

XII. Christian Relationships

June 9/10, 2010

Colossians 3:18-4:6

Aim: To understand that our union with Christ fundamentally controls our horizontal relationships within the family, within the work place, and in the greater world.

The major social problem facing human society is the inability of people to get along with each other. Christianity is not just personal; it is relational. The life of the new man is a life lived among other new men. The new man is to have an impact also on the society in which he lives. That responsibility becomes Paul theme in 3:18-4:1, where he discusses the new man's relationships to other people.

All the moral qualities that the Christian is to 'put on' concern the way that we relate to other people. The focus in verses 12-17 has been on relationships within the local church. By contrast, from verse 18 onwards, the focus shifts to a new set of relationships, those within the Christian homes. Three sets of relationships are in view: husbands and wives; parents and children; masters and servants. The inclusion of slaves in this series of household regulations might appear odd to us, but not so to the original readers. Slaves often composed an integral component of the ancient household.

Genuine Christianity consists of both doctrine and holy living. The New Testament reminds us in many places that an intellectual knowledge of our faith must be accompanied by a life that proves faith's reality. The two basic principles Paul mentions, authority and submission, are not unique to Christianity. It has always been God's plan for homes to operate on this basis.

Colossians 3:18-4:1 has, as usual, its closest parallel in Ephesians. Ephesians 5:22-6:9 addresses these very same household roles, in the same order, and calling for basically the same behavior as does the Colossians text. The parallels between the two passages suggest that they are part of a popular early Christian form of teaching that focused on household affairs. Martin Luther referred to this section as the *Haustafeln*, 'House Table,' a table of responsibilities and duties for the Christian family.

Recent scholarship has quite rightly settled on the general Greco-Roman ethical topic of 'household management' (*oikonomia*) as the source of these passages. The New Testament household tables require certain household members (wives, children, slaves) to 'submit to' or 'obey' others. These exhortations reflect the Roman household pattern, according to which the husband/father/slave owner, the *paterfamilias*, exercised *patria potestas*, 'paternal power,' over the household.

But this hierarchical pattern stands in some apparent tension with the New Testament teaching about the 'equality' of all people in Christ. The modern drive toward 'liberation' has quite naturally focused attention on such passages. Commonly, liberal scholars marginalize these passages. Other interpreters, including many evangelicals, give full weight to these passages, but argue that the exhortations to submission are deliberate accommodations to the prevailing culture. In response, we need to understand how these household table passages are balanced against the 'all one in Christ' principle. While the principle is exceedingly important, setting forth a fundamental dimension of the 'new creation,' it was clearly never intended to eradicate all distinctions between men and women, husbands and wives, children and parents.

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In addition, we must appreciate the degree to which the household codes of Scripture are ‘countercultural.’ They consistently reflect a distinctly Christian ethos, including the new equality among persons that is intrinsic to the gospel. The explicit and repeated basis for the behavior Paul calls for in 3:18-4:1 is the Lordship of Christ. This theme is mentioned seven times in these nine verses. Thus, the household codes makes clear that the creation of a new humanity in Christ does not mean an erasure of existing social relationships, but their transformation as they are lived out under the Lordship of Christ.

A. The New Man in Family Relationships (Colossians 3:18-21)

1. Marriage Relationships (3:18-19)

Colossians 3:18-19 is patently domestic. It has to do with *home*, specifically a Christian home. Moreover, it has to do with the relationship between a *Christian* husband and a *Christian* wife. As such, it has nothing to say about men’s and women’s roles in society, such as the marketplace or politics. The teaching here is for Christians who want to live as Christians within the home and experience all the fullness God intended for them. The context of this teaching begins in verse 17, which makes it clear that the totality of our lives is to be regulated by being in the Lord.

a) *Wives (3:18)*

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

(1) Objections to Submission

Many modern readers find Paul’s words about submission, particularly that of women, to be highly objectionable. Paul’s simple statement has been widely challenged in our day, even by those claiming to be evangelicals. Many argue that Paul’s teaching on this theme is not Spirit-inspired, but reflects his chauvinistic, rabbinic attitude toward women. Others insist that Paul’s teaching on authority and submission was cultural, and does not apply to our society. None of the critics would argue that Paul’s statement in 3:19 is cultural and that men are no longer required to love their wives.

It is sometimes argued that, in saying this, Paul was merely reflecting the culture of his day, as though you would expect a first-century Jewish rabbi to say that sort of thing, but times have changed. Strangely enough, those who make this sort of case do not go on to argue that modern men can stop loving their wives for the same reason! In fact, wifely submission has always gone against the grain. It was tough in the first-century; it is tough now. It involves self-denial, the very thing that all Christians are called to. And this is by no means Paul’s only utterance on the subject (cp. 1 Cor. 11:3; Titus 2:5).

