

Studies in Colossians  
Today's Lesson: 3:18-4:6

- I. Introduction, 1:1-14
- II. The Role of the Apostle 1:24-2:5
- III. The Warnings of the Apostle, 2:6-23
- IV. The Exhortations of the Apostle, 3:1-4:6
  - A. The essential exhortation ("look Up!"), vv. 1-4
  - B. The matter of personal conduct, vv. 5-17
    1. Things to put off, vv. 5-11
    2. Things to put on, vv. 12-17
  - C. The matter of domestic relationships, 3:18-4:1

The section contains three couplets, each couplet dealing with reciprocal social responsibilities: Wives and husbands, children and fathers, servants and masters. In each case, the subordinate is listed first, but there are duties and limitation governing the second person. In the Roman culture husbands, fathers, and masters had priority dominance within the social structure with wives, children, and slaves having no rights. However, conservative Christianity may be criticized as backward in advocating male headship and leadership in the family today, Christianity radically revolutionized the status of subordinates giving them status, rights, and protection.

    1. The marital relationship, vv. 18-19

It is evident by Paul's cryptic comments, and the fact that further data is scattered throughout Holy Scripture, that far more can be said than is stated here.

      - a. Of wives to husbands, v. 18

The idea of submission in our increasingly egalitarian culture has been rendered as a negative, sexist concept. Such an idea has some merit because of the abuse that women often endure in the home as well as the nation, embraced by some, that a subordinate position is somehow suggestive of inferiority of personhood. Christianity embraces the notion of administrative stratification and functional distinction, but always in the context of equality of person, giftedness, intelligence, and voice in decision-making. However, the spheres of exercise and responsibility in the home are not the same.

        - 1) Stated, v. 18a

Perhaps the clearest example of submission within the sphere

of simultaneously equality is the Lord Jesus. Though He thought Himself a God, was equal with God, yet he assumed the role of God's servant even to death (Phil 2:5-8)."

Functional subordination does not imply ontological inequality; they are simply different issues.

2) Qualified, v. 18b

The word, "as," is a comparative term and can mean two things: "as you would submit to the Lord" or "as congruous with your submission to the Lord." I take it to be the latter because the demands of a husband do not always equate to obedience to the Lord. This means that:

-There are limitations on what a wife can do legitimately for her mate.

-A wife is under no obligation (in fact the contrary is true) should a husband ask what is contrary to the revealed will of God.

-It does not mean that a husband should be an autocrat in decision-making or a concessive milk toast with no willingness to make decisions. How can a man be said to love his wife if there is no meaningful communication of what is meaningful to her? How can he create a safe environment for her if the one she depends upon does not create it with her?

b. Of husbands to wives, v. 19

1) Stated, v. 19a

A wife's acceptance of her mate's leadership in the family has its counterpart in the husband's duty to love his wife. It not only involves affectionate feelings; it involves his active unceasing care for her wellbeing.

It is the recognition that your lady is a left-brain person who values relationships, prioritizes the role of emotions and feelings, sees sharing of ideas and talking as a deep form of intimacy, and values time together over the accomplishment of tasks. Men are right-brain people generally and, therefore, are task oriented, goal-driven folk who see relationships to an end and not an end.

-It is the recognition that sharing of ideas, dreams, and frustrations are important because it creates a sense of belonging and caring (not weakness).

-It is the expenditure of your time. Time is the evidence of caring; talking and sharing is the evidence of caring.

Caring is the meaning of love; it is the prioritization of affections, and she stands only second to your regard for God.

2) The qualification, v. 19b

The phrase, “do not be bitter” or “do not treat them harshly” is the opposite of loving them. Because a wife is incapable of completely satisfying the variegated needs of her mate (nor the husband’s his wife since our ultimate fulfillment can only be found in the Lord) the need for a forgiving spirit is important. This is a trait far easier for a wife than a factually, mathematically oriented right brained husband because he is equipped to remember longer. Love and forgiveness are sides of the coin of matrimony!

