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## Colossians 3:18-4:1

### Bond of Love in the Family Relationships

It is a sad commentary on our day that there is an urgent need to lift marriage out of the sitcom sewer and bring it into the bright, clear light of God's glory.

By what standard is the culture of our day to be measured? When the Bible conflicts with contemporary cultural patterns which one is to be chosen as correct? Is the Bible secondary to the prevailing culture? Does the culture interpret the Scripture or does the cultural acceptability determine the teaching of the Bible?

We live in a culture that glories in "I, me and mine," and whoever dies with the most toys wins. It is tragic when this philosophy is carried over into the marriage. What is in it for me? What do I get out of it? How do I get my needs fulfilled? Many marriage relationships degenerate to self-absorption and are shipwrecked on the beaches of life.

When spouses are concerned with, "My needs must be met first," then neither will have their needs met.

"I, me and mine" marriage will lead to utter chaos—divorce or even murder. Marriage is a good barometer of our civilization. As marriage goes so does society. If the family unit is basic for sustainable civilization we are in deep trouble.

How do you keep contemporary family relationships and society from turning into complete chaos? How do we live together responsibly? How do you stay out of power struggles?

Successful family relationships are based on love. Romantic love may lead to marriage, but it does not sustain a marriage. It must move on to a sacrificial commitment to the one loved.

You might be surprised that the Bible has some proven principles that encourage and sustain healthy marriages. When taken seriously and applied they really do work. Here is the arena where we practice our faith. It is here that we learn to live the Christian life. In deed, it is here that our faith is tested in the structure of the most intimate and revealing relationships. How we live in the stresses of home life reveals our true Christian character. I have watched so often professional men and women do heroic things in the public arena only to be miserable failures in the privacy of their home. This is why as pastors and church leaders we must keep the fires burning and guard the integrity of our hearts at home.

There are reciprocal obligations in the Christian family. It is never one-sided. We have responsibilities in our relationships with one another. Christianity has something to teach us in these relationships. Paul stresses responsibility, not rights in the family. A home is in stormy weather when the members are insisting on their perceived rights.

#### THE BOND OF LOVE APPLIED TO MY MARRIAGE (3:18-19)

Our text before us is not about who gets the power to boss the family. It is about demonstrating love. The apostle Paul addresses the women, children, slave and master as equal members of the Christian household in the first century Roman family.

Several times in Colossians 3:18-4:1 Paul stresses a Christ-centered home. Do what is fitting in the Lord (v. 18), this pleases the Lord (v. 20), fearing the Lord, (v. 22), as for the Lord (v. 23), from the Lord (v. 24), you are serving the Lord (v. 24), and you have a Master in heaven (4:1).

Someone has to be the leader in the home. Ultimately someone has to make the final hard decisions that keep the family functioning with integrity.

We are all too familiar with dysfunctional families. It is even more tragic when dysfunctional families run dysfunctional churches.

In the ancient world, the extended family could include any or all of the following relationships: the man and his wife; his male and female slaves; his sons and unmarried daughters; the wives of the sons; grandchildren; aged parents and grandparents. Other people living in the same home and considered as part of the family could include servants and their children and aliens, or strangers, who attached themselves to the family for a time before moving to another location.

The man making the decisions for the family was designated as "father," although he may not have been the oldest male in the group. These family groups, therefore, could be very large. Along with the

honor of the position as head of the family, the father was expected to assume certain responsibilities that can be classified into three categories: spiritual, social, and economic.

### *Ancient thinking about marriage*

Under Jewish law a woman was a thing, then possession of her husband, just like houses and cattle. She had no legal rites whatever. A husband could divorce his wife for any cause, while a wife had no rights whatever in the initiation of a divorce; and the only grounds on which a divorce might be awarded here was if a husband had leprosy.

In Greek society the woman lived a life of seclusion. She never appeared in public alone, not even to go to the market. She didn't even join the men for meals. Her husband could go out on her as much as he liked, and could enter into as many relationships outside of marriage he liked without incurring any stigma. The wife owed her husband absolute, unquestioning obedience.

