

“The Christian Life: Family and Work”

Colossians 3:18–4:1 (ESV)

¹⁸ Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. ²² Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.
4:1 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven

Do you know what a **coming-of-age story** is? At the beginning of the story the main character is seen as a child or immature in some way, but through some form of resistance or struggle the main character comes to be recognized as mature. They come of age before our very eyes during the course of the story. Another way of thinking about this is that the main character in a coming-of-age story is struggling to find their place in the world. They are leaving childhood or immaturity behind and must find their place in the world of adults. This is usually a messy process because the world of adults is full of complicated rules and social structures that make little sense to children. Finding a place in the world is something that is a universal theme in storytelling. It transcends cultural differences. All children must find a place as mature members of society.

What we have been talking about in Colossians reminds me of the coming-of-age story. The Apostle Paul has made a case against false teaching and in order to protect the church and the individual Christian, he called the church to put off the old self with its desires, and to put on the new self, which is being renewed after the image of our Lord Jesus.

The next question for the **Colossians** then is how do we bring all that Paul has been talking about into everyday life? To put it another way, the question Paul is trying to answer is, now that we are renewed in Christ, how is that going to change anything in our lives?

To answer that question, Paul brings the command to “seek the things that are above” to human relationships. He is giving a tangible, practical example of what it means to be a Christian in everyday life. In the first part of **Colossians 3**, AP has given the idea that the Christian life is a spiritual life, but here he is indicating that the Christian life is not only a spiritual life. It is not all about learning doctrine and renouncing the evil things of the world. It is also being a husband, a wife, a parent, a child, a worker, and an employer. In the most common areas of human life, we are being called to do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Now, before we start looking at what the text teaches, I would like to note a few themes within the text. First, this text shows that present in the world there are different roles that we can find ourselves in.

Marriage, parent-child, and work relationships are just a sampling of where we might find ourselves, but according to this text AP sees an essential equality in all of these roles.

In the family, there may be someone who ends up doing most of the chores. There may be someone who ends up providing a larger portion of the income. There may be someone who has to handle the practical everyday responsibilities of running the household. Some of the things we have come to think of as gender roles are cultural, but the point of what I am saying here is that whether or not your family is following the cultural norms or not, all the people in the family and work have the same value.

The reason why this needs to be said is that there is a battle in all families. Husbands seek to show their power over their wives. Wives seek to rule their husbands. Children disobey parents, and parents exhaust their child's patience. Every family in this room is either suppressing this battle or they are engaged in it everyday.

What AP is pointing out here is that all people in the family should be respected and taken care of. There is no ruler for the family higher than our Lord Jesus. The husband/father is not the ruler of the house, though he has a calling to imitate Christ by sacrificing himself for his family. The wife/mother is not the one pulling all the strings in the family, but she should be giving herself to imitating the disciples of Christ who outdo one another in submission to Christ. The children do not follow what is in their own hearts, but follow the path laid before them by the Lord. Parents should not try to dominate their children's lives through excessive rules, but free up their lives for joy in believing in the Lord Jesus. All of the relationships in the family are to manifest the undercurrent of unity in our Lord Jesus. AP says "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." **Col 3:11**, and "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful." (**Col 3:15**)

The next theme that I see in our passage is the theme of mutual protection. This is related to what we have already said about our common unity or equality in Christ. However, there is always a battle for dominance due to the presence of sin in the world. If you regularly check the news, you know that there is rarely a day that goes by without another report of abuse. Most of the abuse that is happening in the world is found in relationships like what we are talking about today—in the family and at work. We know that abuses in these places are the most grievous kind of betrayals, and yet they keep on happening. What AP is saying to the Colossians is that Christians are to be bound by a law of love and imitating our Savior. Love doesn't abuse or dominate. It sacrifices for others. Whether you are weak or strong, young or old, male or female, in Christians and among Christians we should be holding one another up to Christ. Reminding one another by our actions and with our words that we have a gracious Savior. We should be protecting one another from abuse, mistreatment, and other dangers of this life.

And closely connected with what I have been saying is the third thing that I see in this text, which is an emphasis on how every relationship that we have has a connection to God. In fact, all of the relationships that we find ourselves in imitate our relationship with God in some way. Sometimes these are obvious things and sometimes they need to be spelled out for us like Paul does in our text. So whether you work or employ others to work for you, you are called to show Christ's love. Whether you have the duty to sacrifice or obey, you are not to do these things just so you can get more from the relationship. You are called to show God's glory—just because he is glorious.

