

Social Relations

Colossians 3:18-4:1-6

Social relations

(18) Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. (19) Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them. (20) Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord. (21) Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged. (22) Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye-service, as men-pleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: (23) and whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; (24) knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. (25) But he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons. (4:1) Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master in heaven.

Having dealt with moral vices and virtues, the epistle moves on to specific social relationships. It particularly deals with relationships in a Christian household: husbands and wives (Colossians 3:18-19), children and parents (Colossians 3:20-21), and masters and servants (Colossians 3:22-4:1). This passage is a relatively brief summary; a more complete treatment appears in Ephesians 5:21-6:9. Titus 2:1-10 and I Peter 2:18-3:7 also deal with the same subject.

The passage emphasizes mutual privileges and responsibilities. The pagan society of Paul's day defined these relationships in a one-sided manner, giving all power and authority to one of the parties, but Colossians presents them as reciprocal. All relationships are "in the Lord" or related to the Lord. (See Colossians 3:18, 20, 23; 4:1). Moreover, the whole passage falls within the scope of Colossians 3:17, which establishes the lordship of Jesus over all areas of life.

Verse 18 tells wives to submit, or be subject, to their own husbands. In other words, wives should acknowledge the leadership role of the husband in the family. (See also Ephesians 5:22-24; Titus 2:4-5.)

This attitude is proper, or fitting, in the Lord. The clause is descriptive, but it can also be seen as restrictive: the husband has the authority to lead only to the extent that it is proper in the Lord.

The wife is not inferior to the husband, nor is she his slave. The Bible presents marriage as a partnership between two people of equal value, worth, and rights who fulfill distinct but complementary roles (Genesis 2:18, 24; I Corinthians 11:11-12; I Peter 3:7). This verse does not say that women in general should submit to men in general or that a woman must submit to all men. Rather, it speaks specifically of the marriage relationship and tells a woman to submit to her own husband.

In a world sensitized by the women's liberation movement, the word *submit* may seem archaic to some. But understood in the biblical sense there is nothing offensive about it, and we must not lose the truth it expresses. It does not allow a husband to abuse his wife in any way, make arbitrary decisions based on his wishes alone, make selfish demands upon her, or treat her as inferior to himself. Instead, he must love his wife, give honor to her, and seek to please and benefit her as much as he would himself. (See Ephesians 5:25-33; Colossians 3:19; I Peter 3:7.)

Submission here simply means deferring to the husband's final authority. In any unit, one person must have ultimate responsibility and authority, and God chose the man to fulfill this role. Major decisions in a marriage should be made on a cooperative, mutually agreeable basis, but in situations where someone must assume final authority and responsibility, the husband should do so. He should be the spiritual leader. He should bear the primary burden of providing for the necessities of the family (I Timothy 5:8). God places a heavy responsibility upon the husband and gives him a corresponding authority to fulfill his obligations.

In a very real sense husbands and wives are to submit to each other (Ephesians 5:21). The husband must sacrifice himself for his wife (Ephesians

5:25). He must recognize that she has power, rights, or authority over his body even as he does hers (I Corinthians 7:4). Like all Christians, they must give preference to one another in honor and bear with one another in love (Romans 12:10; Ephesians 4:2).

Verse 19 tells husbands to love their wives. (Titus 2:4 similarly tells wives to love their husbands.) The verb here is *agapao*, which refers to the deepest, truest love and is usually, used in Scripture for Christian love. True love is not mere affection, but it is a strong concern for a person's whole welfare. Husbands are to love their wives sacrificially and to love them as they love their own bodies (Ephesians 5:25-33).

Husbands are commanded not to be bitter, or harsh, toward their wives. As discussed in the commentary on verse 18, husbands must submit to their wives in many ways. The command for husbands to love their wives means that they have no authority to abuse them, treat them selfishly, or disregard their desires. A husband must give honor to his wife, and if he mistreats her in any way, he will block his relationship with God (I Peter 3:7).

