

**Jesus Christ**

**The Image**  
**of the**  
**Invisible God**

**An Exegesis of the Epistle to the Colossians**

## Study 9 Christian Relationships (Colossians 3.18-4.1)

In this final section of Colossians chapter 3, Paul deals with three types of Christian relationships; marriage, children and slaves (servants/employees).



The foundation of marriage originated with YHWH. His will is unmistakably expressed in Genesis 2.24-25 which says the following:



*"Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh and they were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed" (Gen 2.24-25)*

Then Paul expands on this very special relationship in Ephesians 5.22-32:

*"Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*

*So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband."*

Against this background of marriage as a metaphor for the relationship of Christ and His church, Paul now offers very succinct advice to the Christians at Colossae.

### Look at Colossians 3.18-19 (Marriage)

Nowhere does Paul say that women should "be subject" to *all* men, but only that wives should be to their *own* husbands.

"The exhortation should not be weakened in translation in deference to modern sensibilities (cf. again 1 Cor. 14:34). But neither should its significance be exaggerated; 'subjection' means 'subordination,' not 'subjugation' . . ."

(Barclay Op Cit)

This *subjection* rests on divinely prescribed authority, not on any inherent inferiority in spirituality, intelligence, worth, or anything else. This is "fitting" in that it is consistent with what God ordained at the creation of the human race (Gen. 2:18; cf. 1 Tim. 2:13).

(Constable Op Cit)

I do not think that God intends for a wife to yield to a husband who abuses her, or orders her to do things contrary to God's will. She should maintain a submissive attitude toward him and defer to him, but she need not subject herself or her children to danger. Paul's point was that a wife should always relate to her husband as God's appointed leader. I take Paul's phrase "in everything," in Ephesians 5:24, to mean "in every sphere of life" (i.e., in domestic life, in church life, and in civil life).

(Constable Op Cit)  
(Hendrikson Op Cit)

"Husbands" have two responsibilities toward their wives. First, they must "love" them, rather than treating them as subjects. *Loving* here involves doing what is best for the one loved, sacrificing self-interests for those of the one loved (cf. John 15:13), and behaving unselfishly (1 Cor. 13). The Greek word translated "love" is *agapao*, the "all give" type of love, not *phileo*, the "give and take" type, nor *erao*, the "all take" type.

Second, husbands must not allow a bitter attitude to develop toward their wives, either because of the wife's lack of submission, or for any other reason. "Embittered" means irritated or cross. This attitude is a specific and all too common manifestation of lack of love.

(Constable Op Cit)

### Summary Statement

Look at I Peter 3.1-7. The key verse by way of summary is verse seven ..... "heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered"

Wives who refuse to be submissive and husbands who are bitter towards them are out of the will of God and as such, their prayers will be hindered.

### **Look at Colossians 3.20-21 (Children)**

Children are to obey (Gk: *hypakoute*) both parents. The Greek word for "obey" implies a readiness to listen to and carry out parental instructions. The Greek word for "children" is *tekna* which is actually referring to teenagers or youths as opposed to infants, toddlers or preadolescents. "All things" is the general principle and would cover the majority of circumstances that could arise in a Christian home.

While children are required to obey their parents, it is also true that every Christian is primarily responsible to the Lord. Consequently, if a parent required the child to disobey God, the child should obey God rather than man (cf. Acts 4:19; 5:29; Eph. 6:1). The reason children should please their parents by obeying them, is that this behaviour pleases ("is well-pleasing to") the Lord (cf. Exod. 20:12; 2 Cor. 5:9).

Once a child is grown to adulthood and marries, they are still to respect their parents, but there is no longer any biblical requirement to obey them as they are now a family unit in their own right.

While children must obey both parents, the father (*pateron*) has the primary responsibility for his children as head of the household. For this reason, Paul addressed the fathers here. What is in view here, with the words "do not exasperate," is the habitual provoking of children by insensitive parents, especially fathers.

