

In Christ at Home

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(Colossians 3:18-4:6)

So far in this letter to the Colossians Paul has shared important truths about the greatness of Christ which can be applied to believers' lives, resulting in the renewal of believers as they grow in spiritual maturity and live in ways which glorify Christ. There is one place where it is very difficult to hide any aspect of one's character, and that is within one's family and household. Those relationships are more intimate and constant, so a person's true character will be more visible at home. This is the realm which Paul now discusses, as he provides guidance for specific household relationships.

Col 3:18 - Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Paul begins by speaking to the Christian wives. He almost always starts by addressing those who are under authority before addressing those who will bear ultimate responsibility. It is the husband who will ultimately give an account to God for the welfare of his wife and household (Eph 5:23). In another of Paul's letters he described God's structure of responsibility this way: "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ" (1 Cor 11:3). This verse outlines a structure of responsibility: **God** → **Christ** → **the husband** → **the wife**. Jesus is the best example of someone who is under proper authority, and the spiritual equality of men and women before the Lord is still fully in effect (Gal 3:28).

Wives are to **be subject to** their husbands. This is the Greek word *hupotassō* which literally means "to arrange under." It is a military term that means "to be under in rank," which describes the way an army is organized. The middle voice of this verb indicates that their subjection is voluntary. "As is **fitting** in the Lord" uses the Greek word *anēkō* which literally means "to come up to." It is often translated as "fitting, proper, appropriate, or suitable." It is only fitting that a Christian wife would recognize and honor God's design for household accountability.

"We must obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29) provides boundaries for all human authority. For example, if the husband tells the wife to sin, she must recognize that ultimately she and her husband are both under a higher authority whose standards must be obeyed. When a wife is properly "in rank" with her husband, she has a position of tremendous influence in his life. She has the ability to properly appeal to her husband to change direction (see the Book of Esther for a biblical example).

Col 3:19 - Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.

Husbands must also recognize the God-given structure of responsibility which puts them *hupotassō* or "under in rank." As it says in Rom 13:1, all authority comes from God, and all

those in authority are accountable to God for rightly fulfilling their responsibilities. The one in authority will be judged more strictly (Luke 12:48).

First, the husband is to **love** (*agapaō*) his wife. This is the highest form of love and this command is in the present tense, so the husband is to be in the habit of continually loving his wife. As we have seen before, *agape* love is unselfish and giving, or even self-sacrificing to the point of “giving up” things for someone else. It is the kind of love that always has the other person’s best interests at heart.

Paul then adds, “**and do not be embittered against them.**” **Embittered** is the Greek word *pikrainō* which means “exasperated to the point of irritation.” This verb is a present imperative, which could be translated “do not have the habit of being bitter.” What we saw in previous sessions can be applied to husbands here. When something difficult occurs which provokes a response, Christian husbands are to “put off anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech” and they are to “put on kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness.” And over all of these qualities the husband is to put on *agape* love for his wife. The marriage relationship is the most important place for believers to put Paul’s words into practice.

Col 3:20 - Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.

To Christian children he says, “**be obedient to your parents.**” The word **obedient** is the Greek word *hupakouō* which literally means “to listen under.” It carries the idea of paying attention and choosing to respect and submit to the wishes of the parents. Paul is speaking to children who have reached the age of accountability and have placed their faith in Christ for their salvation. All children should be taught to do this, but here Paul commands believing children to listen, respect, and follow the wishes of their parents. Jesus provides the perfect example (Luke 2:51).

This command obviously applies to the children who are living in their parent’s household. Once children have grown to adulthood and have left to start families of their own, this command no longer applies in the same way. As adult children, they have the responsibility to honor their parents and give consideration to their advice and counsel. At the end of this verse Paul gives the reason for Christian children to be obedient to their parents: “**for this is well-pleasing to the Lord.**” Children who have put their faith in Christ for their salvation are not only growing in physical, mental, and social stature, but they are growing in spiritual maturity as well. Even children can “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please [Him] in all respects” (Col 1:10).

Col 3:21 - Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

Fathers have a responsibility to treat their children well. The word **exasperate** is the Greek word *erethizō* which means “to stir up, provoke, or irritate.” This verb is a present imperative, so Paul is saying that fathers are not to be in the habit of continually exasperating their children. At the end of this verse Paul shared the inevitable consequences if fathers continue to treat children poorly: “**they will lose heart.**” To **lose heart** is the Greek word *athymeō* which literally means “without passion” and by implication, discouraged to the point of hopelessness.

Since God has entrusted these young souls to our care, it becomes that much more important to treat them well by “putting off anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech” and by “putting on kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness.” And of course, over all of these to put on love. Christian fathers are no longer bound to follow ungodly or worldly patterns of child raising – they are not fettered to their past or to societal norms which run contrary to God’s ways. Believers can “keep seeking the things above, where Christ is” (Col 3:1) and follow Christ’s example in all things, including His instructions for Christian parenting.