c. The raising of children, vv. 20-21

1. Of children to parents, vv. 20-21

a. Stated, v. 20a

The imperative is present tense indicating an ongoing duty, obedience. The issue here that seems most pressing is this: What is the age limit of the category of child? In Jewish and Roman culture, it was when a person entered the stage of marriageability (for a son in Jewish culture it was thirteen, a girl twelve; in Roman culture it was fourteen for males; and in Greek culture it was eighteen for males [I am not sure of females in either of those cultures]). Reaching this status, entering into marriage, makes a person no longer a “child.” Parents of adult children are, at best, sources of wisdom and guidance, but no longer accountable for the consequences of their actions.

b. Reasoned, v. 20b

The statement that “this is well pleasing in the Lord” indicates that the injunction is within the confines of a Christian family. This suggests that the “all things” are within the limitations of Scripture. Children are not obligated to disobey the Bible at the injunction of parents, though it may incur punishment.

c. A caution to fathers, v. 21

The command to fathers, being present tense, indicates that they are to stop an ongoing action. The command can be translated this way: “Do not continually frustrate, irritate, or exasperate your children.”

What are we to know about our children?

-Children want to have guidelines because it provides them with security.

-Children are very insecure people, but they find their security in the loving kindness of their parents.

-The discipline of a child, if done properly, provides the sense of security a child needs to be healthy in social relationships.

-Children need to know that they are loved and discipline is part of loving.

-A child is damaged when it is demeaned, creating a poor self-image, an inability to function in community relationships. Punishment must be remedial, not punitive

How can we “exasperate” a child?

-By not setting clear guidelines of acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

-By being inconsistent in the volume and nature of responses to violation.

-By not explaining the reasons discipline is necessary both in relationship to the violation itself and the implication for their lives if it would not be addressed.

-By not helping the child to know that discipline is love expressed.

-By not punishing the child with silence or abusive speech but immediately allowing them to reenter the family circle of fun and laughter.

d. Of domestic servants, vv. 22-4:1

Mostly likely the reference to slaves in this passage is to domestic servants in the home since the section deals with relationships in that realm. It is interesting that Philemon lived in Colossae and he had a runaway slave, Onesimus, whom Paul encountered in Rome and sent him back to his master with a letter containing a plea for leniency.

Since there are roughly only three categories of people in regard to wealth: those who possess it so that earnings are not required to sustain them; those who have some wealth but need it increase it by employing the service of others; and those who have no wealth and must sell their services, voluntarily or involuntarily, to sustain their lives. The majority in the first century found themselves in the third category. Paul addresses this segment of humanity that is roughly the majority today (obviously contexts are vastly different for us who sell our talents, but the

third group is the closest to the economic circumstances of the majority today).

1. Stated, vv. 22-25

a. The command, v. 22

1) Stated, v. 22a

The command for compliance is forthright, but the “everything” should be qualified by that fact that there are some things that are wrong for a Christian to demand. In such cases, Paul’s injunction elsewhere is to accept the consequences of refusal.

2) Explained, v. 22b

What a radical concept in the first century. Christian slaves are encouraged to honor the Lord through their service to their masters.

b. The reason, vv. 23

Not only are they to offer their labors as an act of appreciation to God, but they are also to do so with wholehearted devotion to God first, and then to man.

c. The consequences, vv. 24-25

Our section offers various motivations for obedience: there is a reward for it, the one that we truly serve demands it, and the threat of dereliction.

1) Of obedience, v. 24

The reward of the one who serves His heavenly master through serving his earthly master is that he/she will have what the apostle Peter speaks of as an abundant entrance into glory, the reward of following Jesus is eternal life (though eternal life is the fruit of obedience, that life is not cause by obedience. Paul is saying that obedience brings to us the blessing of God.

2) Of disobedience, v. 25

The converse is also true, dereliction in earthly service to earthly masters brings legitimate negative consequences (the topic here is not salvation; it our manner of life as saved people).

d. Qualified, 4:1

1) The command, v. 1a

Christian masters are instructed to treat their slaves fairly and equitably. Christians (whether husbands, parent, or masters) are not to use their position to ask unreasonably, act unfairly, or discipline cruelly.

2) The warning, v. 1b

No one lives without someone to answer to for his/her conduct. All in authority over others are answerable to God. Not one of us is free to act as we please; we are all held responsible for conduct in conformity with the character of God. In a sense, we are all slaves in that we are all subject to a master.

