aggressiveness. The world around us is filled with shouting matches, punishing one another with withdrawal, and words of disrespect and dishonor. This way of relating with one another leads to bitterness, resentment, isolation, and, ultimately, destruction.

And this is not what the kingdom of God looks like. The people of God are called to have marriages distinctly different from the world; marriages that reflect the character and love of Christ. For this reason, Paul writes, "*Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them*" (Col 3:18–19).

Here, Paul envisions a marriage that is formed by the gospel. He is exhorting both wives and husbands to love one another in a way that their love is truly felt and understood.

In calling Christian wives to submit to their husbands, Paul is not calling all women to see themselves as less than all men. Far from it. According to Scripture, both men and women are equally made in the image of God. They are created equally, but they are created *differently*. And their differences are a part of the goodness of God's creation.

Biblical submission is mysterious in that it is something that husband and wife do together, but also something that the wife is directed to do in a particular way. As Paul writes in Ephesians, "*...submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord*" (Eph 5:21–22).

I believe this type of submission is less like a soldier obeying the orders of a drill sergeant and more like dancer following her partner's lead in a ballroom dance.

In this way, Paul directs Christian wives to show their love for their husbands in the way they honor and respect them. The opposite of this would be to demean them and mistrust them; to put themselves in constant opposition against their spouse.

To Christian husbands, Paul says they must love their wives, with a sacrificial, servant-hearted love. The word for "love" used in Colossians comes from the Greek word "agapē" (ἀγαπάω). It is a selfless love that desires the highest good for another. It means to cherish and treasure.

Husbands must not be harsh with their wives in their words and actions. One of the more interesting things I learned in studying this passage this week was that the term

for “be harsh” (πικραίνω) in verse 19 also means “to cause bitter feelings.”<sup>1</sup> Paul is saying, “Husbands, if you choose the way of the world, if you choose to act like tyrant in your home, if you demean and speak down to your wife, instead of loving and cherishing her, don’t be surprised when you have a bitter wife.”

The key to a healthy and happy marriage is not complex. There are two easy steps. You need to (a.) learn how to *forgive* well. And you need to (b.) learn how to repent well. You need to give grace generously, when your partner does not deserve it. And you need to humbly own your mistakes and do what you need to do to make things right when you have hurt your spouse. When this happens, it creates this beautiful cycle of grace that begets more and more grace, and more and more love.

The problem is that we are so often tempted to be pulled down into pettiness and selfishness like gravity. We are tempted to fall into those old patterns of hurting one another and withdrawing. I believe the only way to overcome this is to be reminded daily, in the depths of our hearts, that Christ has loved us when we were unlovable. He has given us grace that makes us new.

Needless to say, this was a countercultural vision of marriage that testified to the truth of the gospel in the Roman world. And it is still a countercultural vision of marriage that can testify to the truth of the gospel in our world today.

A watching world will not be changed by participation in a cultural shouting match about what we believe about marriage, gender, and sexuality. But I believe that the Christians who display the gospel through marriages that are happy, holy, and saturated with grace can bring honor to Jesus.

So, for the married folks in this room, may we seek to have marriages that testify to that which is true and good and beautiful. Not just for our own joy and peace. But for the glory of Jesus’s name.

## **2.) Children and Parents**

All throughout the New Testament, the church is envisioned as the family of God. We are no longer rivals with one another. We are no longer enemies of God. We are brothers and sisters who have been adopted into a new relationship with our Heavenly Father. And one of the key ways that Christians can display the reality of the church as a spiritual family is to cultivate a culture of faith and grace within our families at home.

In the Roman Empire, children were either a useful utility that would advance the productivity and wealth of the household, or else a child was a burden that could be discarded. If a child was unwanted, he or she could be discarded and killed. If a child became a burden later in life, he or she could be sold into slavery for the profit of their family.

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<sup>1</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 812.

In a similar way, today's culture can view children as an unnecessary burden that limits the ability of adults to have freedom, fun, and advance in their careers. So too, children are often encouraged by the surrounding culture to see their own families as something they can escape so that they can discover their true selves in independence.

Against this backdrop, Paul paints a different vision of the family: *"Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged"* (Col 3:20–21).

God calls Christian children toward obedience and honor. For children at home, this means you are called to listen to your parents and do what they ask of you. For adult children as well, this means you should give your parents respect and honor. Learn from their wisdom. Appreciate their provision and sacrifice on your behalf.

