

Our Households and the Lordship of Christ | Colossians 3:18-4:1

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Every day we go about our lives according to certain rules, and abiding by certain regulations and expectations, that are codified by our culture and society to help us understand the “right way of doing things.”

Some of them are simple, introduced to us at a very young age for our safety and well being. For example, if I were to say, “*Look both ways before...*”, you would likely be able to finish that sentence, “*...crossing the street.*”

Other such cultural codes of conduct help us as we strive to live peaceably together, and even establish a common morality. The most well known example of this might be “*treat others the way...you want to be treated.*”

These sayings and standards are so well known and so widely accepted that if I were to change them in some way, or add something extra to them, you’d immediately notice and want to know why. If I said, “look both ways before crossing the street, and only cross at crosswalks or while holding the hand of a friend”, you’d probably be curious about these changes and maybe even start to consider how following them might impact your life.

The Apostle Paul does something very similar to this in Colossians 3:18-4:1. Throughout the letter to the Colossians he has been trying to help these believers understand just how much Jesus must have a profound and boundless influence on everything in a Christian’s life. Once you follow Jesus, you begin to realize and shape your life around the truth that ***everything comes under the authority of and submits to the Lordship of Christ.***

Nothing about your life – your identity, your desires, your purpose, your character, or your relationship – nothing can remain unchallenged or unchanged once you make it your heart’s desire that “*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.*”

And so, in the process of helping his readers better understand the all-encompassing impact following Christ will have on their lives, Paul turns his attention to what it will mean to keep Jesus as the ultimate authority in the roles and responsibilities of a household – which often include the most important relationships in our lives.

We’ll take a look at how Paul did this and why it is so important to understand this context in just a moment. But before we dive in any further, I want to say a few things about this passage.

I know that for many people, and probably for some of you here today, these verses have a reputation...and in your experience that reputation might not be a good one. Throughout human history Col 3:18-4:1 has **inappropriately** and **illegitimately** been used to **sinfully justify** terrible things.

Women have been told that they are less valuable, less capable, and of a lower status than men.

Children have been made to believe that they must comply with anything adults in positions of power over them may demand.

Christians, pastors, and churches – both in the past and still today – have defended slavery and the subjugation of one human being over another as a good thing, a biblical thing, because Paul supposedly calls for it here.

I want to be very clear before we go any further: there is nothing, **NOTHING** in this passage that justifies any of the interpretations I just described.

God's Word does NOT teach that women are inferior to men.

It does NOT teach that children are at the mercy of or under the command of every adult in their lives. And it most certainly does NOT defend slavery as something that is good or should be required.

I hope to make all of this more clear as we go along, but I wanted to be sure I say it up front: ***any interpretation of this passage that diminishes the value or worth of a person is wrong.*** It should be rejected. And any trace we hold of it should be met with repentance.

The main point Paul is trying to make in this passage, is:

As a Christian, your role in your household is subject to the authority and Lordship of Christ.

Ultimately, if you are a follower of Jesus, then you must strive to conform your role as wife, husband, mother, father, son, daughter, or any other familial relation to the expectations and commands of Christ. He is the authority we are all, together, trying to obey. Our understanding of how we treat and interact with one another must be grounded in our obedience to Him.

Before we get to the text itself, we need to consider the historical and cultural context in which Paul is setting this standard of Christian household behavior. Getting a good interpretation of this passage absolutely depends on understanding a few things about Paul's world.

It may seem odd that Paul all of a sudden, without any kind of transition or introduction, starts listing off orders to wives, husbands, children, and slaves. But to his readers in the 1st century, this sort of a list would have been very familiar.

Most of the cultures within the Roman Empire had what are sometimes called "household codes". They were the standard cultural expectations for what a home would look like and how it would operate if it was living up to society's ideal for the family and the community.

Long before Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians, a Greek philosopher named Aristotle popularized what would become the standard version of these codes. You can look these up online (just google "Aristotle Household Codes" and have fun going down the rabbit hole). For our purposes today, I will summarize the parts of Aristotle's work that are most enlightening to what Paul is saying and trying to accomplish here.