(2) What Is Submission?

It is assumed by many that submission has built into it the ideas of superiority and inferiority. However, ‘submit’ is not a synonym for servile, menial bondage. It does not imply inferiority. Galatians 3:28 clearly affirms that spiritually there is no difference between male and female. It is important that we grasp that submission is an essential part of what it is to be a Christian. There are certain contexts in which all Christians must acknowledge the rightful claims of a higher authority. Our most important relationship, the one that we enjoy with God Himself, is not one of equals. At every level of our being He has a right to claim our allegiance and exact our obedience.

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But submission does not stop there. Writing to the believers in Rome, Paul insisted that ‘every soul’ should be ‘subject to the governing authorities’ (Rom. 13:1; cp. 1 Pe. 2:13-17). In the same way, the under-shepherds, who rule over the scattered flocks of the Great Shepherd Himself, have a right to expect compliance and loyalty from the sheep they serve (Heb. 13:7). Perhaps the most telling injunction anywhere in Paul’s writings is found in Ephesians 5:21. Spirit-filled people are called to submit ‘to one another in the fear of God.’

Our pattern for subjection is Jesus Himself (Phil. 2:7-8). Jesus submitted to the Father during His life on earth, yet He was in no way inferior to Him. He was no less divine than His Father was (Jn. 5:18). Nevertheless, the Son is subject to the Father (Jn. 8:29).

These verses establish a definite hierarchy within the marital relationship. However, this does not suggest that the wife is naturally or spiritual inferior to the husband, or vice versa. There is a hierarchy in the Holy Trinity, and yet equality. Orthodoxy teaches that the Son is simultaneously *equal* to the Father and *submissive* to Him. Likewise, *equality* and *submissiveness* can exist in human relationships, including the marriage relationship. When a woman submits to the loving leadership of her husband and follows God’s intention for her, she is fulfilled and so is the husband. Efforts to reverse or confuse the duties of wife and husband destroy the blessing that each is to be to the other.

(3) Submission of Wives

Wives are to submit to their husbands, to place themselves under their authority. On the one hand, this is to be a voluntary act. ‘Be submissive’ is from *hypotassō*, and means ‘to subject oneself.’ The verb occurs 38 times in the New Testament, 23 of them in Paul. It has the concept of putting oneself under (*hypo*) another’s order (*tassō*), not by compulsion, but willingly. This is the characteristic use of the verb in the New Testament (cp. Heb 12:9; James 4:7; Eph. 5:24; Rom. 13:1,5; etc.). On the other hand, Christian ladies in general are not required to submit to men in general, but only to their own husbands. They are not to submit to some detached, impersonal authority.

The wife is to ‘put herself under’ her husband in recognizing and living out an ‘order’ established by God Himself within the marriage relationship. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 11:3, ‘the head of a wife is her husband.’ The husband, as the ‘prominent’ and ‘directing’ member of the relationship, is to take the lead in the marriage relationship.

It is probably significant that the household code here in Colossians urges wives to ‘submit’ to their husbands, but children and slaves to ‘obey’ their fathers and masters (3:20, 22). ‘Obedience’ naturally fits a situation in which orders are being issued and in which the party obeying has little choice in the matter. Submission, on the other hand, suggests a voluntary willingness to recognize and put oneself under the leadership of another. To ‘submit’ is to recognize a relationship of order established by God. At the same time, submission is not absolute. Submission to any human is always conditioned by the ultimate submission that each believer owes to God: in any hierarchy we can imagine, God stands at the ‘top of the chart.’ This means, then that a wife will sometimes have to disobey her husband (even a Christian one) if that husband commands her to do something contrary to God’s will.

The husband’s authority is not to be exercised in an authoritative, overbearing manner. The wife’s submission takes place of a loving relationship. The submission of the wife to the husband is inevitably and necessarily conditioned significantly by the demand that husbands love

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their wives, and, in so loving them, will often ‘submit’ to their needs, desires, and wishes (cp. Eph. 5:21).

The last clause, ‘as is fitting in the Lord,’ does not limit the submission but explains why it is necessary. She must submit not because it was necessary for the order of society (as the secular household codes usually emphasized) or (only) because it was appropriate to that time and place but because it is the kind of behavior that is ‘fitting’ to those who ‘live in the sphere of the Lord.’ It is this theme of what is required of those who belong to the Lord that undergirds the household behavior Paul requires in this passage.

b) Husbands (3:19)

Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them.

(1) Positive Command

Requiring wives to submit to their husbands matches widespread Greek and Jewish teaching about marriage. Requiring husbands to love their wives does not. No other code discovered from the ancient world requires husbands to love their wives.

