

Autumn Ridge Church Women's Bible Study
Colossians 3:18-4:1 - Because of Christ
November 7, 2018 - Jann Wright



Welcome to Women's Bible Study. We are continuing our journey through the book of Colossians. We have one chapter remaining, then we will transition to the short book of Philemon and then close out with Gretchen's final lecture on December 5.

If you had the opportunity to review our lesson, you realize that we are working through a controversial passage on relationships where we encounter words like submit, obey, slaves and masters. You might wonder if I somehow drew the short stick among my fellow teachers to end up with this topic. Actually, I volunteered to teach on this particular passage, not because I am an expert on the topic, but rather because I am a struggling student who has signed up to take the course yet again.

I taught a similar passage when we studied 1 Peter last fall. I prepared the teaching materials for middle school and high school students when they studied Colossians last spring. I still don't quite get it, but together we are going to grapple with this passage and its clash with culture. At the end of the lecture, I hope we will each leave saying, "I can take another step to be in alignment with the instructions in this passage". We will learn as the first century Christians did that Jesus transforms our relationships and every person is under authority.

Review

Foundational Principles

In our study over the past few weeks of Colossians we have learned some foundational principles. We learned Jesus is the Image of the Invisible God. Jesus is the Creator of All Things. Jesus Holds All Things Together. Jesus is the Head of the Church. Jesus is the Reconciler. His death on the Cross was the sacrifice required to pay for our sins and bring us back in relationship with God.

New Life in Christ

In addition to these foundational principles, we learned as Christians we are to set aside behaviors like sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed. We are to rid ourselves of anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and lies.

In addition there are new characteristics that define us. We are to demonstrate the virtues of: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love. We have also learned the importance of discerning judgment, the need for godly friends to correct us when we get off track, and that suffering will be a part of our reality.

Context

As Christians, the foundational points are clear. The natures we are to set aside are straightforward. There is also agreement on the exercise of virtues. The challenge comes

when we apply these principles to our families and our workplaces. That is where it becomes messy, challenging, and downright difficult.

Scripture Passage: Colossians 3:17-4:1

¹⁷And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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

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

²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

²¹Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

²²Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.

²³Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, ²⁴since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. ²⁵Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism. ^{4:1} Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

General Overview

The management of the home was serious business in the ancient world. Even ancient philosophers like Aristotle and Seneca weighed in on its importance.² A quick perusal of popular selling books reveal similar concerns with family and work two thousand years later. (book slides)

The instructions in Colossians are given in pairs with the traditionally considered weaker party listed first. Each are called to the first century traditional value of submission which authors of the book, Hard Sayings of the Bible³ note that any pagan moralist would have also instructed. However, the key difference is that these ideas are reframed in terms of a relationship with Christ.

Additionally unusual in the first century is that Paul addresses women, children, and slaves as individual thinking people capable of choosing how they would relate to others. They were not addressed as property or tools, but as people.

In each pair there is a clear instruction and an accompanying boundary. Rather than husbands, fathers, and masters having no limitations on their power and influence, now we have the introduction of a balance of rights and responsibilities, of sacrifice and concern for others.

¹Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

²Garland, David E. The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians/Philemon. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998. Print. Page 241.

³Kaiser Jr, Walter C., Davids, Peter H, Bruce, F.F, and Brauch, Manfred T. Hard Sayings of the Bible. Madison: InterVarsity Press. 1996. Print. Page 649.

As we discuss these relationship pairs, we are going to reverse the order for two reasons. One is that we often are so charged up about the concept of submission of wives to husbands that if the speaker doesn't say exactly what we want to hear, we don't listen to anything else. A second reason is sometimes it is easier to talk about relationships that are a bit more distant and then move to our most intimate relationships. Our overarching theme as we study the passage is that Jesus transforms our relationships and every person is under authority.

Abusive Relationships

Before we dive into the passage, we need to clarify some issues related to abuse. Commentator David E. Garland notes:

We live in a culture of violence, which has for too long silently tolerated abuses against women in the home, in the workplace, and through pornography. We must not allow this text to be misused to apply pressure on wives to put up with husbands who abuse them emotionally, sexually, or physically, or who abuse their children in any way. . . . Abusers need treatment, wives and children need protection. Such action may be the greatest sign of love."⁴

If you are in a situation where you are facing abuse, you need to seek the help of an experienced professional Christian Counselor who can give you individualized spiritual counsel regarding the application of these verses. We have access to a female licensed counselor here at church who can provide counseling in the short term and help direct you to resources if you don't know where to start or are concerned about finances. You may contact Dr. Jennifer Burden through the ARC church office to schedule an appointment free of charge.