That philosophy was absolutely opposite of what the apostle Paul teaches us in this passage. Christ as Lord in the home of the Christians would have been a new revelation and revolutionary to the heathen in the city of Colossae. In fact, it is still revolutionary to pagan homes in our own culture. Christianity changed marriage forever.

The apostle Paul does not follow the prevailing cultural patterns of the first century Roman society. He stresses an ordering of society which keeps the family from turning into pure chaos. Wives should align themselves with and respect the leadership of the husband.

### *A Word to Wives (Col. 3:18)*

The apostle Paul did not instruct the wives to obey their husbands. That would have been the typical demand of a Roman household. His choice of words does reinforce the Biblical conviction that men do have a God-given leadership role in the family.

He did not have in mind the wife being a slave to her husband. However, he did say: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (Colossians 3:18). "Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands. "

The word for submit (*hypotasso*) is a volitional choice. I choose to submit. The idea is to defer to the husband and let him take the lead. She therefore would be willing to take second place to her husband. The idea may be to be loyal to her husband, or to give preference to him. Show eagerness in honoring him.

Is Paul out of date, or does he have a key to healthy marriage relationships? Wives have privileges, but recognition of the husband's leadership is essential to a well-ordered home. The assumption is the husband is wise and loving.

An emotionally healthy woman has the emotional strength to submit to her husband. I have also observed that she has the inner strength to submit to whatever authority in her life, including that outside of the home. My wife has observed many times that if a woman has a hard time submitting in the home to her own husband she will have a difficult time at school or in the workplace. To submit is a volitional choice. An emotionally healthy woman can say, "I chose to submit" and has the self-esteem to do it.

Why is this attitude so important in a healthy family relationship? Someone must be the head of the household. Who makes the final decision in the tough choices? It also provides significance for the husband. He is the role model for leadership in the home.

Yes, there is plenty of room for discussing, negotiating, problem solving, etc. That does not take away from his leadership, nor the attitude of

submission to that leadership.

A Redneck proverb says the husband may be the head of the family, but the wife is the neck that turns the head. It is sad but often a lot of emotional blackmail, manipulation, passive-aggressive behavior destroys the positive interaction of healthy responses.

Referring to Ephesians 5:23-33, Alexander Maclaren said "Marriage is regarded from a high and sacred point of view, as being an earthly shadow and faint adumbration of the union between Christ and the Church. "

The admonition of Paul is so critical to a wholesome marriage: "You wives, continue in subjection to your husbands, as it should be in the Lord" (Robertson, *Paul and the Intellectuals*, p. 116).

The greatest motivation is "it's fitting in the Lord. It makes our Lord happy. It honors and pleases Him. Submission takes on a whole new level of understanding.

What is the responsibility of the husband? What is his response to this attitude of the wife?

### ***A Word to Husbands (Col. 3:19)***

The wife's submission is prompted by her husband's unselfish sacrificial love. "Husbands, love your wives." "Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them" (Colossians 3:19).

Husbands are to demonstrate Christ's sacrificial love. Note that it does not say the husband is to love if the wife chooses to submit. It is the husband's responsibility to love even if she chooses not to obey God and submit. It is the husband's responsibility to love and keep on loving, and not become resentful and bitter. It is a deliberate attitude of mind.

This is the balance. What woman does not want to submit to her husband when she knows that she is loved in the same way? Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her? "What man won't love his wife with a sacrificial love when his wife shows him honor and respect as the leader in the home?"

Both attitudes and responding behaviors reinforce positively each person's response to the other. In practice it reinforces a loving relationship that watches out for the interests of the other person.

The love in this verse is *agape*. It is God's love demonstrated in Christ's death. For God so loved the world. Christ did not love with sentimental emotion; it was love in action. It was a love that loved the unlovable. It is a self-sacrificing love. This provides security for the woman.

