

Alive in Christ: Christ at Home and Christ at Work

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Date: 09 July 2017

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[0 : 0 0] We're continuing our series in the book of Colossians. Paul is writing this letter to this new young church in the little town of Colossa.

And he's asserting the absolute supremacy of the resurrected Jesus over all other gods, religions, worldviews, spiritual systems.

Because of Jesus' resurrection, he gives his followers new life. He gives them a new nature. He writes in the beginning of chapter 3, you have been raised with Christ. And so in chapter 3, he unfolds what this new nature looks like.

Two weeks ago, we heard how Paul was pressing this truth into our personal lives. He wrote, to put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you, and to put on the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge after the image of its creator.

Last week, we heard how he expands what this new nature looks like in community with each other. Today, in this passage, Paul is pressing that reality into the home network.

[1 : 0 7] If you're paying attention, that first reading, you might have noticed a couple words. It might have grabbed your attention. The words submit, obey. And for many of us, they bring up negative emotions, defensive postures.

Why is that? Why is that? So I knew this was coming, this passage, a couple weeks ago. And at first, I thought, this is what I'm going to say.

We just don't like the word submit. Because we don't like to submit. We are rebellious people, not liking to submit. We need to submit to God.

And I thought, that's probably not very pastoral, even though it's true, not the great pastoral approach to take. So I thought, why don't you try being empathetic?

So I tried empathy. That didn't work. So I asked other people what they thought. Just got their input. And, you know, after talking to them, I realized, you know, I have the experience it takes to understand why these words are difficult.

[2 : 2 8] I think we have a hard time with the word submit because we associate it with the abuse or misuse of power. Many of us have been on the receiving end of an abuse of power by a parent, a boss, a spouse.

And some of us have been on the giving end of it. I know I have. I worked at a church ten years ago as a director of music in Florida. And I was noticing that it was my friend that was the sound technician week after week.

And I thought, oh, he really likes working with me. So I asked him, so what happened to the other sound technicians? And he said, nobody else wants to work with you, Dan. I was impatient, impetuous, like a child.

I was misusing authority and power. Okay, so I know that the word submit is difficult because of an abuse of power.

Another problem we face is that we know this passage and others like it in the Bible themselves have been abused. And it's affected us personally.

[3 : 44] And again, the misuse of the scripture affected my family. My parents came to faith in their mid-30s.

And they joined a church that was one of the only gospel-preaching churches in town. So we had people of all types in our church.

And they were very excited to learn about the Christian faith and about Jesus. So people would come and bring books of various kinds. And one time this guy came and he brought a couple books. And he sat in our living room.

And my parents were full of questions. My dad had a couple questions. And then my mom asked a question about baptism. She said, why are there different kinds of baptism?

What are they? And crickets. Complete silence. And the guy had his Bible. And he opened it up very slowly and deliberately. And said, As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches.

[4 : 53] For they are not permitted to speak. But should be in submission as the law also says. He closed his Bible.

And my mom asked the question, because she was new to the faith, and she hadn't baptized my brother or myself, and was wondering if she had done something wrong by not doing that.

So on top of the shame, she was already feeling about that. A new shame. Double shame. By the misuse and abuse of a passage of scripture. And I don't even know the guy, but I'm still having to work to forgive him.

Yeah. Not a scene from The Handmaid's Tale. That happened in my living room. So those inside the church and outside the church have used these passages to reinforce cultural patterns of oppression that we are born into and live with every day.

But it doesn't mean that we should jettison them. As a matter of fact, I think that as we look intently into this passage, we're going to love it. Embrace it.

[6 : 05] First, we need to ask God for help as we tackle this together. So let's pray. Lord, would I not misuse or abuse this passage?

Would you give me wisdom as I speak? For we would hear your voice and what you would have to say to the church in Washington, D.C. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. The Bible is full of imperatives. Do this. Do that. Sometimes the Bible has instructions or commands that don't seem very clear.

Some are very clear. So we hear, do not steal. Like, that makes sense. We have a good idea why we shouldn't steal. Other instructions are less clear or they tend to, it seems like, they contradict other instructions in the Bible.

The wise person diligently searches the scriptures to make sense of these instructions. And there's a way to do it. One way to do it is to find it in its context, to place it in a large narrative.