D. The matter of Paul's requests, 4:2-6

Paul turns from personal and family conduct to concerns of his ministry. First, he dealt with the conduct of our personal inner lives (3:1-17) and then conduct within the domestic unit (3:18-4:1). Here he deals with the progress of the gospel.

1. Toward God, vv. 2-4

a. Commanded, v. 2

Prayer, making requests of God, and thanksgiving to God, are interconnected. Requests originate from a relationship that calls for thankfulness.

b. Specified, vv. 3-4

In the prayer life of these people, mention should be made for the work of the proclaimers of the gospel. The request is not simply for Paul, the plural "us" likely indicating the eight workers listed in vv. 7-14. The substance of the request is for opportunities to speak the message of Christ.

Remember that this letter was written during Paul's imprisonment in Rome awaiting trial for yet-to-be-disclosed charges. He is confined to house arrest, but the eight are apparently free to minister publicly. Paul is confined to those who visit and the guards that watch him.

Since Paul was imprisoned for speaking the gospel, which some had charged as illegal and insurrectionist, Paul is asking prayer for clarity when he makes his defense (he will be released to continue his work), to express his message with clarity.

2. Toward unbelievers, v. 5-6

a. Stated, v. 5a

As Paul asks prayer for wisdom and clarity in expressing the gospel, he commands the believers to do the same.

b. Reasoned, v. 5b

Speaking to people requires prudence, wisdom in choosing the right words with the right timing.

c. Manner, v. 6

1) Stated, v. 6a

The apostle commends the speech he has requested for himself in turn for the Colossians. When the opportunity arises, they would speak the gospel in a fitting fashion. "Seasoned with salt" seems to mean in a tasteful fashion.

2) Explained, v. 6b

This verse is intriguing. It suggests that speaking the gospel appropriately is quite a contextual matter. That we should be aware of how those we speak to might access our words and seek to talk in a manner they can readily understand.

Thoughts:

1. Marriage is the greatest of human institutions ordained of God; it is a sacred gift from God to be shared exclusively between a man and a woman. However, given the brokenness of our beings, the intended harmony and delight within the marital state can be reduced to mutual toleration for the benefit of offspring or shattered in a divorce court. The fall has turned marital bliss into a potential for conflict as opposites, once attracted by commonalities and dreams, must deal with differences. Sadly, redemption alone does not ameliorate our selfishness; it requires effort. Marriage is not a call to individual gain; it is a call to mutuality of commitment that produces individual gain.
2. Children are tender branches in the family tree that can easily be broken by the sharpness of words. They may be silent before an authority figure, but when words are repeatedly matched by illustrative behavior, a child believes the criticism about itself. Words that follow, "you are..." in a loud, abusive, and derogatory way is devastating and crushing to a child. It is important in a child's instruction to be critical of inappropriate behavior, but never the inherent worth of the child. Do you have negative memories of what authority figures has said about you that you carry in your memory-bank to this day?
3. Discipline without the expression of love and care is destructive. If discipline is needed, time to explain the nature of its cause is important. Time spent helping a child gain some insight into disruptive and destructive behavior must accompany correction. Also, with discipline isolation makes the discipline worse for the child because it teaches them that they are not worthy to be part of the community. Isolation, as discipline, may be appropriate, but it must have limits as also other forms of correction. To correct in front of friends, neighbors, and strangers adds to the devastation of embarrassment and humiliation. Have you felt the pain of such mistreatment?
4. The privilege of being in a special position of influence far outweighs the issues that come with the restrictions and duties of it. It is a great privilege to

have been given a mate, a friend, a companion to walk with through the loneliness of life's journey. It is a great privilege to shape the life of a child by instruction, exhortation, and correction, a child that is your flesh and blood, a child that will become an adult someday to shape your grandchildren. It is a great privilege to have the help of others in a common task. To lead is a privilege because it is a way to serve those who serve us. Are you treating your responsibilities as privileges to be guarded with integrity and executed with wisdom and compassion?

5. We must not miss the point of our passage. The distinctions of leaders and subordinates are valid in marriage, parenting, and the labor pool. However, subordinates have rights, freedoms, and limitations as do leaders. Position does not determine worth; all of us are equal before God and now of our entrance into heaven every distinction will dissolve and we will truly be one in Christ; there will be no social stratification. Is your significance tied into what you do, how you are received by peers, or by the God you serve?