According to Aristotle...

- There were three key relationships in any home: Masters and slaves, fathers and children, wives and husbands.
- The husband exercised authoritative rule over his wife and children.

- The slave master (which was often, but not always the husband) also had full authority over the slave (who was not regarded as a full person under Roman law)
- Ultimately, according to the culturally codified and commonly utilized household rules, the man, husband, and father of the house held nearly unquestioned authority on the basis of his assumed natural superiority.

In other words, 1st century Christians lived in a culture that believed a man ought to be the central authority in all matters of his home and family. This authority could be (and often was encouraged to be) domineering, self-centered, and chiefly concerned with the preservation of power and status.

Paul wrote this letter to the Christians of Colossae because they were struggling against false teachers in their community. It is reasonable, then, to assume that Paul had been asked to address what these teachers were saying about authority in one's own household. Perhaps the Christians in Colossae were wondering, if all believers are united in Christ and equal before the Lord, how can they go on running their homes in a way that so clearly depended on a hierarchy based in the assumption that a wife is inferior to her husband, or that children are inferior to their parents, or that slaves are inferior to all other human beings?

So, Paul responds to these questions in this passage. He is not creating or defining a new system of Christian household governance, and he is not prescribing the ideal Christian household. He is commenting on a system that is already in place and helping believers understand how to navigate it while retaining their faith and obedience to God.

And what he ends up telling them is, **as a Christian, your role in your household is subject to the authority and Lordship of Christ.**

So, fresh off a series of commands for how to live in Christian community under the Lordship of Christ (Col 3:12-17), Paul turns his attention to the family community and says:

*18 Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.
19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.*

“Wives submit to your husbands” is straight out of every household code you could find in the 1st century. That part would have sent heads nodding in recognition.

However, the addition of a wife's reason and motivation for submission being her obedience to the authority of Jesus Christ, **and not her husband** – that would have made people sit up, take notice, and ask “hold on, what was that last part again?”

And then, to really shake things up, Paul adds a command to the husbands as well. Requiring wives to submit to their husbands was a fairly common teaching in the ancient world. However, a requirement for husbands to love their wives *was not part of the household code at all.*

These two verses signal a cataclysmic change in the role of authority for Christians and their households. If a wife is going to submit herself to her husband based on what she believes is the best practice for following and obeying Christ, and if the husband is going to assume the responsibility of loving his wife, giving him a task that brings his

relationship with her into the realm of mutual humility and partnership...then it means there has been a serious change of who is in charge in this marriage.

The Romans believed (and most culture at the time agreed) that the husband was the center of authority in the family, with all members of the household submitting to his superior rule.

But for followers of Christ, there is space for only one ultimate authority in any part of our lives, family and household included. Paul removes the man, the husband, the father from that space as defined by the culture...and instead declares it to rightly belong only to Christ.

Men then join women and children, wives and sons and daughters (and in Paul's day, slaves) in building relationships with one another that are mutually loving, caring, kind, good, and fair. Paul says both husbands and wives are called to make Christ the Lord of their lives and the authority of their homes.

If you are following me so far, you might be thinking "okay...that all sounds fine...but what are we supposed to do with the command for wives to submit to their husbands, and husbands to love their wives?" How do we obey this command? What are we supposed to do?

"Submission" is a very tricky and triggering word for us today. It gets a lot of bad press, and gets associated with a bunch of modern definitions that do not fit with Paul's usage at all. Furthermore, I think it is important to keep in mind that while Paul applies the concept of submission here only to wives, his letter to the Ephesians makes it clear in 5:21 that submission is an act and attitude that is to characterize all Christian relationships. Out of our reverence to Christ, we all must learn how to humble ourselves and live lives in service and surrender to one another.