Husbands are commanded, first of all, to love their wives. The present tense of the imperative *agapate* (‘love’) indicates continuous action. *Agape* love involves unceasing care and loving service for the wife’s entire well-being. It is a willing love, not the love of passion or emotion, but the love of choice—a covenant kind of love. The willing, covenant love in view here is the activity of self-sacrifice. It is the kind of sacrificial self-giving love whose model is Christ Himself. The parallel passage in Ephesians 5 leaves us in no doubt that husbands are required to love their wives to an extraordinary degree, ‘as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her’ (Eph. 5:25). Thus, this radical command to love is only fulfilled when a husband loves his wife in imitation of Christ’s love. Few godly women would mind submitting to men who could love like that, and that kind of husband would not insist on an exaggerated or demeaning subjection.

As the people loved by God, Paul urges us to ‘put on love’ (3:14). Now Paul applies this requirement to husbands specifically. But why are only husbands urged to love their wives? Perhaps the pattern here, in Ephesians 5:22-25, and 1 Peter 3:1-7, reflects the particular susceptibilities of each partner in the relationship: wives may be tempted to chafe under the ‘headship’ of their husbands; and husbands are prone to abuse their leadership role. Whatever the explanation, the command that husbands love their wives introduces a somewhat revolutionary note of reciprocity that is a hallmark of this particular code.

God designed that a wife’s submission operates within a context of love. In that way she is protected because a man who truly loves his wife would never force her to submit to something humiliating, degrading, or that violates her conscience. The godly husband loves his wife like Christ loves the church.

(2) Negative Command

The positive command to love is reinforced by a negative command. The imperative *pikrainesthe* (‘embittered’) could be translated, ‘stop being bitter,’ or ‘do not have the habit of being bitter.’ In its only other uses in the New Testament (Rev. 8:11; 10:9, 10) it refers to something bitter in taste. Words from the Greek root of the word used here occur in other ancient Greek writings to refer to rulership that is domineering and harsh. Paul tells husbands

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not to call their wives ‘honey,’ and then act like vinegar. They must not display harshness of temper or resentment toward their wives. They are not to irritate or exasperate them, but rather to provide loving leadership in the home. There is no place for bitterness in the way a Christian husband treats his wife, as though she has become a disappointment to him.

Colossians 3:18-19 has two radical calls. One call is to wives: *submission*. The other is to husbands: to *love* as Christ loves. These cannot be read in isolation; they go together. It is unthinkable for a Christian husband to demand submission of his wife if he is not radically loving her; likewise, it is errant logic for a wife who is not submissive to demand such love. These brief words give us the pattern for fullness in Christian marriage – full love, full commitment, full exchange, full blessing.

2. Parental Relationships (3:20-21)

The dominating example in parental relationships is the loving Fatherhood of God.

a) Children (3:20)

Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord.

The Greek word translated ‘children’ (*teknon*) does not refer to a specific age-group, such as very small children, but to all who are still living under the parental roof and who are therefore under their parents’ authority (cp. Eph. 6:2-3; Ex. 20:12). Paul includes any children who are part of the household and therefore technically under the ‘authority’ of the *paterfamilias*.

Discipline is indispensable if we are to have Christ’s fullness in the home. The absence of discipline means fatherhood is not being practiced, and weak, inconsistent discipline shows a lack of love. Discipline and consequent obedience are indispensable if we are to experience the fullness that God wants for us in our homes.

Submission and obedience are related terms, but submission is the broader concept, implying a general ‘order’ in a particular relationship that renders it appropriate for one party to defer to another. Obedience is the specific form that submission will often take. Obedience implies a relationship in which one party issues ‘orders’ to another, a circumstance generally incompatible with a husband’s sacrificial love for his wife but fitting for the relationship of children with their parents.

The present tense of the imperative *hupakouete* (‘be obedient’) demands a continuous obedience. The command ‘obey’ is significant for two reasons. First, it is a different word than that used in verse 18 where wives are told to ‘submit’ to their husbands. The word there suggests a voluntary submission, a choice; here the command is more absolute. The other reason this word is significant is that it really consists of two words (*kouete* – ‘listen,’ and *hupa* – ‘under’) and can be read literally, ‘listen under your parents.’ Obedience begins with listening. Children are to obey their parents ‘in all things.’ The only limit placed on a child’s obedience is when a parent demands something contrary to God’s law.

As long as children are living under the protection of their parents, they are expected to obey their parents. But when children are no longer under the protection and care of their parents, while deference and ‘honor’ are still appropriate, obedience is no longer necessarily to be expected.

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Implicit in this also is, not just hearing and doing, but doing it with the right attitude. The Scriptures call for a heart obedience to parents; obedience ‘pleases the Lord.’ The parallel passage in Ephesians 6:1-3 similarly says, ‘this is right.’ As God the Father was well-pleased with His own Son (Mt. 3:17), so He deserves to be with other children.