(Constable Op Cit)

### **Look at Colossians 3.22-4.1 (Masters & Slaves)**

It is very possible that there may have been more slaves in the churches of Greece and Asia Minor than masters. Paul's assertion recorded in 1 Cor. 1:26 certainly implies that this may be the case.

The friction inherent in this situation probably called for extended comments on master-slave relationships in the body of Christ, and in this church particularly. Note also that Paul did not argue for the abolition of slavery but urged Christians to behave as Christians should behave within that existing social structure.

### **Slavery in Biblical Times**

The society of the ancient Near Eastern world had three major categories: free, semi-free and slave. All social structures were defined within these categories

The Old Testament record of Israel's origin and development demonstrates that they functioned within the cultural milieu of their own time. God's self-disclosure and direction to his elect nation often accommodated existing cultural aspects. While such accommodation reflects God's way of dealing with his creation, it does not necessarily imply his ideal will. Slavery is accepted in the Old Testament as part of the world in which Israel functioned. It is not abolished but regulated. The legal codes for that regulation ( Exod 21 ; Lev 25 ; Deut 15 ) and the numerous texts that reflect Israel's development in this domain indicate an increasing humanization of slavery in contrast to the rest of the ancient Near East. The Hebrew slave was more protected than those of other nationalities. The Old Testament raised the status of the slave from property to that of a human being who happened to be owned by another person ( Exodus 21:20 Exodus 21:26-27 ; Job 31:13-15 ; Eccl 7:21-22 ). The fact that Israel was enslaved in Egypt may have influenced this development ( Lev 25:39-43 ; Deut 5:15 ; 15:13-15 ; Joel 2:29 ).

The New Testament in contrast with the Old Testament does not record the origin and development of a national entity of those identified as “slaves”. Therefore, its references to slaves and slavery are more coincidental and secondary. The Gospels refer to slaves as part of the fabric of society. The personal slave of a centurion ( Matt 8:5-13 ) or of a high priest ( Matt 26:51 ) is a natural part of the narrative. Incidental references to the everyday functions of slaves are numerous. Jesus frequently used slave motifs in his parables because such images were the common stock of his audiences. His mere reference to the social phenomenon neither approved nor condemned its existence.

Paul's epistle to Philemon and his treatment of household codes directly addresses the issue of owner and slave relationships. Paul reflects the dual worlds for which Christians are responsible. He recognizes the legal ownership of Philemon by returning the runaway slave Onesimus (vv. 12-14). He also emphasizes the human relational changes that are the result of believing in Christ. Onesimus now has the status of a brother (v. 16) and thereby deserves to be viewed as such. Paul's statement in verse 16a, "no longer as a slave, " does not abolish the legal issue but highlights the new spiritual relationship. The tone of Paul's appeal for Onesimus may well imply his desire that Philemon give Onesimus his freedom, but Paul comes short of demanding this response. It is Philemon's decision.

The household codes that address slaves call for Christian integrity within existing structures, even when these structures have what can be perceived as negative consequences (cf. Eph 5:22-6:9 ; Col 3:18-4:1 ; 1 Tim 6:1-2 ; cf. 1 Peter 2:13-3:7 ). Paul's instructions to slaves calls for them to fulfill their obligations to human masters as if they were rendering service to Christ. The motive for providing honest and dedicated service is that the Christian witness may be advanced. These texts reflect the missionary mandate Christ gave to the apostles for his church ( Matt 28:18-20 ). While early Christian teaching contained humanitarian emphases (cf. Matt 24:45-51 ; Luke 15:22 ; 17:7 ) and has often resulted in social change, there is no social mandate to abolish slavery in these texts. The revolutionary nature of the early church is contained in the concept of being "in Christ." The result of being "in Christ" is, on the one hand, spiritual egalitarianism ( Gal 3:23-25 ), and on the other, responsible behaviour within existing structures

(Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology)

Paul's view was this: It is more important for Christians to carry out their mission as Christians, in whatever social conditions they find themselves, than it is to make changing those conditions the primary concern (cf. Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 7:20-22). "On earth" means in your physical relationships. In spiritual matters, the slave and his master were equal brothers in Christ. "Slaves" in the Roman Empire were similar to domestic servants in Victorian Britain.