Still, we need to take both the wives' call to submission, and the husbands' call to love her, seriously. Here is my best attempt to understand these commands as a Christian, theologian, pastor, preacher, and fellow follower of Christ trying to figure this out shoulder to shoulder with you:

- ***A wife's submission to her husband is her voluntary act of serving her husband, helping him when he is in need, and being a supportive partner committed to working together in the growth and flourishing of their marriage.***
 - A wife's submission is NOT blind obedience to any idea or desire of her husband.
 - It is NOT doing whatever he wants or says, especially if what he is demanding is in conflict with her faith or obedience to Christ.
 - And hear me clearly: submission can never, EVER justify an abusive relationship. Marriage is a covenant. It is a promise. And abuse – be it physical, verbal, emotional, or spiritual – seriously damages that covenant. While I absolutely believe in the power of forgiveness and God's ability to redemptively repair the promises we break with another, this does not mean that a woman is ever required to remain in a place or with a person that is abusing her.
- ***A husband's love for his wife is his intentional commitment to put her needs and interests first, to never use his cultural or spiritual authority in a way that diminishes his wife's dignity or drives her to bitterness, and requires him to be a supportive partner committed to working together in the growth and flourishing of their marriage.***
 - A husband's love for his wife is NOT doing whatever she wants to make her happy.

- It is NOT putting her on a pedestal to the point where she becomes an idol for him.
- And a husband's love for his wife does not mean he has to grin and bear abuse, either. Again, there is absolutely no biblical requirement for accepting and putting up with abuse in any relationship.

The key to getting this right is that both the wife and the husband must look to Christ, AND NEVER THE CULTURE, to define what their marriage is and what it will look like.

There is no greater example of what beautiful, voluntary servanthood looks like that of Christ toward us. Wives, submit to your husbands in careful reflection of the pattern of submission modeled for us by Jesus.

There is no greater example of love leading someone to put the interest and needs of others before themselves than that of Christ giving himself up for our benefit. Husbands, love your wives in careful reflection of the pattern of deep, tenderhearted love modeled for us by Jesus.

A rich Christian marriage is one in which husbands and wives are helping one another pursue the example of Christ, together. If you are each subject to the authority and Lordship of Christ, then you are side by side walking the path of righteousness, together.

And if you happen to be a Christian but your spouse is not a believer, I hope it is some comfort to you to know that your circumstances are probably like a majority of the wives and husbands Paul was writing to. That's the beauty of Christ being your true authority. You can submit to a non-believing husband or love a non-believing wife, because your obedience is not to one another, but to the Lord. In doing so, you may end up being a brilliant witness of the Gospel to the one you love.

So this morning we must ask ourselves: **Is it your desire to make Christ the true Lord and authority of your marriage?** Will your partnership together be one that is ultimately about seeking and serving and obeying not first each other...but Jesus first (and then each other, in obedience to Him)?

So often when things are not going well in a marriage the first thing we do is to focus on the short-comings of our spouse. "If he were better at this, or if she would only do that...then everything would be better."

And although it is true that every husband and every wife will ALWAYS have things to work on, grow in, and get better at...perhaps before we seek to blame each other, we should first consider if we are living under Christ's authority. When conflict arises, on those days when marriage is HARD...are we quick to lash out at our spouse, or are we quick to seek the Lord and pray for His guidance, to have Him help us understand how to love one another?

The second relationship Paul addresses in the household is parents and their children.

*20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.
21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.*

Paul's address to children is again unique when compared to the household codes of his day. Most ancient codes would not have thought of children as responsible persons needing to be respected and instructed as members of the community, as Paul treats them here. Most of the time they were thought of as property, as future prospects, as a way of securing and continuing the legacy and status of the father of the house. But Paul gives them a much greater status than this. Children are invited to understand their relationship with Jesus too, and to start considering how they might live in light of His Lordship in their homes and in their lives.

The command given to children is a bit more rigid and authoritative than that given to wives or husbands: "***obey your parents in everything***" – A possible way to understand this is:

- as long as children are living under the protection of their parents, it might be suggested that the biblical expectation is for them to obey their parents in as many ways as is possible.
- When children are no longer under the direct protective care of their parents, then the relationship may transition to one of honor and respect, but not necessarily direct obedience.
- However, I have to once again make clear: ***this does not excuse or allow for parental abuse of a child. Ever.*** Abuse is a failure of a parent's or caretaker's role and responsibility toward their child.