The wording of the Greek suggests that Paul is not so much saying that ‘this is pleasing to the Lord’ but that it is pleasing ‘in the Lord,’ that is, the obedience of children is appropriate behavior within the community that acknowledges Christ as their Lord. Many young people struggle with knowing God’s will for their lives. Obeying their parents is the right place to start.

b) Fathers (3:21)

Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

The Greek word for ‘fathers’ (*pateres*) can sometimes refer to both parents (cp. Heb. 11:23). However, the primary referent is probably the father, since this fits the culture of that time, in which the man was the head of the household, and would have had primary responsibility for issuing orders to the children. And Paul’s shift from the word in verse 20 *goneis* – which can only mean ‘parents’ – to *pateres* here is probably significant. Fathers are addressed in Colossians because they were the ones who had ultimate authority over children in the ancient household. But since in the modern family mothers often appropriate take equal responsibility for raising children (and indeed, in many families are the only parental authority), it is entirely valid to apply this verse to both fathers and mothers.

Fathers, for their part, are charged not to ‘provoke’ their children, not to exasperate them, in case they become disheartened. This admonition is roughly parallel to what Paul has to say to husbands in v. 19, although a different word is used. The specific sense of the Greek word (*erethizō*) is to irritate one’s children either by nagging or deriding them – putting them down. The text most relevant to Colossians 3:21 and one that Paul may well have had in mind is Deuteronomy 21:20. Paul, in effect, is exhorting fathers to raise their children in such a way that they do their utmost to avoid provoking a rebellious attitude in them.

The parallel in Ephesians 6:4 says, ‘Fathers, do not exasperate your children’ and has the same idea of irritating them through perpetual fault-finding. It is a bitter legacy to leave behind if, when our children think of us, the phrases that spring to mind are things like: ‘He’s always finding fault,’ or ‘Nothing I do ever satisfies him.’

Parents, fathers, discipline is to be given, but so is encouragement. Obedience is to be nurtured by love and praise. We must never cause our children to ‘lose heart’ or ‘become discouraged’ (*athymēō*). The idea of that term is ‘to be without courage or spirit.’ It has the sense of being listless, sullen, discouraged, or despairing. Parents can take the heart out of their children by failing to discipline them lovingly and instruct them in the ways of the Lord with balance. Paul does not want to see the children of Christian families disciplined to such an extent that they ‘lose heart’ and simply give up trying to please their parents.

Parents, especially fathers, if we want to have all the fullness in our primary family relationships which God would have for us, we must discipline our children. To refrain from discipline is an act of hatred toward our own – unloving indifference – cruel permissiveness. But at the same time, our discipline must be given with encouragement. We must be patient, not irritable. While strict, we must not be overstrict. We must look for ways to say yes as well as no. We must be consistent and stable in our direction. We must spend time with our own, listening and loving.

B. The New Man in Working Relationships (Colossians 3:22-4:1)

The institution of slavery was very pervasive in the ancient world. From one-third to one-half of the population of Rome was made up of slaves. It is highly likely that some of the believers in Colossae were slaves and others, probably fewer in number would be slave-owners.

The New Testament does not endorse slavery, because slavery is incompatible with Christian values. However, in this passage and in other places, the practice of slavery was a present reality. If the wholesale abolition of slavery was not yet a viable proposition, the transformation of individual relationships was. It follows that even an oppressive relationship based on exploitation can be altered for the better. This is why Paul's words are still relevant in a very different setting. In our day, the master/slave relationship can largely be compared to that of employer and employee. Relationships in a modern workplace can be very fraught, with both management and labor trying to use and outwit the other. Paul's challenge is that, whichever side of the divide we find ourselves on, we learn to think of our role in a new way. Let the slave concentrate on his freedom and the master on his servitude.

We can be sure that Paul's teaching in Colossians 3:22-4:1 was attended eagerly by both slaves and masters in Colossae. The Colossians code gives proportionately greater space to slavery than to the family. Why? Remember that this letter is being sent along with Onesimus, a slave who is returning to be reconciled (Paul strongly hopes) with his master, Philemon. That, no doubt, is why it was far more extensive than the previous domestic instruction to husbands/wives and children/fathers. The advice that Paul gives here was ultimately revolutionary, because in time it brought the downfall of slavery as an institution. But it was also immediately revolutionary in that it brought fullness to the Christian's life, whether slave or master.

1. Bondservants (3:22-25)

a) *Obedience in Service (3:22a)*

Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh...

