

“Christ-Honoring Relationships”
Colossians 3:18-4:1
November 27, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

Christianity is a practical religion, affecting our most basic relationships. While Paul’s letter to the Colossians contains some of the most exalted Christology in the Bible, it is also intensely practical. In today’s passage, the reign of Christ is applied to the mundane relationships of life—that between husband and wife, parent and child and slave and master (employer and employee in our context). The common theme in these three pairings is submission. Did you notice how Paul mentions first in all three pairings the ones who are to be in submission?

In some ways, Paul is applying here the fifth commandment. Question 104 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “What is God’s will for you in the fifth commandment?” The answer: “That I honor, love, and be loyal to my father and mother and all those in authority over me; that I obey and submit to them, as is proper, when they correct and punish me; and also that I be patient with their failings—for through them God chooses to rule us.” Rather than taking each of these pairings individually, let’s consider three themes that emerge from them.

I. The Glory of Powerlessness

The practical application of the present reign of Christ is for us to embrace an attitude of submission in all that we do. The obvious examples of submission here apply to wives, children and slaves. The passage ends, though, with a reminder that even the most powerful among God’s people are required to submit. Notice the last verse in which masters are commanded to treat their slaves justly and fairly, **“knowing that you also have a Master in heaven”** (4:1).

To say this differently, the gospel changes our view of power, and it is the misuse of power that most often causes problems in our relationships. When I seek to retaliate against my wife by giving her the silent treatment, I am engaged in a power play that will bring harm to my marriage. When I want to make my children be what I want them to be to meet my needs instead of recognizing who God has made them to be, I am engaged in a power play that will bring harm to my children. So Paul tells wives, children and slaves not to seek power, but to submit to the place in which God has put them. And those who have been given power are not to use it as they please, but to do so for the benefit of those who are called to submit to them.

We don't like the idea of submission in our day, and the notion that a wife should submit to her husband is widely rejected and even mocked today. These commands would not have been without controversy in Paul's day either, but for the exact opposite reason. The controversial parts in Paul's day would not have been the commands to submit, but the commands to the powerful to use their power for the sake of others. The word of God is always challenging the current world order, but not always in the same way. In our day, everyone thinks that freedom means doing anything you want to do, and submission to another doesn't fit well with that goal.

Paul tells a wife to submit to her husband, **“as is fitting in the Lord.”** Submission is fitting and proper for the Christian. Perhaps Paul has in mind the submission of Jesus himself within the Trinity. The Bible is clear in saying that the Father and Son are equal, but also that the Son is forever submissive to the Father. Wives have the great honor of following Jesus in their submission.

Let's pause for a minute to define what we mean by submission. It means to respect the authority of another so that obedience is given to that authority. Whenever this topic is considered, the question that frequently arises concerns the husband who is unworthy of a wife's submission. A wife might say, “It's one thing for Jesus to submit himself to a holy and perfect heavenly Father, but I don't know of anyone who would use those adjectives to describe my husband.” Does Paul mean for a wife to submit to a fallen, sinful husband? Clearly he does, since there are no husbands in the category of unfallen and non-sinful. But it is just as clear that a wife's submission is never to lead her into sin, because her ultimate submission is to God. She submits to her husband for Jesus' sake, and would also refuse to submit for the same reason.

The Old Testament character, Abigail, provides an interesting study in the submission of a wife to a difficult husband. Her husband, Nabal, was blinded by his own greed. He acted so offensively in denying provisions to David and his army that David determined to take his revenge by wiping out every male member of Nabal's family. Abigail heard of the approach of David's army and his intention, and she acted quickly and decisively to take the provisions to him that her husband had determined to deny David. Submission in her case involved doing something contrary to her husband's desires but which rescued him from his own foolishness. She acted in his best interests without him even knowing about it, and did so in a manner that protected him from public shame as much as possible for such a greedy, stubborn and foolish man. Submission doesn't require seeing your husband with rose-colored glasses. Nabal was indeed a fool, and Abigail acknowledged as much. But she still acted in his best interests.

There are two ways that a wife's submission is full of glory. First, it provides her with an opportunity to trust God. Just in the past few weeks, I have had two wives in our congregation tell me about God meeting them in just this way. They both spoke of a desire they had to change their husbands, embracing the role of chief change agent in his life. They would pray for such change, speak of it openly to their husbands and even seek to require it of him through specific actions they wanted their husbands to take. But then both spoke of God clearly leading them to stop all that and just love their husbands and focus first on the changes needed in their own lives. Both reported much happier marriages after that and a deeper love for Jesus in their own hearts.

The second way a wife's submission is full of glory is that it speaks a strong message of respect to her husband. We men are more fragile than we like to admit, and this is one of our greatest vulnerabilities. We need respect, and a wife's respect can bring great benefit to her husband. Proverbs 14:1 says, **"The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands."** Disrespect of your husband is the foolish tearing down of your own house. Even if a man is not worthy of respect in many areas of his life, there are often some ways where he is and where a wife can respect him authentically.