Slaves and Masters

With that being said, let's look at our first relationship pair, which had high potential for abuse, slaves and masters. As we look at each pair we are going to discuss them in terms of the tension around the relationship, the instruction, the boundary, and a model example.

The Tension

American Slavery

The tension regarding slavery in the U.S. is obvious. We have deep national scars and open wounds around our history of the enslavement of African Americans. The Bible and the Church were often at the center of that controversy.

This summer my family and I went to Washington, D.C. While there we visited the newly opened Bible Museum. It is a fascinating place with lots of interactive and engaging ways to learn about events in the Bible.

⁴Garland, David E. The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians/Philemon. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998. Print. Page 265.

One of the displays had as its subject the Bible and Slavery. In the display case was the pro-slavery position using the Bible to advocate its position on the left and on the other side was the anti-slavery position using the Bible to advocate its position on the right. It was fascinating and disturbing at the same time.

There were also national wounds around slavery in the first century. Early in the development of the nation the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt and were prisoners of war at various times in their history. During the time of Jesus they were under Roman occupation.

The Romans and Greeks were heavily dependent economically on the work of slaves. Estimates are that one-third of the population in urban areas was composed of slaves. In Roman Culture slavery was not usually permanent, but rather a temporary condition on a path to freedom. There was no racial component to slavery in the Roman culture.⁵

The Instruction

So in all of this historical tension, Slaves are instructed to obey their earthly masters. We learned in chapter 3 that before God there was no moral distinction between those who had become Christians: Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, and in Galatians 3:28 male or female, but given their new identity in Jesus how are they to function in the daily relationships of life? Slavery was “an entrenched reality that the early Christians could neither change nor ignore”⁶.

Paul does not provide a course for slaves on owner management or for masters on slave management rather the emphasis is on relationships in light of what Jesus has done for them. Slaves are instructed to obey, to not use their faith as an excuse to perform their jobs poorly or to take restitution from their masters, for example through theft, but to conduct themselves in a way that would honor Christ.

The Boundary

Their boundary, which in this case was an encouragement, was to remember they were working for the Lord. Their work had deep purpose. They were promised an inheritance. This was amazing as slaves didn't typically have the legal standing to inherit anything; however, in God's kingdom, they would be treated as equal inheritors.

Masters

Masters were instructed to provide for their slaves what was right and fair, not what was customary or culturally acceptable. The masters were warned that they too were under the authority of one much more powerful than they, God, and that he would judge them for their actions. There seems an implicit understanding here that Masters would not make demands that were contrary to God's standards.

⁵McKnight, Scot. The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Peter. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996. Print. page 164-166.

⁶Garland, David E. The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians/Philemon. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998. Print. Page 248.

Modern Application

The concept of slavery is abhorrent to our culture and has been abolished by law in many parts of the world, but sadly slavery is still an issue today even in our country with the reality of human trafficking which inevitable leads to modern slavery. It seems we read headlines every week of someone taking extreme advantage of another person.

While we may have preferred the Paul demand an open overthrow of the institution, the seeds were planted to transform the culture and thus end the scourge. We should note also that Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 provides further clarification on the issue of slavery telling slaves if they can gain their freedom they should do so. Also in 1 Corinthians 7, verse 23 Paul reminds them:²³*You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.* The issue of slavery was deeply personal to Paul, which we will discover when we later study Paul's appeal to Philemon to free his slave, Onesimus.

A modern day example to which we could apply these principles is the employee and employer relationship. How much more should we be in alignment with these instructions when we are able for the most part to choose our authority? So whether you are employed in the workplace, serving in a volunteer capacity, a member of a church committee, or serving a role in your community or school you should work as though for the Lord.

Additionally, when we are in positions of authority, however big or small we must provide what is right and fair. We must remember we are under authority and God is watching our actions.