Many of the celebrated stories of our culture condition us to believe a narrative of individualism, in which we have to leave our families to find ourselves. But God created us in families, and often times we discover who we are by being loved, known, encouraged, and challenged in and through our families.

In verse 21, when the term translated as "Fathers" (πατέρες) can simply mean "parents" or even ancestors. The charge here is to not provoke your children. Paul is telling parents, "Don't demean your kids through fear, threats, and rage." This will lead them to insecurity and discouragement.

Another temptation for our age is for parents to desire the approval of our children in an unhealthy way. We can overly accommodate the desires of our kids as a way of creating co-dependent relationships. It is a very real temptation for parents to need to be needed by our children. But this can actually harm the development of our children. It can prevent them from acquiring healthy independence and taking on healthy responsibility. The end of this road is not a close relationship but resentment.

The goal of Christian parenting should not be seen as an attempt to control the behavior of our children, but rather a way of life that cultivates character from the heart. Proverbs says it this way: *"My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways"* (Pr 23:26).

For Christian parent, this means we are to neither control nor coddle. Instead, we must be generous in giving our kids grace and unafraid to instruct our kids in truth. It means when family life is stressful and chaotic, we take the responsibility to lead our children to into peace and maturity. It means, when we inevitably mess up, we show our kids what repentance from sin and faith in Christ looks like. We say we are sorry. We own our mistakes. We ask forgiveness, and we make it right. We prioritize Jesus, not just with our words, but with our actions, our habits, and our time.

### 3.) Servants and Masters

The next few verses can be especially confusing and controversial: *“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 the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality”* (Col 3:22–25).

Let’s begin with these terms, when Paul uses terms like “bondservants” and “masters” in Colossians, what is he talking about? Well, the term “bondservant” comes from the Greek word “doulos” (δοῦλος). This term can be translated as “servant” (KJV) or even “slave” (NIV, NASB).

The question arises; does the Bible condone chattel slavery, like the type of slavery that was in the North Atlantic Slave Trade? The answer is emphatically, “no!”

In fact, if you study history, it was Christians like William Wilberforce (1759-1833) who led the charge in bringing down the institution of chattel slavery in the western world. We cannot impose the category of American chattel slavery in the 1800s onto a letter that the Apostle Paul is writing in the first century A.D.

In Roman society, to be a bondservant was to be someone who had some type of debt and then contracted his or her services to a “master” or “boss” to pay off that debt. Typically, this would be a poorer person who was trying to advance in society or a non-citizen of Rome who was trying to work towards establishing his or her citizenship.

By the time Paul was writing, most people who had a vocation in Roman society were working off some type of debt as bondservants. You had high-class bondservants and low-class bondservants. So, you had bondservants who were maids and custodians. But you also had bondservants who were doctors and lawyers and teachers and political officials.<sup>2</sup> Most bondservants had their own homes or apartments, and more than half of all slaves of the Roman Empire had paid their debts and purchased their own freedom by the age of thirty.<sup>3</sup>

What does this all mean for us, you might ask? It means when Paul uses the term “bondservant” in Colossians 3, he is talking to anyone who is working under the authority of another so that they can pay off debt and have the means that they need order to live life. In other words, we can take many of the things Paul is saying about

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 207.

<sup>3</sup> “A slave could be a custodian, a salesman, or a CEO. Many slaves lived separately from their owners. Finally, selling oneself into slavery was commonly used as a means of obtaining Roman citizenship and gaining an entrance into society. Roman slavery in the first century was far more humane and civilized than the American/African slavery practiced in this country much later. This is a sobering and humbling fact!” R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 206.



“bondservants” and apply them to anyone who is an employee.

So, for any Christian who is an employee, there are some sinful approaches to work we need to avoid. The first of which doing our job *“by way of eye-service.”* This is that unique skill of not working hard at your job, but rather the skill of looking like you are working hard at your job. This is the temptation to be lazy: to conserve our energy, our creativity, and focus for ourselves instead of doing our job. There are many people in the world who go from job to job, attempting to do the least amount possible. Perhaps you have worked with or for or over such a person, and you know very well, such a person is not pleasant to work with. Even more, such a person does not honor the name of Christ by working this way.