We can forget how great God is when we are trying to figure out how to parent or how to be a good spouse. We forget God when we are trying to deal with a difficult work situation. BUT AP is saying that because God is God we should be bringing his influence into all our relationships. So whether we are talking about family, work, or any other thing you find yourself doing, the call laid upon us today is to show forth the glory of God. And after doing that we will receive from the Lord all the wisdom and help we need to flourish in our lives.

With the themes of equality even in different roles, mutual protection of people in all roles, and an emphasis on how God is inherently involved in all of our relationships in our minds, we look at the particular words of **Colossians 3:18-4:1**.

In verses **18-21**, AP says, “¹⁸ Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.”

In other words, AP starts this section by addressing the family. There is significance in the groups that he addresses. The one that sticks out to me is the inclusion of children. Paul is treating them the same way that children were treated in the OT. They were expected to be faithful members of the people of God even from youth.

Now besides the groups of people that he includes in this section of the letter, what Paul says is important for us. He starts the section by saying that wives should submit to their husbands. AP describes submission as something that is “fitting in the Lord.” Submission is important because it has roots in what is honoring to the Lord. Now even the time that the letter to the Colossians was written, it would have been hard for women to hear “wives submit to your husbands.” There are lots of times when I need help and/or seek direction from my wife. So when Paul says, “wives submit to your husbands,” we should not assume that this is some kind of display of male superiority. Rather the background of this submission is a restoration of the way that things were before the Fall in the garden of Eden.

Before the Fall, Adam and Eve lived together as one flesh. They helped one another, gave companionship, and had the same mission to subdue the earth. In other words, they were called to fill the earth and to create civilization together.

However, when they sinned some negative consequences were introduced into the world. Beside the spiritual death that they immediately experienced, they also had enmity placed between them. In **Genesis 3:16** it says, “To the woman he said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.’” To put it another way, in the Fall, the husband will rule his wife, but the wife will want to rule her husband.

So then, the command for wives to submit to their husbands is a reversal of the curse of the Fall. Rather than seeking to rule over her husband, the wife should submit to him like it would have been if the Fall had never happened. I say that this command is important because it means that Christian marriages should be giving the people in the marriage and the people who get to see the marriage a glimpse of what life would have been before the Fall. It is important to say at this point that this glimpse will always be imperfect because all husbands and wives are sinners. However, by trying to obey these

commands, we will have to continue the “putting off” and the “putting on” that we first talked about in **Colossians 3:5-17**.

Wives then should submit to their husbands. I do not think that it is an overstatement to say that wives should always submit to their husbands, but I should qualify what I am trying to say. A wife is not supposed to be a human slave for her husband. She aids his leadership. The wife helps the husband as he goes about the business of life in the world. I do not think that the wife is supposed to accept abuse (verbal, physical, or sexual), nor is the wife required to submit to sinful requests. The wife is to submit to her husband in a way that is fitting in the Lord. For example, it would not be fitting in the Lord to lie or to tolerate adultery. So the wife comes alongside of her husband to help relieve the weariness of life, share in his labors, assist in raising any children, and as much as possible do so with joy.

On the other hand in verse **19**, AP says, “husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.” This verse serves as the perfect counter point to what I am sure that most wives would be afraid of when they are commanded to submit to their husbands. If the husband is a tyrant, the command to submit would be a prison. But AP says that husbands are supposed to love their wives. In a similar passage, AP says that husbands are supposed to love their wives the same way that Christ loved the church and gave his life for the church. The command to love here is probably as radical or extreme as the call to submit.

Husbands are given the place of leadership, but the kind of leadership envisioned here calls our attention back to the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve lived together and were given the same mission. The wife’s submission does not mean that men are superior, but that sin’s effects are being mitigated among Christians. In the same way, the sinful tendency of men to seek to rule women is broken by the command to love. Do not lord over your wife, but rather cherish her, protect her, and seek her good. So much can be made of the way that AP speaks about marriage in **Colossians 3** and **Ephesians 5**, but we can sum it all up by saying Christian husbands and wives are called to restore life to what it was like before the Fall.

I’ll add a brief word here to those married to unbelievers: you find yourself trying to fulfill these commands with someone who may reject their side of these commands. I offer my prayers to you, and this encouragement. You owe your highest duty and regard to the Lord Jesus. He is truly your master (ご主人) so as far as it is within your power to do so, obey these commands. To those that are not yet married but earnestly desire marriage, if it depends on you in any way, marry a Christian.