As in the relationships between husbands and wives and parents and children, the principle of authority and submission is central to Paul's thought. However, Paul significantly departs from the pattern we see in the first two relationships. First, rather than simply naming the slaves' 'masters,' he characterizes them as 'earthly masters' (*kata sarx*), which could be rendered simply 'according to the flesh.' Paul uses *sarx* to connote the human realm, sometimes neutrally (cp. 1:22) and other times negatively (cp. 2:18). Here the word is being used in the neutral sense: the slaves' masters belong to the human realm. There is an implicit contrast intended: the slave has a master on earth, but he or she also has a 'master' in heaven. In English, we miss some of what Paul intends here, because we cannot easily reproduce his play on the Greek word *kyrios*, which is translated in this context both 'master' (3:22a; 4:1a,b) and 'Lord' (3:22b, 23, 24). Slaves are to obey their earthly masters, but they are to 'fear' their (ultimate, heavenly) Master.

Paul also departs from the pattern he established thus far by adding a series of more specific admonitions to the slaves, focusing on the manner of their service (vv. 22-23), the reward they can expect for faithful service (v. 24), and the penalty they will incur if they do not serve faithfully (v. 25). It is probably the delicate situation of Onesimus, who is accompanying the letter carrier (4:8-9), that explains this material.

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Christian slaves are to obey their human masters ‘in all things,’ which is a comprehensive phrase referring to both enjoyable and distasteful duties. On the one hand, this means that first-century slaves and twenty-first century employees should not only comply with instructions that are easy and pleasant, but also with those that are tedious or disagreeable. On the other hand, ‘all things’ does not include those things that are displeasing to God.

a) Manner of Service (3:22b-23)

...not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men...

Paul makes two basic points in the second half of verse 22. First, their obedience is to be sincere, and second, their obedience is to be conditioned by their fear of the Lord.

Slaves are not to work ‘with eye-service, as men-pleasers.’ ‘Eye-service’ translates a single Greek compound word that is made up of the words for ‘eye (*ophthalmos*) and ‘service’ (*doulia*). This mentality is summed up in the phrase: ‘When the boss is looking, look busy.’ Eye-service results in half-done jobs. Paul adds a further description of ‘as men-pleasers.’ The Greek behind this clause is an adverbial clause made up of ‘as’ (*hōs*) and another compound word, composed of the word for ‘person’ (*anthrōpos*) plus the word for ‘pleasing’ (*areskos*). The two compound words reinforce each other, conveying the sense of obedience that is superficial and hypocritical, concerned with appearances rather than reality.

Instead, our service is to be ‘in sincerity of heart.’ ‘Sincerity’ (*haplotēs*) has the sense of ‘singleness.’ It refers to a focused and unvarying concentration of the will that produces consistent conduct. This high call makes no distinction between pleasant or unpleasant tasks, dull or challenging, menial or interesting. It simply states that everything must be done energetically, from the heart, whether the boss is present or not.

The principle of doing everything with respect to Christ that Paul set forth for Christians in general in v. 17 is now applied specifically in v. 23 to Christian slaves. In verse 22, ‘heart’ translates *kardia*, whereas in v. 23 it translates *psychē*, the word often translated ‘soul. Thus, ‘heartily’ means ‘from the soul.’ The two words are essentially interchangeable in a context such as this. Both of them indicate the true and authentic inner person.

Our work is to be done while ‘fearing God’ or in ‘reverence for the Lord.’ The pagan slave served his master because he was bound by fear; the Christian slave served his master *better* because he feared God. Working hard at our tasks from the heart brings glory to God.

In effect, the apostle poses the question: ‘Who do you really work for?’ It is not a matter of pleasing some unpredictable line manager, but a question of pleasing the God who loves us and sent His Son to save us. If we are answerable ‘to the Lord and not to men,’ there is no need to skimp on the job in order to get back at a vindictive boss. Those further up the chain of command may be inconsiderate, or even vindictive, but if you are a Christian you don’t work for them anyway. Our head of department may not be worth it, but our heavenly Master is.

b) Reward for Service (3:24)

...knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.

Paul gives two reasons for slaves (or employees) to obey their masters. Positively, the Lord will repay them for their faithfulness. The translation ‘an inheritance as a reward’ is almost certainly

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the right way to understand a phrase that would be literally translated from the Greek ‘the reward of the inheritance’ (*tēn antapodosin tēs klēronomias*). In this kind of construction the two nouns refer to the same thing but in different ways. In the New Testament, the ‘inheritance’ is ‘the kingdom of God’ or ‘salvation,’ an inheritance now ‘kept in heaven for you’ (1 Pe. 1:4) and to be given to God’s people in the last day.

Paul enlarges the rationale for the believers’ work ethic by adding that the God we serve will reward us. Adding poignancy to this language is the fact that most slaves in the Roman Empire would have had little hope of any earthly inheritance. Paul is reminding the slaves that their true and ultimate ‘master’ is Christ, not the earthly master to whom they are enslaved. The earthly master or boss may not give the servant what he desires, but the Lord will, because God rewards faithful workers. This ought to be an encouragement to us, whatever our lot in life. God pays us so well that when we get to Heaven we will wish we had served Him even more.

c) Warning for Disservice (3:25)

But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.