Paul admonishes the husbands, "don't be embittered against them" (Col. 3:19b). Phillips paraphrases: "don't let bitterness or resentment spoil your marriage." A. T. Robertson picks up on the imperative: "stop being bitter." Bitter, he says, is like the taste of vinegar or gall. "

Men in the Roman society raged against their wives and family members. How many family relationships have been severely damaged by sinful natures out of control expressing harsh words, threats, unkindness, physical violence? We live in a day when marriage and families are destroyed because of bad attitudes resulting from sinful behavior.

The apostle cautions everyone: "Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26). "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice" (Ephesians 4:30-31).

The apostle Paul is concerned about the ultimate well-being of all the individuals in the marriage. Balance is the key to a healthy marriage. Selfishness will destroy it. Loving attitudes and behaviors will build up the family.

"You husbands, keep on loving your wives, and stop being bitter toward them" (Robertson translation, p. 117).

### **THE BOND OF LOVE APPLIED TO MY CHILDREN (3:20-21).**

How many times have we heard some adult say, "Children are to be seen, not heard"? True, robust children make a lot of noise, but we must be careful not to destroy their need to express themselves.

#### ***Roman Culture***

Under Roman law parents could do anything they wished with their children. The father could sell his children into slavery; he could make him work like a laborer on his farm he could even condemn his child to death and carry out the execution. We can thank God every day for the change that Christianity brought to change the cultures of the world. I hear a lot of talking heads on TV condemning Biblical Christianity and ridiculing the influence of Christians and I think they don't have a clue. They are as pagan as the Roman Empire in the day of Paul.

### ***A Word to Children (Col. 3:20)***

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

"Children, obey your parents in all things" (v. 20). "You children, keep on obeying your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing in the Lord" (Robertson). There are exceptions of course, but in the context Paul is speaking of the Christian home and Christian parents. If parents step in between God and the child, the child must obey God. However, in our context we are talking about a Christian family where conflicts between

duties to parents and duty to God are not in question. Paul is dealing with the Christian home and does not contemplate unchristian attitudes on the part of parents.

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you" (Exodus 20:12).

The word translated *obey* implies a readiness to listen and the idea of obeying orders. It is a habitual action of listening to parents and following the instruction to completion.

They are to do *all* things. Children don't have a say in the instruction. They are for their own good. Children are not to be the judges of what they should or should not obey. The parents have the responsibility of developing Christian character in their children.

This obedience to parents is seen as *well-pleasing* in the Lord. It is another way of worshipping God.

Do you want to please the Lord? This is where it begins.

### ***A Word to Fathers (Col. 3:21)***

"Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart" (Colossians 3:21).

Robertson translates, "You fathers, stop irritating your children that they may not lose heart. The verb *hêre* means irritation as the result of nervous explosion on the part of the father."

"Fathers, provoke not your children to anger" (v. 21). The word *ptôvoke* in this verse means to arouse, provoke in a bad sense, irritate, embitter. Various translations read: "vex not your children," "do not fret and harass your children," "avoid irritating," "don't overcorrect," "stop exasperating."

Probably the fathers are singled out because they are the head of the household with special responsibilities in training the children. It is true that the word for *fathers (hoi pateres)* here can be used in a much broader sense of both the male and female *parents*. Parents need to be careful not to be constantly faultfinding and nagging their children.

The family is where we learn to control our temper, abusive language, and lying lips. This is the laboratory where we invest in eternity. It is where our attitudes and thoughts form and shape the future of our wives and children. The peace of God reigns when we as husbands guard our tongues and bring encouragement instead of anger. Some people live with a broken spirit all their lives because of something said in the home on the spur of the moment. The child loses heart and becomes spiritless. A broken spirit can become the plague of a youth. My observation is that it can have devastating effects on attitudes in school and later in the workplace.

In the home the father and husband can *put* on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Col. 3:12). There he learns to bear with one another and forgive each other (Col. 3:13).