Secondly, we are not to work *“as people pleasers.”* This would be the exact opposite of the overly lazy approach to work. It is the way of life that looks to our job as the way we find our value, our purpose, and our approval. This can lead to a very toxic relationship with work in which we are not working to honor God, but rather to find honor for ourselves. Instead, Christians are to pursue a work ethic that contains the virtues of diligence, respect, integrity, and, ultimately, worship unto Christ.

To Christian “masters” (κύριοι), or what we might call bosses, Paul says this: ***“Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven”*** (Col 4:1).

Christian bosses are to be just and fair. In a parallel passage in Ephesians, Paul even forbids “masters” from is the constant use of threatening (Eph 6:9).

I firmly believe this is not just a biblical idea in the workplace; it is also a very effective idea in the workplace. The best leaders lead from a position of influence, not compulsion. The best leaders encourage people; they don’t dehumanize or demean them. Needing to constantly appeal to your hierarchy or title or the ability to fire someone to exert your will is a sign of weak leadership, not strong leadership. Being petty and prideful about the authority you hold over someone – whether big or small – is a sign of insecurity, not strength.

Christian leaders are to be distinctly different from this mindset (cf. Mt 20:25-28). We are to lead well, but we are to do so in a way that honors God and shows love for our neighbors. Christians who have authority are to look at their employees not as property, not as utilities, but as people made in the image and likeness of God.

This means that all of the things that applied to bondservants now apply to masters as well. Christian employers are to work with honor, diligence, integrity, and worshipfulness.

With this said, if you have authority in the workplace, you will have to make unpopular decisions. You will have to make disciplinary decisions. You will have to have hard and uncomfortable conversations. That is all part of the job. But as you do this job, do so in a way that conveys that you are accountable to the God who is Lord and master of all.

Recognize there is a higher authority you will answer to for your use of authority: “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil*” (2 Cor 5:10).

This all matters because, after all, our vocations are a primary way that Christians can bear witness to Christ among our non-Christian neighbors. We can’t always convince people to come to church on Sunday. But through our vocations and jobs, we can send the church to people who don’t yet know Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

For Paul, all of this reordering of relationships comes from Jesus. As he has been saying throughout this letter, *Jesus has done so much more than just forgive our sins. Through his life, death, and resurrection, he has delivered us from the spiritual bondage of the rulers and authorities that once held dominion over our lives. He has torn down the walls of hostility that stood between people groups and ethnicities for ages. He has made a way for us to know new life and wholeness and restoration in him. And that restoration extends to every sphere of human relationships.*

It is undeniable that the way the early Christians lived got the attention of the world. Particularly, those whom Roman society devalued found themselves drawn to the honor and dignity they found among the early church.

In the church, women were not second-class citizens. They were the first witnesses to the resurrection. In the church, children were not treated as disposable. They were welcomed by Jesus himself and said to them belongs the kingdom of heaven. In the church, servants were not dehumanized, they were free in Christ, and several even became companions of the apostles.

The church was a place where the dehumanized and devalued found dignity and honor. The way that the church was able to restore broken relationships was a signpost that pointed to the day when Jesus will return and renew all things.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a people who allow the resurrection power of Jesus to shine through our lives. May our we steward our marriages, our families, and our vocations in such a way that would cause people to be drawn to the hope of Christ. May our lives give the watching world a glimpse of the day when Jesus will restore all of creation.

AMEN.

## **Ministry**

- Healing broken relationships
- Marriage
- Children



- Struggling at work

### **Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities**

1. Read Col 3:18-4:1. What are the various roles and relationships that are addressed in this passage?
2. Compare Colossians 3:18-19 and Ephesians 5:21-32. What is unique about the Christian vision of marriage? How should wives be challenged and instructed by these passages? How should husbands be challenged and instructed by these passages?
3. Compare Colossians 3:20-21 to Ephesians 6:1-4. How should these passages challenge Christians to a countercultural manner of family? What are the ways that children and parents could be motivated by these verses to love one another?
4. Pastor David argued that the “bondservants” of Colossians 3:22 have some similarities to employees today. How should the parallel passages of Colossians 3:22-4:1 and Ephesians 6:5-9 help us understand a Christian vision of work?
5. How do Christians’ relationships in their marriages, families, and vocations have a missional impact on the outside world?