Verse 20 tells children to obey their parents in all respects. Such obedience pleases the Lord.

While children should always honor their parents, the duty of obedience is not absolute. There is no indication that adult children who have established their own home are still bound to follow their parents' desires. Moreover, children have no duty to commit sinful acts, violate conscience, or disobey the expressed will of God at the behest of parents, and they should not do so if they have a choice in the matter. The general principle of Acts 5:29 applies: "We ought to obey God rather than men." (The critical text says that children's obedience is well pleasing "in" the Lord, implying conformity to a Christian standard.)

Verse 21 tells parents not to provoke (irritate, embitter) their children. It specifically addresses fathers because they have the greater responsibility

and also the greater tendency to be harsh, but the principle applies to both parents. Clearly, this verse rules out all physical or emotional abuse.

If parents discipline their children too stringently, they may discourage, or dishearten, them. In such cases, children may ultimately turn against their parents or their parents' faith. Proper training of a child involves both discipline and encouragement.

Verse 22 tells servants to obey their earthly masters, and employees today should likewise follow the directions of their employers. The Greek word *doulos* literally means, "slave." While slavery is an indefensible, inhuman, evil system, and while many slaves in Paul's day suffered cruelly, the working arrangement of many slaves was similar in some ways to that of an indentured servant or a career employee. Today, the principles expressed in Colossians 3:22-4:1 apply to employees and employers.

This passage does not endorse slavery; indeed, the principles it expresses actually undercut slavery. Moreover, Colossians 3:11 shows that slavery contradicts the very basis of Christianity. But the epistle recognizes that slavery was an unavoidable fact of life in the first century. The apostles' purpose was to preach the gospel, and they did not engage in social or political activities in an attempt to abolish slavery or revolutionize society by massive, violent protest. Rather they sought to transform individual lives by the power of the gospel, and that process would ultimately make a strong impact upon society.

Colossians deals with this subject at length. The immediate reason was probably because Onesimus, a converted runaway slave, was returning to his master in Colosse with the letter.

Verse 22 recognizes that in the temporal world order there are masters and slaves. It does not concede that a master has total authority over a slave, but only "according to the flesh," that is, according to human laws and activities.

Christians who find themselves bound by the civil law to human masters should submit to them and work diligently. Slaves, servants, and employees

should not merely render eye-service; that is, they should not work diligently only when their masters observe them. Nor should they merely be men-pleasers; that is, they should not work only to win the favor of their human masters.

Rather, Christian workers should work with sincerity of heart and with reverence for God. (The critical text has “the Lord.”) In other words, they should be conscientious workers.

Verse 23. Christians should work heartily, literally, from the soul. They should work as though they are working for the Lord and not for humans. The phrase “whatsoever ye do” echoes verse 17, reminding us of that verse’s admonition to submit to Christ’s lordship in everything.

This verse expresses the Christian doctrine of work. Work is not merely a drudgery or something we should shirk whenever possible. It is honorable for everyone. It is both a responsibility and a privilege. The Lord wills for us to work in order to support ourselves, our families, and society and in order to help others. (See Ephesians 4:28; II Thessalonians 3:6-15; I Timothy 5:8.) When we work, we are actually working for the Lord, and therefore we should strive for excellence. When we work as unto the Lord, our labor becomes a testimony before unbelievers of our allegiance to God and of His grace in our lives. (See Titus 2:9-10.)

Verse 24. Not only do we labor for the Lord and not merely for humans, but we look to the Lord and not merely to humans for our reward. This truth should motivate us to work indeed as unto the Lord. The Lord will pay us fairly. Whatever injustices we endure in this life, He will more than repay us in the life to come. He will give an inheritance as a reward.

This promise was particularly comforting to the slaves to whom it was originally addressed. Although they were not part of the family for which they labored and had no hope of payment from their master, God promised them an inheritance, or a son’s portion.