Moving onto the next verses, we see the interplay of parents and children. As the Lord commanded in the Old Testament, children are to honor their parents by obeying them in everything. This presupposes that the commands given by parents are not sinful commands, but in all issues of preference and wisdom, parents are to be obeyed. On the other hand, fathers are not to provoke their children. Provocation leads to discouragement according to our text.

The wisdom here is that the goal of parenting is not perfect children that make lots of money, but that parents raise children who know and honor the Lord. If we push our kids too hard they may end up with good grades and a good job, but empty souls. Children, let your obedience be filled with joy and be directed toward Christ the Lord. And, Parents, recall the joy of salvation as you call your children to grow up and live in this world. Keep the focus and direction of the family toward the only light that is capable of shining through the darkness of this world—the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The other relationship that is tackled in **Colossians 3:18-4:1** is that of master and slave. On the surface this relationship does not legally exist in this country or most of the places where we come from. There have been wars fought over the practice of slavery, and it does not take a lot of study of the history of slavery to see why it has been made illegal. So why didn't AP command slave masters to free their slaves? That is a tough question, but the best answer that I can give is that his emphasis in his NT letters was to strengthen people where they found themselves. If you find yourself enslaved, what should you do? If you become a Christian and you have slaves, what should you do? These questions seem to be what is motivating AP. One thing that is clear from this passage is that AP saw slaves as equal to masters. The call to obey masters sits alongside the fact that even the earthly masters have a master. We are all servants of our heavenly master.

On the other hand, we do not have to deal with slavery in Japanese society. The normal way of applying **Colossians 3:22-4:1** is to talk about employee-employer relationships. I think this is right to do, but we need to take some steps to show how the slave-master relationship is different than the employee-employer relationship. First of all, slaves could not quit their jobs, and they did not have worker-protection laws to keep them from overwork. Workers today have rights and should respectfully demand that those rights be honored in the workplace.

SO employees should work hard. They should work honestly. They should do their absolute best, but not because they want bigger paychecks or because they are afraid of being fired. Rather, employees should view themselves as laboring for the kingdom of God and in the name of their Lord. "Work hard even when no one is looking" is something that is standard work ethic advice, but the Christian modifies this idea by saying "Work hard even when no earthly person is looking" because we are working for the unseen Triune God.

Leaders/employers have the complimentary calling to treat workers fairly and justly. Injustice is rampant in a world so full of sin, but Christian leaders should be known for fairness and justice.

We all find ourselves in a variety of different relationships. In fact, we will have layers of relationships: some when we have the responsibility to take care of others, and other times when we will have to submit to other people's authority. Whether you find yourself taking the lead or following someone else's lead, you should be modeling your behavior on Christ. In the incarnation, the Lord Jesus lowered himself to the form of the thing he created and even gave his life for rebellious sinners. And yet he is the Lord of all creation and is the head of the church. He is the King of Kings. We can look to Jesus as our example, but also rely on him to be our goal. We are not aiming to be great people. We are aiming to point people to the Kingdom of God, and to the Triune God. More than that we are seeking the things that are above.

Before we finish today, I have another question for us to consider. How do we cultivate healthy relationships? What I mean by "healthy" is, of course, relationships that are full of equality and mutual protection and that lead to God-honoring fulfillment. First of all, we cultivate these kinds of relationships with the people that are currently in our lives. We repent for wrongs that we have committed and for the ways we have failed to live according to the commands we find in the Scripture. On top of that we forgive as much as we have been forgiven in Christ Jesus.

As we repent and forgive, we also shift our focus on earthly fulfillment to heavenly rewards. Remember the way that Colossians 3 started...AP says that we should seek the things that are above, where Christ is. The slaves are encouraged to remember that they are laboring for a heavenly reward. In our friendships, school relationships, work, and families, we should prioritize “doing all things in the name of the Lord Jesus, and giving thanks to God the Father through him” (**Col 3:17**). By prioritizing the heavenly over the earthly things, we will find it difficult to judge the quality of relationships by modern standards. So rather than asking if our relationships look like those around us, we should be asking if we are being obedient to Christ.

Ultimately relationships contain several players. They contain the people involved and the Triune God. If one person shuns the law of love and seeks to rule over the other, there is little that you can do to make that person change. The call of God is to follow the Lord rather than give into man. Returning evil for evil or seeking revenge is the natural, sinful response. As Christians, we are called to something higher and better. When we are mistreated we should take steps to protect ourselves, but that does not excuse us from striving to keep our attention on Christ. “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (**Col. 3:1**).