Our Example: Christ

⁵*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

⁶*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-7)*

Jesus in John 15:15 gives some insight into his role as our master, addressing his disciples he says: ¹⁵*I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*

Children and Fathers

The Tension

In the first century fathers had absolute authority over their children, even the power of life and death. They were regarded as their father's property and so their status was not much higher than that of a slave. This power extended even after the children were grown or married, and until the Father relinquished it or until he died.⁷

The Instruction

⁷Garland, David E. The NIV Application Commentary: Colossians/Philemon. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998. Print. Page 246-247.

The instruction is for children to obey their fathers. It is a variation of the instruction from the 10 Commandments in Exodus 20:12 where children are told to honor their father and mother. This was an expected cultural behavior.

However, in this instruction in Colossians there is an assumption that parents will not demand unseemly behavior from their children like Herodias did when she asked her daughter to request the head of John the Baptist in Mark 6:24. It is also assumed that parents have their children's best interests in mind (Matthew 7:9-11).

The Boundary

The boundary however, is shocking. Fathers are told not to embitter or provoke their children or they will become discouraged. In other words, do not lead your homes in such a way that children become discouraged and their spirits broken. This is good advice for both mothers and fathers, but it is addressed to fathers, likely because it is a strong temptation to go too far in one's authority.

Modern Application

Even two thousand years later we still recognize the need for children to obey. Usually it doesn't take long when managing sleep deprived toddlers to realize that parents need to provide rules and structure for the safety, well-being, and ultimate happiness of the children and everyone else in the family.

However, the instruction to obey must be balanced with an eye toward the health and well-being of children's spirits. I found these suggestions from Ravi's Zacarias in his book, *I Take Thee Rebekah* to be helpful, he says:

Work hard at keeping in tune with the way your children think. . . Keep close contact with them. . . Answer their questions with candor and thoughtfulness. Do not ignore their struggles. Deal with their difficulties, and spare them a cynical attitude. . . Most of us learn the hard way that our children were in a very different world in their own thoughts than we realized.⁸

Our Example: Christ

When Jesus and his parents were visiting Jerusalem, on the return trip home Mary and Joseph realized Jesus was missing and returned to Jerusalem to find him. We read in Luke 2:48-51:

⁴⁸When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

⁴⁹"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁵¹Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁸Zacharias, Ravi. *I, Isaac, take Thee, Rebekah*. Nashville: W Publishing Group. 2004. Print. Page 145.

Even Jesus, the very Son of God, as a child obeyed his parents. Jesus also demonstrated how to honor your father and mother as an adult. When he was dying on the cross, he addressed the needs of his mother.

²⁵Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," ²⁷and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:25-27)

Wives and Husbands

Finally we tackle the last pairing, husbands and wives. This is a more concise version of a similar teaching in Ephesians 5.

The Tension

When I was a student at the University of Kentucky, I remember taking a 500 level class in Personality from the Psychology department. I was engaged at the time, but not yet married. As part of the class we did some personality/communication profiles.

One of my categories was labeled submissively hostile. I was aghast, that didn't seem like a great label! I remember complaining about this "dumb" test to my future husband who looked at it, read the description, smiled and said, "Yes, my dear that is pretty accurate."

So you see I am not the poster child for submission, but I have worked at it. Often with mixed results, sometimes being submissive on the outside but hostile on the inside, sometimes being submissive on the outside and hostile on the outside. Over the years we have learned to laugh together when I have crossed the line. However, I think my husband would say that I have improved over our 32 years of marriage.

Incredible tension exists in our culture over this concept. We are independent, thinking working women. We have a different social environment than the first century. Yet, all is not well with our marriages 2,000 years later.

The Instruction

The instruction says wives submit to your own husbands. Notice it does not say to obey as in the case of the instructions to children and slaves. Also it does not say to submit to all men, but to submit to your own husband, which should be presumably easier in our culture because we have great freedom of choice in this area.

Let's look a bit deeper at the concept of submission. Here it carries with it the idea of choosing to place oneself under another's authority. Emerson Eggerichs in his excellent book, Love and Respect, uses the more palatable cultural term, respect.

I actually think respect can be harder. One can technically submit to someone or obey in a half hearted way, we have all observed that technique by children. But respect requires that the heart, mind, and action be in alignment which is way more difficult.

Women are often very clear on what God requires of husbands, unconditional love, but we often don't want to talk about what he requires of us. Wives are to submit or respect their own husbands. The loving seems to come easily to us, Eggerichs would say that we are wired for it, but respecting our husbands that is harder and we seem to have let ourselves off the hook from this instruction.