Verse 25. Just as a conscientious worker will receive a fair reward, so a wrongdoer will receive a “reward” for his wrongdoing. God will see that he is paid back for what he has done. “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he

also reap” (Galatians 6:7). Again, whatever is not repaid in this life will surely be repaid in the life to come. There is no favoritism or partiality in this matter. This principle applies to everyone. By implication, it applies to both master and slave; both have equal responsibilities and privileges in God’s sight.

Chapter 4, verse 1 tells masters to grant what is right and fair to their servants, and employers today should do the same for their employees. The society of the first century gave masters absolute power over their slaves, but Christianity imposed the demands of justice upon them.

The word translated as “give” means to grant, supply, or show. Masters are to give of themselves to ensure fairness. It appears that a Christian master who implemented these principles fully would eventually come to realize that he should give his slaves their freedom.

Prayer and witnessing

(2) Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving; (3) withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds: (4) that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak. (5) Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. (6) Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.

This passage provides some additional instructions as the epistle draws to a close. It focuses on prayer and witnessing, which are the responsibilities of every Christian.

Verse 2 admonishes us to “continue in prayer,” meaning to devote ourselves to prayer, to make prayer our habit. Paul, Timothy, and Epaphras were examples of Christians who prayed faithfully (Colossians 1:3, 9; 4:12). Two ingredients are vital to prayer: (1) *watchfulness* (keeping awake, being alert, being spiritually sensitive) and (2) *thanksgiving*. Once again, the epistle places emphasis on giving thanks to God. (See Colossians 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 17.)

Verse 3. Paul specifically requested that the Colossian saints pray concerning him. Clearly, there is power in intercessory prayer. (See Colossians 1:3, 9; 4:12.)

The prayer request was twofold. First, Paul wanted the Colossians to pray that God would open a door for the message so that he and Timothy could proclaim the gospel. He desired above all else to speak “the mystery of Christ,” which is the message of the Incarnation and Atonement and specifically the message of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). And Paul’s proclamation of the mystery of Christ was the reason for his imprisonment.

Verse 4. Second, Paul requested the Colossians to pray that he would be able to proclaim the message properly, that is, to make the mystery plain and clear. Even though he was a veteran missionary, he did not have confidence in his own human ability, but he depended upon the grace of God and the prayers of the saints to make his ministry effective.

Significantly, Paul’s personal prayer request centered around the preaching of the gospel and the furtherance of God’s kingdom instead of around his personal needs and desires. Only in the last verse of the letter did he so much as imply the Colossians pray concerning his personal circumstances of imprisonment.

Verse 5 admonishes believers to act in wisdom, or conduct themselves wisely, toward outsiders.

We are also to redeem the time, “make the most of every opportunity” (NIV), or “make the best possible use of [our] time” (Phillips). In other words, we should buy up for ourselves each opportunity.

We need to regain time that the devil would like to misuse. In short, we should use our time wisely and for God’s cause. This principle applies to all our activities and all our time, but in the context it seems to refer particularly to opportunities for prayer and witnessing.

Verse 6. We should always speak with grace. “Let your conversation be always full of grace” (NIV). “Let your speech at all times be gracious

(pleasant and winsome)” (Amplified Bible). This principle applies to personal conversations as well as to preaching. In light of verse 5, this admonition is particularly relevant to our dealings with unbelievers.

We should season our speech with salt. This metaphor can have a twofold meaning. First, just as salt enhances the flavor of food and makes it more appetizing, so our speech should be pleasant and appealing. Second, just as salt preserves food, so our speech should be free from corruption.

We should also understand the proper way to answer each person. An appropriate answer can defuse a tense, troublesome, or dangerous situation. “A soft answer turneth away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1). Good answers are important in witnessing to the unsaved, which seems to be the primary meaning here. “Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15). With these practical exhortations, the teaching portion of the epistle comes to a close.