I think it is actually really beautiful that God has made it clear that kids can participate in faith and discipleship to Christ. My oldest daughter is two years old, and she's starting to pick up on and remember the things my wife and I tell her about God, about Jesus, and about what it means to love our neighbors, care for others, and to do what mom and dad ask. And I do want her to grow up knowing that as she listens to us and tries her best to follow in the ways we are leading her that her obedience is not just to make us happy...but that it brings a smile to the face of God as well. Kids can make God happy. How cool is that?

But Paul's command is not just to children. Again, he reminds fathers that their authority in the home is not absolute. Part of the responsibility of being a father is treating your children in such a way that the expectations set before them, and the obedience being asked of them, is reasonable, fair, and grounded in the hope of their healthy development.

Fathers (and honestly, I think it's totally okay to apply this command to all parents and caretakers) must love, discipline, and lead their children so that they know the most important adult in their life is "for them", is "in their corner", is someone they can trust and depend on. Paul does not want to see kids losing the will to obey their parents, to seek God, or to be productive members of their families because their fathers or parents are too cruel, dismissive, unloving, or harsh.

Jesus may never have been a biological father. He never married, and never raised children of his own. But through his life, death, and resurrection he created an enormous adoptive family of brothers and sisters, of sons and daughters. And the binding, unifying instruction he gave for all the relationships in his family was this:

33 "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Fathers, hear me clearly: the expectation of Christ, the command of your King, your Savior, your ultimate Authority in all things including your family is this: **love your kids**. Care for them. Sacrifice for them. Pursue their best interest before your own. You're going to mess this up from time to time. You're going to fail. But a loving person knows how to find the one they've hurt and say "I'm sorry." A loving person repents, grows, and gets better after every failure. Commit to loving your kids, and commit to getting better at it every day.

The last household relationship Paul addresses is the one that is hardest to find a parallel for in our lives:

22 Slaves, 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. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Anyone 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.

Because you and I live in a culture that no longer accepts or allows slavery, I'm not going to spend as much time drawing out lessons and applications from these verses. I do think there are some really good principles for our lives of work and our relationships with those in authority that can be drawn from this section, especially from v23 (*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters*). Our Senior Pastor, Steve Ratliff, who is on sabbatical right now, gave an excellent sermon from this passage on the topic of doing all our work in light of truly working for the Lord, a few months ago. It can be found in our archives under the title "Faith @ Work Part 2", from January 23 of this year. I'd encourage anyone who wants to learn more about work and obedience to Christ to go back and listen to that sermon.

What I am going to do instead is try and provide a clarification to something that is too often misunderstood about what Paul is doing in these verses. I ask you to again remember that Paul is striving to help the believers in a mostly Gentile church know how they can go on living in accordance with the household codes of their culture while maintaining their obedience to Christ. Paul speaks to slaves and to slave masters, because they were a deeply entrenched part of the Roman culture at this time.

It is easy to read v22-4:1 in isolation and feel Paul endorses slavery wholesale. But consider:

- Paul addresses slaves as people of value and worth and as the equals of others. This was drastically, subversively different from the view of slaves in most cultures at the time. Their earthly status as slaves does not impact their true identities as sons and daughters of Christ.
- Paul decisively reorients both slave and master to their true, mutual master, God in heaven.
- Paul never endorses slavery. There is never a hint of approval of the practice. He explains how the institution might work within a Christian framework, but that is a long, long way from ratifying it.

Everything Paul ever wrote about slavery keeps the authority and Lorship of Christ in mind. Everything Paul ever wrote about slavery would, quite honestly, make it almost impossible for a believing slave owner to do anything other than see their slave as a human being and, in all likelihood, consider freeing them.

Paul believed in no master but Christ. He believed in no authority other than Jesus.

Our authority reigns in heaven. Our commands come not from the power or hierarchy of human beings, but from Christ and Christ alone.

As a Christian, your role in your household is subject to the authority and Lordship of Christ.

Submit to the Lord, and lean into the love, kindness, humility, and good treatment of all people that He expects of the people who follow Him.