Col 3:22 - Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who [merely] please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

Paul now turns his attention to those who are Christian servants within the household. The word translated as “**slaves**” is the Greek word *doulos* which is commonly translated as “servant” or “bondservant.” In Paul’s day being a servant under someone else’s authority was the norm, and more than half the people seen on the streets of the great cities of the Roman world were slaves. Paul is using an aspect of daily life in New Testament times to communicate a truth about how those under authority are to relate to those in authority over them, especially within a Christian household.

Paul writes four verses to servants before addressing masters in a single verse. Why did Paul use four times as many verses addressing servants? It may be the result of long talks which Paul had with the runaway slave, Onesimus, whom later he was to send back to his master Philemon. We can assume that Paul learned quite a bit from him about the way servants typically behaved. This may have given Paul new insights which he used to correct that behavior for servants who are believers in Christ.

He begins by saying “**in all things obey those who are your masters on earth.**” As mentioned before, there are limits to all human authority. When someone in a position of authority tells someone under authority to sin, then the believer must acknowledge the higher authority of God whose standards must be obeyed. But in the normal course of daily life as someone in service to others, believers are to obey those in authority.

The word **obey** is the Greek word *hupakouō*, which is the same word that was used for the obedience of children in Col 3:20. As it did there, here it means to pay close attention and choose to respect and submit to the wishes of the one in authority. The words “**masters on earth**” could be translated literally as “lords according to the flesh.” This is Paul’s way of referring to earthly authorities, in direct contrast to a believer’s “Master in heaven” (Col 4:1).

Paul ends this verse with a negative example of behavior, followed immediately by a positive example of behavior for a believer who serves. First he says, “**not with external service, as those who [merely] please men.**” **External service** is the Greek word *ophthalmouleia* which literally means “eye-service” or service that is given only while under the watchful eye of the one in authority. This is the kind of work attitude that attempts to “**merely please men**” as Paul says here. It means only doing the minimum amount of labor to get by while the boss is watching.

At the end of this verse Paul says believers should work “**with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.**” They should put their heart into their work as a matter of personal integrity. The word translated **sincerity** is the Greek word *haplotēs* which literally means “singleness” or singleness of purpose. This contrasts with the negative example Paul presented of a worker who is two-faced, working only when under supervision. Believers have a Master or supervisor who is always watching. Believers “**fear the Lord,**” which means that they are aware of His presence and desire to honor Him no matter what their “lords according to the flesh” might say or do.

Col 3:23-24 - Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

Paul says, “**whatever you do**” – in whatever field or occupation they are serving – they are to “**work heartily.**” In the last verse Paul had said they were to work with **sincerity of heart** and there he used the Greek word *kardia*, which is the *heart*. Here he used the Greek word *psuchē* which is the **soul**. Believers are to put their heart and soul into their work, because they know they are working **for the Lord rather than for men**. This attitude toward work comes from understanding who your real boss is. Since believers are trying to live lives that please the Lord, this will apply to everything they do, including their work or service to others.

Here in Col 3:24 Paul explains that this involves “**knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward.**” This means that believers understand who is signing their paycheck. But much more is at stake than their earthly wages – it extends to their heavenly reward. Paul is referring to “the inheritance of the saints in Light” (Col 1:12). They will be given a portion of the property and privileges waiting for believers in heaven for eternity. Finally, Paul states: “**It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.**” Believers are bondservants of Christ in subjection to His Lordship, and Christ’s standards of behavior and workmanship are what believers must seek. In seeking to please Christ, they will certainly exceed the standards of their earthly authorities, not only with the quality of their work but with the quality of their lives.

Col 3:25 - For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

Here Paul states a general principle, but he specifically applies it to believers who are serving under earthly authorities. It is possible that Paul may have learned from Onesimus that the behavior of servants he described in the last three verses was so common that it required a specific warning to servants. **Wrong** is the Greek word *adikeō* which comes from the root word *dikē*, meaning right or just. So *adikeō* means to be unrighteous or unjust, to actively do wrong, to hurt or injure, to be an offender.

“**Will receive the consequences**” translates the single Greek word *komizō* which means “to receive back.” This is the same word Paul used in his earlier letter to the church in Corinth when he said, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be **recompensed** for his deeds in the body” (2 Cor 5:10). Whether in this life or the next, wrongdoers will suffer the consequences for their wrongs. The next phrase, “**of the wrong**

which he has done,” translates the word *adikeō*, which is the same word he used in the first part of this verse for being unjust or doing wrong. The one doing wrong will suffer the consequences for his wrong.

The phrase **“there is no partiality”** translates the Greek word *prosōpolēpsia* which literally means “to accept the face.” This word describes someone who is a respecter of persons; someone who displays partiality or favoritism. But this is not true of God who sees all and knows all, both inside and out. Rom 2:11 declares, “For there is no partiality with God.”

Col 4:1 - Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

Paul turns from addressing the servants to addressing their “masters on earth” (Col 3:22). They are to grant **justice and fairness**. **Justice** is the Greek word *dikaios* that is a positive form of the word *adikeō*, which means the opposite of justice and righteousness. Even if a servant were to do wrong or behave unjustly, Paul commands the household master to grant justice.