A national research study conducted by Decision Analysts, Inc. asked 400 men if they were forced to go through one of two negative experiences what would they choose:

- a) to be left alone and unloved in the world.
- b) to feel inadequate and disrespected by everyone.

74% of the men preferred being alone and unloved.⁹ Apparently respect is critical to the men we love. Another large study by the same research firm asked:

Even the best relationships sometimes have conflicts on day-to-day issues. In the middle of a conflict with my wife/significant other, I am more likely to be feeling:

- a) that my wife/significant other doesn't respect me right now.
- b) that my wife/significant other doesn't love me right now.

81% chose (a), my wife doesn't respect me right now.¹⁰ This is a big deal for husbands and we should be paying attention. It would seem we are better at loving than respecting. Scripture is giving us this instruction for a reason.

The Boundary

The boundary is as is fitting in the Lord indicating that there are some limits. Yet, it is still possible to disagree with respect. Some commentators view this also as a consideration that takes into account the context of culture. The reverse can also be true, just because something is culturally acceptable does not mean it is Biblical.

Husbands

The Instruction

We tend to forget the second part of this verse because we are focused on the first part, but a very high standard is set before husbands. The instruction is simply love your wife. Think about that in a first century culture that was very much male dominated, the focus is not on the husband's rule and authority, but on loving his wife. That would have been shocking. The standard for that love was incredible high, in Ephesians 5 we read,

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25)

⁹Eggerichs, Emerson. Love and Respect. Nashville: W Publishing Group. 2004. Print. Page 49.

¹⁰Eggerichs, Emerson. Love and Respect. Nashville: W Publishing Group. 2004. Print. Page 58.

The Boundary

The boundary for the husband is "do not be harsh with her", surely a temptation, especially if she is not respectful. If respect is hard for women, unconditionally loving appears to be hard for men.

Three Pictures

Here are three pictures that represent various time periods in our marriage. Here is one on our Wedding Day in 1986. This was a trip to Hawaii about 20 years and four children later.

But this is my favorite one, at the RAC in 2016. Now it doesn't seem like this could be my favorite compared to my wedding day and a trip to Hawaii. It looks very ordinary. However it is five days post op. I have 4 surgical drains and a wound vac. I could not shower, dress, drive, open or shut doors, or get my own drinks or meals. My husband was doing all of that and more, but I knew I was unconditionally loved, that is why it is my favorite picture.

Our Example: Christ

Our Ultimate Example is Christ who submitted himself to God and who loved us unconditionally and laid down his life for us.

Modern Application

As we seek to apply these instructions, I challenge you to consider doing three things. I am not telling you what to do, or giving you a list, I am simply trying to the best of my ability explain the scriptural passage. You will have to sort out what you are going to apply. Here are some ideas to think about:

Pray

First pray, ask for wisdom to understand what God is asking from you in your marriage regarding submission and respect. If you are not married or if you are a widow, pray and ask God whose marriage he would have you pray to strengthen. You can have incredible impact on other people's marriages by applying these principles.

Ask

Be bold and ask your husband what is one thing I could do to show you respect?

Do

Third, with the power available from God, with the example of Jesus, and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, put some strategies in place to take steps to align your thoughts and actions with what we have learned from this passage.

We quickly want to decide that the words addressed to wives in this passage are for a different culture. But have you considered that we don't think children obeying their parents, fathers being careful not to crush the spirits of their children, husbands loving their wives unconditionally, masters being just and fair, and slaves, servants, or employees working as though for the Lord are inappropriate. That means all the other instructions make reasonable sense. Only the instruction to wives is troublesome. Is it the scriptures or us that need to realign?

Consider these strategies:

Maybe you change the way you interact with your friends when discussing husbands, maybe you change the way you interact with your son or daughter when they express concerns about their spouse. Maybe as a person with influence with a young teen you listen when they are struggling with obeying their parents and give them godly counsel. Maybe when your co-workers are giving halfhearted work, you redouble your efforts to be a godly role model.

Jesus not only died for us, he taught us how to live on earth. Jesus transforms our relationships. He transformed them in the first century and he is still in the business of transforming them now. He transforms them in our families and in our workplaces.

Finally, we should realize from scripture we are all under authority. The Bible tells us that even non Christians, sadly are under the authority of sin. As a Christian our relationships are all under the ultimate authority of Jesus. He knows what it is like to be under authority.

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