It is easy to break the spirit of a child, and have a lifetime of negative results.

The apostle Paul cautions: "lest they be discouraged" (v. 21b); "lest they lose heart," "become discouraged and quit trying," "grow up feeling inferior and frustrated."

The admonition of by apostle Paul should be taken not only by fathers, but mothers, school teachers and anyone else with authority over children and youth. Be sensitive to your children and their emotional and personal needs. Encourage them and build them up in the Lord.

"Happy is the man who can find his own childhood reproduced in his children and grandchildren" says Robertson. "Children are to be seen, heard, and welcomed in home and heart" (p. 120).

### **THE BOND OF LOVE APPLIED TO THE WORK PLACE (3:22-4:1).**

In the context of the passage of Scripture we are examining it should be noted that slavery was the most extreme form of exploitation of human being ever devised by depraved humanity. It was evil and everywhere it exists in our day it is still evil. Slavery no longer exists in most parts of the world because of the freedom and equality that Christianity brought.

#### ***Roman slaves***

Everywhere in the Roman world of the first century you would have seen slaves. Slavery was universally accepted in ancient times. It was considered indispensable to civilized society. The majority of professional people such as teachers, medical doctors, and craftsmen were slaves. Many of the slaves in the Roman Empire were captives taken in war and were more cultured and educated than their masters. The Roman Empire had millions of slaves. It has been suggested there were as many as 60 million in Paul's day. The slave under the Roman law was *thing*. There was no code of working conditions. When a slave was no longer able to produce he could be thrown out to die. He did not have the right to marry, and if he cohabited and there was a child, the child belonged to the master. In most situations they were treated like animals. This was also true in the city of Colossae.

The early Christian churches numbered many slaves among their members. They along with their masters were members of the church at Colossae.

The apostle Paul treated the slave with dignity. In no way does he condone the system of slavery. God did not ordain slavery. It was imposed by

the evil nature of human beings. It was never in the will of God for any person to have dominion over other human beings. The evil of trafficking human being is condemned.

Paul's letter to Philemon addresses a slave holder who also lived in Colossae and Onesimus was a slave who had come to Christ. How should the slave and his master regard each other in the Lord? The slave and the master both serve a greater master. They both have equal dignity.

The apostle Paul defends the rights of slaves, who under Roman law had no legal rights. Paul was saying they should be treated with respect, justice and fairness.

Christianity attracted multitudes of slaves and freemen to its ranks. In the church they were allowed equal privileges right along with their masters. Some of these slaves became pastors of the churches where the masters were members. The masters according to the flesh were not their spiritual lords, observes Robertson (p. 121).

Christianity entered into the picture and brought a new work ethic. To understand this passage of Scripture and its application to our life today we need to keep in mind the context and historical setting. Slaves in the Roman Empire were considered members of the larger family unit. They worked in the home and on the farm.

### *A Word to Servants (Col. 3:22-25)*

"Servants, obey in all things your master. . ." (v. 22a).

"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" (Colossians 3:22).

The principle is give of your best on the job. Do what is expected of you. Fulfill your obligations as an employee. Work as if you were doing it for your Master. Work with a "singleness of heart." Give it your very best; give a full day's work.

If you strongly believe you are being abused in the work place, look somewhere else for a job.

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

Work "not only when their eyes are upon you, as if you had but to please men, but giving them ungrudging service in your reverence for the Master" (TCNT).

Moffett translates: "do not work simply when their eye is upon on you, as if you had but to please men, but giving then ungrudging service, in your reverence for the Master."

The Roman slaves would not have received an inheritance. However, Paul says, "you know that you will receive your inheritance from the Lord as a reward" (NET). Inheritance of God's children is eternal life. The reward consists of the inheritance. That is something worth looking forward to regardless of our social setting.

Let your work be the "sincere expression of your devotion to the Lord . . . put your whole heart and soul into it" (Phillips). Williams translates: "Whatever you do, do it with all your heart."