Fairness is the Greek word *isotēs* which means equity or having equal proportions. It means they are to provide no less than what is due. The reason for masters to grant justice and equity is almost identical to the motivation he gave to the servants. Here he says, **“you too have a Master in heaven.”**

Col 4:2 - Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with [an attitude of] thanksgiving;

In the original Greek sentence the word **“prayer”** occurs first for emphasis. Paul uses the noun for **prayer** (*proseuchē*), and then follows it with the Greek verb *proskartereō* which literally means “to be strong toward” something. It carries the idea of persisting in adherence to a thing, to be intently engaged in something, and to attend constantly to something. This is an imperative in the present tense, which emphasizes how constantly they are to engage in prayer.

When he says **“keeping alert in it”** he used the Greek word *grēgoreō* which means to stay awake or be vigilant. While it certainly is important to stay awake during times of prayer (see Matt 26:36-46), believers should **keep alert** for opportunities to bring things before the Lord throughout their day. **“With an attitude of thanksgiving”** encourages a spirit of thankfulness as part of a believer’s prayer life. Thankfulness is one of the main themes that appears throughout this letter (Col 1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15, 16, 17; 4:2).

Col 4:3 - praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned;

Paul uses the Greek word *proseuchomai* in the present tense which means “keep on **praying**,” and this is the same word Paul used in Col 1:2 & 9 when he said that he was constantly praying for them. Now he is asking them to pray for him and he gives them two prayer requests.

First, he asks them to pray that God will “**open up a door**” so he can preach the word. He is asking that God would create an opportunity for him to speak the **word** of the gospel. He specifically identifies this word as the **mystery of Christ**, which includes the new revelation God had given to the New Testament apostles and prophets for the Church age. Paul then adds that proclaiming this mystery is the reason he has been **imprisoned** for so long.

The last eight chapters of the Book of Acts describe the series of events **for which he had been imprisoned** (Acts 21 - 28). The exact **words** he was speaking which resulted in his imprisonment are recorded in Acts 22:1-21. Paul shared the words which Jesus Himself had spoken to him: "And He said to me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles'" (Acts 22:21). After hearing this, the Jews shouted, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!" Those Jews in Jerusalem were reacting against the words of Christ which revealed a previously unrevealed mystery – that God had opened the door for the Gentiles to be included in the body of Christ, the Church, on the same basis as Jews. Jews and Gentiles alike would now be accepted on an equal basis, with the only requirement being faith in what Christ accomplished when He paid the ransom price on the cross to redeem the world.

Col 4:4 - that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.

Paul's second prayer request was for guidance in how he should present the word of the gospel so that it would have the greatest effect. He wants to “**make it clear**,” which is the Greek word *phaneroō* that literally means “to bring something into the light.” It has the idea of making something apparent or making it known, as well as making it clearly and thoroughly understood.

In the phrase “**the way I ought to speak**” the word **ought** is the Greek word *dei*, which conveys the idea of a necessity or a binding obligation, and in this case it means “exactly what is needed in order to accomplish a specific goal.” Each individual might require something tailored specifically to his level of understanding in order to respond to the word of the gospel. Paul is requesting prayer that God would give him the words that are needed at just the right moment.

Col 4:5 - Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.

Paul turns his attention to the Colossians and how they should behave toward those who are outside the Christian family. The words “**conduct yourselves**” are from the single Greek word *peripateō* which is a metaphor for all aspects of a person's lifestyle. In Col 1:10 Paul told them he was praying that they might “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.” Then in Col 2:6 he said that, “as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.” Now in Col 4:5 he commands them to live and behave wisely before the watching world.

Paul says, “**making the most of every opportunity**,” literally, “buying up the time.” He wants us to be aware that our time is short, so we should make the most of it. He doesn't want us to waste a single moment behaving in a silly or sinful way that might ruin our testimony to those who are watching.

Col 4:6 - Let your speech always be with grace, [as though] seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

Whatever we say must measure up to the standard of **grace** (*charis*), which is defined as “that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness, good will, loving-kindness, and favor.” Paul adds that our words should be “**seasoned with salt**” which means that, just like seasoning makes food more pleasant to eat, we should choose our words carefully so that they are pleasant and agreeable to those who are listening. Paul commands believers to eliminate any coarse, crude, or unpleasant words from our conversation with those who are outside the family of God.

Paul adds the reason why believers must carefully watch their words. He says, “**so that you will know how you should respond to each person.**” This phrase is very similar to what Paul asked the Colossians to pray for himself and his ministry partners in Col 4:4. In that verse he asked for prayer to know exactly what must be said so each individual would hear words that lead them to respond to the gospel. In this verse he used the same Greek word (*dei*), translated “**should,**” to say that “**each person**” (*heis hekastos*) – every single one – may require words that are tailored to their level of understanding. If our speech is gracious and appealing, then God will allow us to see exactly what is needed to respond to whoever we are speaking with in a winsome way.