Paul then gives a negative reason for obedience. The warning is that the Lord will discipline without partiality in cases of disobedience (cp. Gal. 6:7). The verse uses a play on words to warn that people who ‘do wrong’ (*adikōn*) will be repaid for their ‘wrongs’ (*ēdikēsen*, which is from the same root as the verb ‘do wrong’).

But who are these people? Is Paul still referring to the slaves, warning them of the consequences if they fail to continue to serve their earthly masters as they live out their ‘slavery’ to Christ? Or does he anticipate 4:1, warning masters that they will be punished if they do not treat their slaves properly? Or is the verse a Janus, looking in two directions at once: back to the slaves and forward to the masters? Since Paul does not explicitly turn to address ‘masters’ until the next verse, the most likely context is that Paul is still addressing ‘slaves.’

This verse has a context to the situation in the epistle to Philemon. Paul goes so far as to promise to repay Philemon for any ‘wrong’ Onesimus has done (Phm. 18). In this verse in Philemon, Paul uses the same verb (*adikeō*) that he uses twice here in Colossians 3:25. It seems quite likely, then, that Paul has the possible ramifications of Philemon’s forgiveness and acceptance of Onesimus in view here. He does not want other slaves in Colossae to think that they can ‘do wrong’ with impunity, avoiding any penalty for their actions because they are now in Christ.

The last clause of verse 25 is a reminder to both slaves and masters that they will have to stand before an impartial and discerning judge to answer for their conduct. The word ‘favoritism’ or ‘partiality’ translates a Greek word that means, literally, ‘receiving the face.’

In verses 22-25 we have Paul’s teaching regarding the work of slaves (employees) in the Colossian church. How does this impact our work ethic? First, we must not suppose that if we try to live up to the Biblical teaching regarding work, all will go well on the job. Second, the apostle’s teaching here is not a call to overwork or workaholicism. A third aspect of our work ethic is that Christians ought to be the *best* workers. Christians ought to be the best in attitude, the best in dependability, and the best in integrity. All of us who are employed must be faithful, hard workers or we are sinning. Last, we must realize that there is intrinsic nobility in work offered to God.

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2. Masters (4:1)

Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

Although this is the sixth relationship in Paul's table household, in reality of course, the husband (3:19), father (3:21), and master (4:1) are three related roles carried out by the *paterfamilias*, the 'head of household.' Paul's admonition is remarkable, in comparison with secular parallels, for its concern with the kindness and 'other-regard' with which the duties of household management are to be carried out. 'Justly' translates a Greek adjective used as a noun, *dikaios*, 'just,' 'right.' 'Fairly' translates a word that means 'equality' (*isotētes*).

The guiding reality for the master/employer is that both he and his servant have the same Lord. Most English translations preserve Paul's play on words by translating the Greek *kyrios* – which is normally translated 'Lord' when the reference is to Christ – as 'Master.' Christian slave owners need to remember that they are answerable to a higher master, the Lord Jesus. God will judge masters who mistreat their slaves, as He will slaves who fail to serve their masters. Since slaves and masters are spiritually equal in Christ (cp. 3:11), masters must act accordingly and treat their Christian servants as brothers in Christ.

There was at least one Christian slave-owner in Colossae, a man named Philemon. A runaway slave of his named Onesimus had been converted. Philemon was now going to have to think of his slave in a new way. While the two men were at opposite ends of the social spectrum, the fact that both had put their trust in Christ for salvation meant that they were spiritual equals. Philemon needed to grasp that all Christians are servants. However elevated our income or status, we are as much servants of Jesus as the person on the lowest rung of the ladder. Our role model is the one who took 'the form of a bondservant' (Phil. 2:7). He Himself is a good master and those in authority must strive to be like Him.

There is a message here for all those who have responsibility for people who are lower in the hierarchy. In modern terms, fair and honest treatment covers a wide range of issues, all the way from fair pay, sensible hours, holiday and pension provision, to union recognition and personal courtesy. Employers, if you truly realize that you must answer to God for the way you conduct yourself with your employees, you will care about what happens to them. You will be concerned that they are paid properly. You will be concerned about their illnesses, their spouses, their children, their education.

C. The New Man in Communication (4:2-6)

With this paragraph, Paul concludes his series of general exhortations about the way the Lordship of Christ is to be lived out in daily life (3:5-4:6). It also brings to a close the letter body. Colossians 4:2-6 looks outward, with a focus on Paul's evangelistic work and the community's relationships with non-Christians. The movement of the paragraph is as follows: 1) a general encouragement to pray (v. 2); 2) a request to pray for Paul's evangelistic ministry (vv. 3-4); and 3) exhortations regarding the Colossians' evangelistic ministry (vv. 5-6). It seems as if Paul does not want his warnings about avoiding false teachers to lead the Colossian Christians to distance themselves from non-Christians generally. They must resist the false teachers, but they must also continue to reach out to their fellow citizens.