Our work says something about us (vv. 24-25). Paul assumes the masters are Christians and will not command obedience to themselves that cause the slave to be disobedient to God.

Your work tells the world something about your Christian character. Our first responsibility is to please the Lord Jesus Christ; everyone else comes second. Both servants and masters serve the same Lord.

Christianity should help us to be better employees. "For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality" (Colossians 3:25).

When we sin we reap the consequences. This is a common biblical theme. Believers who sin and disobey the Lord whom they serve will receive the consequence of their actions which is a fitting discipline (NET, v. 25 note). God does not show partiality, even to Christians.

Along about the same time Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus saying, "And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him" (Ephesians 6:9).

Paul wrote probably a short time later after he was released from prison in Rome another word of encouragement. "Those who have believers as their masters must not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren, but must serve them all the more, because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved. Teach and preach these principles" (1 Timothy 6:2).

Everything we do ought to be done with the high deal of exalted service to the Lord Jesus. That attitude will transform our attitudes toward work. Peak said, "However their earthly master may reward their service, there is a Master who will give them a just recompense; although they cannot receive an earthly, He will give them a heavenly inheritance. "

John Eadie wrote: "Christianity did not rudely assault the forms of social life, or seek to force even a justifiable revolution by external appliances. Such an enterprise would have quenched the infant religion in blood. The gospel achieved a nobler feat. It did not stand by in disdain, and refuse to speak to the slave till he gained his freedom, and the shackles fell from his arms. It did something far greater. It went down into his

degradation, took him by the hand, uttered words of kindness in his ear, and gave him a liberty which fetters could not abridge and tyranny could not suppress (*Ephesians*, p. 446).

It helps to keep in mind that within a couple of years the one who wrote the letter from a Roman prison cell to the church at Colossae and to Philemon the slave owner would himself die as a result of his loyalty to his Lord and Master. Wisdom called for a careful, tactful message in its cultural context. In the end, Paul won.

### ***A Christian employer (Col. 4:1)***

Colossians 4:1 give balance to what Paul has just said. "Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal. . ." "Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven" (Colossians 4:1).

The Roman law held and the Greek philosophy taught that the slave had no rights, he could be bought and sold like animals; however the apostle Paul demanded that the slave be respected as a person. That was the revolutionary change and eventually transformed the world. You master, keep on supplying on your side justice and fairness to your slaves, translates Robertson (p. 124).

Employers have a responsibility to give just and equitable treatment. If you are a manager do what is right and fair. Paul was seeking a fair deal for the slaves. The revolutionary thought was, Christian master shall treat his slave as a brother in Christ. This is fleshed out in his letter to Philemon. The idea that the slave may be a noble man, and a brother in Christ, would one day blot out slavery all over the world.

I can tell you of too many stories of business men who have been taken advantage of by lazy, selfish, undisciplined employees who claim to be Christians.

The Master of both the slave and the master will have the final word. One day we all stand before Him and give an answer as to how we have lived our lives.

### **SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

I have lived over half of my life in the third world. I know and have seen injustice first hand. I have seen lives changed. Christ does make a difference.

1. When we are Christians all our relationships are influenced by Christ. The whole of the Christian life is lived in Christ.
2. In the home Christ is always the unseen, but welcomed guest.
3. When you are Christians you are under obligation to your employer to give of your best on the job.
4. When you are a Christian business man or woman you are under obligation to treat your employees as persons, not things.
5. When we have the right attitude work of any kind is worship.

The Christian life enables submissiveness that puts other members of the family first, encourages selfless love that refuses to become bitter, sustains obedience when life is difficult and overbearing, enhances devotion to giving your very best in the workshop and balances fairness and justice in the responsibilities of the work place.

Is it easy? No one said it would be easy. But herein is the secret. God gives us the grace to live and work and demonstrate His grace in the most difficult arena of life. This is where the believer puts into practice the principles of the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

If you need help in becoming a Christian here is [A Free Gift for You](#).

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Series: Colossians

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