II. The Powerlessness of Glory

In each of these pairings, the person in the position of power and glory is called upon to give of himself in service to the one who is to submit to him. So the father is told not to provoke his children. What kind of behavior from a father might provoke a child? Perpetual fault-finding would do so. A critical father is attempting to shape a child by manipulating the child with words and threats of punishment only, and Paul will have none of it for the Christian father. Instead, the father is to give up shaping the child as the father wants him to be shaped, and instead to recognize the way God wants that child to be shaped. He is to affirm what he sees God doing and cultivate that in the child. Of course, a mother is to do the same.

A master is to treat his slaves justly and fairly. This command in Paul's day would have been quite controversial. Slaves were viewed only as property, to be used in any way seen fit by the master. The needs of the slave were not considered at all. Paul's command to Christian masters would have gone against the grain to a significant degree, leading undoubtedly to much objection from other masters. You can hear them saying, "If you're too soft on your slaves, then my slaves are going to hear about it and expect equal treatment from me. You're busting the curve for the rest of us." For a master to act in this way is to give up power.

And then we have the command given to the husband to love his wife. We have other literature outside the Bible from this period, and much of it contains advice given to households about the appropriate behavior expected of each member of the household. Nowhere in any of this literature is a husband told to love his wife. The harsh husband makes demands of his wife to meet his needs. The loving husband sacrifices himself to meet his wife's needs. That is the clear call of Christ.

Dr. Robert Seizer wrote a book called *Mortal Lessons: Notes in the Art of Surgery*. He gives an account of a time when he needed to remove a tumor and found it necessary to sever a facial nerve, leaving a young woman's mouth permanently twisted. In Dr. Seizer's own words:

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. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks, "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut." She nods, and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says. "It is kind of cute." All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I, so close, can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.

Accommodating ourselves to the needs of others is indeed God-like. That's what Jesus has done for us, at great cost to himself. It is a giving up of power for the sake of others, power that could otherwise be used to force others to accommodate to us. There is glory in giving up power for the sake of others.

III. The Freedom of All Servants of Christ

The Bible has a different view of freedom than the view current in our world. The current view of freedom is that it is the ability to do whatever you want to do. The Bible says that such an attitude only leads to bondage. The Bible teaches that everyone is a slave to something. Doing whatever you want to do makes you a slave of self. Submitting to God and doing what he wants makes you a slave of God. You don't get to choose whether or not you are a slave, but you do get to choose to whom you enslave yourself.

This perspective helps answer a thorny question that comes up in this passage. Why does Paul tell Christian slaves to submit to their masters rather than rebelling against them? Or if that would be too harmful and revolutionary, why doesn't he at least condemn slavery here? One of the things we must understand is that slavery in this day was very different than what we are

familiar with in our own nation. It wasn't racially-based. It was more like what we know as indentured servanthood.

Paul is concerned about real freedom, the kind that is available both for slaves and those who are enslaved to a job or anything else. Many experience a type of mild slavery today by being trapped in a job. Perhaps you feel trapped by a hard set of circumstances in your life, such as caring for a special needs child or a sick relative. The path to freedom involves several elements found in Paul's directions to slaves. First is submission to the authorities God has placed over us, even when those authorities are less than ideal.

The second element toward freedom is doing all of one's work as if Jesus is the one who asked us to do it and who benefits from it. It is critical to focus your eye on the right object in your work. It is not to be focused ultimately on the master or the boss but on Jesus. Paul specifically rejects working with the motive of being a people-pleaser, working only when the boss is looking. This would also include working only for financial profit as one's ultimate goal. On the contrary, the Christian is told to **“work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men”** (v. 23). This gives meaning and dignity to all of our work, even the most menial tasks. If you are a chef in a restaurant, prepare every meal as if you are preparing it for Jesus. If you are a teacher, treat every student as if you are teaching Jesus. As a pastor, I am to preach every sermon as if Jesus is in attendance at that worship service.

Third, remember that there is a reward for work done unto Jesus. Paul tells Christian slaves to work heartily, **“knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward”** (v. 24). Can you imagine the encouragement this would be to a slave? Slaves would never be considered as potential heirs, no matter how faithful they may have worked for their masters. Inheritances are for children, not slaves. But the best inheritance, the one from the Lord, the owner of all things, is available to slaves. As a matter of fact, it is only those who humble themselves to become as a slave who will receive this inheritance.

CONCLUSION:

Dorothy Sayers once wrote, “What is the Christian understanding of work?... [It] is that work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties...the medium in which he offers himself to God.” The same could be said of all our relationships. They are the medium through which we offer ourselves to the God who has so generously offered himself to us.