(Wiersbe Op Cit)  
(Dunn Op Cit)

Slaves (or workers) should do their work primarily "for the Lord." They should also do it "heartily," i.e., "from the soul." This view of work transforms a worker's attitudes and performance. Even the most servile (lowly; menial) work thereby becomes a ministry and an act of worship. All jobs can and should be "full-time Christian work." Gideon was a farmer; Dorcas, a seamstress; Luke, a doctor; Daniel, a government official; and Lydia, a business woman—to name only a few. God uses all occupations.

(Constable Op Cit)

Paul now speaks of inheritance, slaves or bond-servants receiving an inheritance! Not only is the concept of a slave receiving an inheritance unthinkable in biblical times, it was illegal. No person who was a slave was permitted to receive an inheritance. However, bond-servants who perform their work duties with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord will receive a reward for their faithfulness in serving the Lord Christ (1 Cor. 4:5; Rev. 22:12).

The title "Lord Christ" occurs only here in the New Testament. Evidently Paul coined it here in order to stress Jesus' Lordship. Jesus is the Messiah ("Christ") who, as "Lord," will "reward" the faithful in the future.

(López, RA 2011 A Study of Pauline Passages on Inheriting the Kingdom. *Bibliotheca Sacra*)

The New Testament revelation concerning the inheritance that believers can merit by faithful perseverance in the faith and good works is extensive. All believers will receive some inheritance, simply because God chooses to bestow it on all (cf. John 3:3, 5, 16, 36; Rom. 5:1, 9; 8:1, 31-39; 1 Cor. 15:53-57; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-17; 1 Pet. 1:9). Nevertheless believers who remain faithful to the Lord will receive much more inheritance (cf. Matt. 5:12, 46; 6:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, 18; 10:41-42; 16:27; 25:21, 23; Mark 9:41; Luke 6:23, 35; 19:17, 19; John 12:26; 15:14; 1 Cor. 3:8, 14; 6:9; 9:16-18, 25, 27; 2 Cor. 5:9-11; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Phil. 4:1; Col. 3:24; 1 Thess. 2:19; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:18; 2 Tim. 2:5, 12; 4:8; Heb. 11:6; James 1:12; 1 Pet. 1:7; 5:4; 2 John 8; Rev. 2:7, 10, 11, 17, 23, 26-27; 11:18; 22:12).

(Constable Op Cit)

Whereas doing one's work heartily as to the Lord results in a reward, not doing so ("does wrong") will also inevitably result in bad consequences. Paul did not specify what these consequences would be, but lack of a reward at least, and punishment at most, can reasonably be expected (cf. Matt. 25:14-30). Furthermore, the Judge will be impartial.

(Constable Op Cit)

"It should be remembered that, while all Christians are on the same level in the Lord, there are still spheres in which subordination must be recognized. In fact, there are four spheres in which believers live: (a) in Christ; (b) in the household; (c) in the church; (d) in the state. In Christ there is no difference between Jew and Greek, bond and free, or male and female (Gal. 3:28). In the household, while there is intrinsic spiritual equality, there are distinctions. The husband is the head of the wife (Eph. 5:23), and children are to obey both (6:1; cf. Col. 3:20), the Lord being the supreme illustration (Luke 2:51). The slave, too, is to be subject to his master (Titus 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18). In the church all are subject to the oversight of the elders (1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:7), and to the Lord (Eph. 5:24). In the state even the believers, although God's children and heavenly citizens, are subject to the secular authorities and earthly statutes (Rom. 13:1; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13)."

(Johnson Op Cit)

#### Summary Statement

The fact that the word "Lord" occurs seven times in Colossians 3:18—4:1 highlights the importance of applying the Lordship of Christ in all our interpersonal relationships.