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 12

The subject that unites these verses is speech. What consequence does having ‘put on the new man’ have for the way that he talks, whether to God or to other people? We have considered the part that the Christian plays in his local church fellowship and his conduct at home and at work; now, we can learn from Paul as he outlines the believer’s responsibility to those outside the Christian community. It is of utmost importance that those who have ‘put on the new man’ (3:10), should seek to bring their tongues under control, so that there is a harmony between the way they speak to God and the way they speak to others.

1. Praying to God (4:2-4)

a) *How to Pray (4:2)*

Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving...

At the very heart of our communication must be full devotion to prayer. Paul makes a number of observations about the character of true prayer. In the first place, true prayer is intense and persistent. Christians should pray habitually and with perseverance. The phrase ‘continue earnestly’ or ‘devote yourselves’ translates a Greek expression which focuses on the idea that prayer is work, and as such it is both strenuous and dogged. This phrase is from *proskartereō*, a compound word made up of *kartereō* (‘to be steadfast,’ or ‘to endure’) with an added preposition that intensifies the meaning. The verb means ‘to be courageously persistent,’ ‘to hold fast and not let go.’ Paul is calling strongly on believers to persist in ‘prayer’ (*proseuchē*). Prayer involves sweat, commitment, and unflagging effort. An earlier generation of Christians used to describe this kind of prayer as ‘wrestling with God’ (cp. Gen. 32:22-32). True prayer often involves struggling and grappling with God, proving to Him the deepest concern of one’s heart. Prayer is to be a persistent, courageous struggle from which the believer may come away limping. Praying at all times is not necessarily limited to constant vocalizing of prayers to God. Rather, it refers to a God consciousness that relates every experience in life to Him.

True prayer is also ‘vigilant’ (*grēgorountes*). Those who offer it are on the alert, wide awake. What the watching believers are to do in other texts that use this word (e.g., 1 Th. 5:6, 10) is not to watch for Christ’s return, but watch their own life in light of the return of Christ. Paul’s parallel challenge in Ephesians 6:19 presents this attitude in no uncertain terms. Paul’s thought here, though, is broader than mere physical alertness. Paul also wanted his readers to be aware of their own vulnerability (cp. Mt. 26:41). Paul had in mind the Christian’s need to be wary. These words in Colossians were first addressed to the members of a local church who had been gullible and had almost allowed it to be taken over by spiritual imposters.

Paul also means that believers should look for those things about which they ought to be praying. A habit of prayer demands mental alertness to the dangers of life and the needs of those around us, an awareness which can at any moment launch us into fervent prayer. Christians sometimes pray vague, general prayers that are difficult for God to answer because they do not really ask anything specific. To be devoted to prayer requires something specific to pray for.

Thirdly, we learn here that true prayer is thankful. Thanksgiving is a motif that is woven throughout the argument of Colossians (1:12; 2:7; 3:15, 17). If we tried to make an inventory of reasons for thanking God, the list would be almost endless.

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 12

b) *Prayer for Paul's Ministry (4:3-4)*

(1) An Open Door (4:3)

...meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains...

Paul was also concerned that the prayers of his friends in Colossae should be mission-minded, that they should have an evangelistic thrust. The participle that Paul uses – *proseuchomenoi* – takes on imperative force. The plural pronoun ‘us’ almost certainly includes Timothy and probably includes the list of Paul’s friends and co-workers that begins in 4:7.

An ‘open door’ is a natural metaphor for the idea of ready access to a priceless, not-to-be-missed opportunity and is therefore widely used in the ancient world. It occurs in the New Testament to refer to an opportunity for evangelistic ministry (cp. Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Rev. 3:8, 20). It is the ‘word’ (*logos*) that must be given entrance because it is the word that has the power to transform human beings. Believers are to pray for open doors because it is God who opens them. It is God who prepares the way for the message of the gospel; He provides the opportunities; He softens the hearts of listeners by His grace.

‘Proclaim’ translates a verb with a broad meaning (*laleō*, ‘speak, ‘say’). In identifying the content of what he proclaims as ‘the mystery of Christ,’ Paul harks back to the description of his ministry in 1:24-2:5. In the present context, the ‘mystery of Christ’ refers to the content of the gospel. Paul asks the Colossians to pray that he would have an open door to speak the full truth of the gospel.

This is the first time in the letter that Paul has mentioned his status as a prisoner – ‘I am bound’ (*dedemai*). Paul, writing from prison, did not so much want the Lord to open doors to get him out as to open up a way for the Christian message. Paul did not seem to care whether he was in prison or not – he just wanted more opportunity to communicate the Good News. Paul burned to communicate the gospel.

Another dimension deserves to be considered. This is very graphic language. The apostle is suggesting that, until God changes things, the human personality is bolted and barred against the gospel. The Lord opened Lydia’s heart (Acts 16:14), and He can open hearts in first-century prisons or anywhere in the cynical postmodern west.

(2) A Personal Need (4:4)

...that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.

Paul certainly wanted prayer so that he might become an increasingly effective communicator. He needed God’s help in two important areas. The first concerned his longing to make his message ‘manifest’ (*phaneroō*), or plain and obvious. Paul wanted to proclaim the gospel clearly. Secondly, Paul wanted to speak as he ‘ought,’ to fulfill his calling. ‘Ought’ can be understood in two ways. First, it refers to the compulsion Paul felt to preach the gospel. Second, it refers to the mandate for using the God-ordained method of presenting the gospel. For this he needed the prayers of his friends. This admission is very winning. Far from presenting himself as a man of steel, impervious to the difficulties experienced by ordinary mortals, Paul needed help. Every preacher and evangelist does.

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 12

2. Witnessing to Outsiders (4:5-6)

Paul's logic in these verses cannot be faulted. Having asked the Colossians to pray for the evangelistic efforts of himself and his co-workers (vv. 3-4), Paul naturally thinks of the Colossians' own involvement in evangelism (vv. 5-6). If we want to speak to others about God and His message of reconciling love, our efforts will carry little weight unless we first speak to God about them.

a) Redeem the Time (4:5)

Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time.

The apostle's description of those who are not yet Christians is heartbreaking. They are 'those who are outside.' What could be worse than being outside the Christian community?

And surely those of us who are Christians want to share the gospel effectively? In that case, our first great need is personal credibility. This is what Paul had in mind when he urged his readers to 'walk in wisdom.' Believers should govern their conduct with unbelievers on the basis of biblical wisdom. Wisdom will enable us to determine just how, in given situations, our new way of thinking, our new set of biblical values, should be put into effect. This is a plea for believers to live integrated, wholesome Christian lives that do not detract from our message. The key to effective evangelism is not so much to learn certain techniques of communication, but to work at being a godly person whose character will add credibility to his message.

We also need a sense of urgency – 'redeeming the time.' This verb (*exagorazō*) is a compound verb made up of the preposition 'out of' (*ek*) and the simple verb 'buy' (*agorazō*) and means 'to buy out of.' The word for 'time' here, *kairos*, can sometimes have the sense of a particular time, or opportune moment (as opposed to *chronos*, which usually refers to time in a general way). Thus, 'redeeming the time' means that we become aware that time is in short supply. Our Lord may return at any moment. Paul expressed the urgency of redeeming the time in Romans 13:11-14. The time is now for believers to speak with their lives.

b) Seasoned with Salt (4:6)

Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.

Consistency of life must be followed by consistency of 'speech' (*logos*). To speak with 'grace' (*charis*) means to say what is spiritual, wholesome, fitting, kind, sensitive, purposeful, complementary, gentle, truthful, loving, and thoughtful. Paul is exhorting Christians to exhibit in all their speech a gracious and attractive tone.

When we do speak to others, our conversation is to be both gracious and salty. Consider for a moment what would happen if our language was the opposite, if it was ungracious and insipid. A kindly, tender, and loving message deserves to be conveyed with warmth and gentleness. No one was ever nagged into the kingdom.

'Salt' (*halas*), of course, can sting when applied to an open wound (cp. Pr. 27:6). It also prevents corruption. Believers' speech should act as a purifying influence, rescuing conversation from the filth that so often engulfs it. Salt also adds flavor, and the speech of the new man should add charm and wit to conversation. The idea here is that there is a place for confrontation and challenge in our communication of the gospel provided that the element of grace is kept in view. Grace will prevent direct and challenging words from becoming too abrasive.

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 12

Our conversation is never insipid or boring. It is salty, savory, scintillating, not the dull, sanctimonious vocabulary that seems to be demanded in some church circles. It is thoughtful speech, words with content. It is joyful, even witty, for this is what salty speech meant in classical Greek.

Let us pray for one another so that when the questions come, we will have the grace and saltiness to ‘answer each one’ (1 Pe. 3:15b). Believers must know how to say the right thing at the right time. Paul is calling on Christians to speak with their unbelieving neighbors and friends with gracious, warm, and winsome words – all with the purpose of being able to ‘answer’ unbelievers. An appropriate Christian response will, of course, communicate the content of the gospel, but it will also be done in a manner that will make the gospel attractive.

For next time: Read Colossians 4:7-18.