[7 : 24] In this book, After Virtue, the philosopher Alistair MacIntyre tells a hypothetical story that's very short. You're standing at a bus stop.

And a young man next to you leans over. And he's a complete stranger. He leans over you and says, the name of the common wild duck is Histrionicus, Histrionicus, Histrionicus.

And that's it. That's all he says to you. Now, the meaning is very clear and it's actually right, from what I know. But you have no idea why he's saying it.

Because it's out of the blue. It doesn't fall into any narrative or story. It's just this random comment. Like, perhaps he's mentally ill. But perhaps, like, there's a bigger story that this account fits into.

Perhaps it's a case of mistaken identity where he thought you were the one who asked him a question at the library the day before. You had asked, or he thought you had asked, what is the name of the common wild duck?

[8 : 32] And so now he thought he's seen you the next day and he tells you. Or he is just leaving his psychotherapist's office who's encouraging him to come out of his shyness by talking to strangers.

What should I say? Oh, say anything at all. Well, that would explain why he said that. Or, or he's a spy. Or he's a spy and he's waiting at a prearranged rendezvous and he's just uttered the code sentence which will identify him to you as contact.

Now, in each of these scenarios, the thing he says makes sense once it's put into a narrative. The narrative also determines how you respond to it.

So if we want to make sense of Paul's instructions and how to respond, it would be good to understand the narrative into which they are placed. So, you can start at the beginning or even before the beginning.

Before the world was created, God existed as one God and three persons enjoying from eternity past a dance of mutual love and delight. He then created the world good and he made man in his own image male and female.

[9 : 49] And they would also experience a life together of mutual love and delight. He instructed them to be fruitful and multiply and to get to work caring for the garden in which they were placed.

So at the very beginning, we see the institutions of marriage, family, and work. Interesting that Paul addresses those in this passage too. And then came the fall.

Wanting to be like God, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and everything broke and fell apart. Instead of mutual love and affection, marriage became a power struggle.

Family life immediately suffered as brother turned against brother, literally. And work became toilsome and backbreaking as thorns and thistles grew up.

And very soon thereafter, evil was invented. Jump ahead to Paul's day and humanity had experienced millennia of humans owning other humans.

[10 : 49] Wives, children, and slaves had varying degrees of status, but most often they had the status of property. Now many philosophers in the centuries leading up to Paul had things to say about the relationships within the family.

And when I say family, I mean the household, parents, children, and servants. If you had noticed a change in tone or in style in this passage of Colossians from the passages that we've read in the past few weeks, it's because Paul's using a specific format or a genre.

It's called the household codes. And this format is also found, this structure is found in other ancient writing. Aristotle wrote, the science of household management has just three divisions.

one of the relation of master to slave, one of paternal relation, and one of the conjugal relation. For it is part of household science to rule over wife and children.

Philosophers saw an orderly universe, and so they based their teaching on the laws of nature. This is the way the world is, so this is how you should order your life, to be in harmony with nature.

[12 : 04] In reference to the household, Plato wrote, the stronger should rule and the weaker should be ruled. Now what Paul does here in Colossians is he takes this format, the household codes, a genre, if you will, that already existed outside of Paul's writings, but instead of looking to nature for determining how various members of a household should relate to one another, Paul bases these household codes on the new nature.

Christ has given you a true humanity based on a divine pattern, lived out not in self-assertion, but in self-giving. The institutions of family and work that were created good and wholesome, but were broken by the fall, are renewed by the power of Jesus' resurrection.

One last thing to say about the context is that Paul is writing to a very specific community and a very specific time and a very specific empire.

He's not remaining abstract, but he's getting very concrete. This is what new life looks like in a small town, in the exurbs of the Roman Empire.

And I'll refer more to this later. But having looked at the context and narrative, let's look at these verses. After. Grab this. A general observation first.

[13 : 37] That what makes this setting in Colossae similar to our own day is that Paul is pressing the reality of living new resurrection life into the place where we are most ourselves.

Into the place where we are most ourselves. In other words, it is most likely at home that you are to be short-tempered and say perhaps mean things to your family members, the ones you love the most.

Things that would cause you to lose friends or maybe not be able to keep a job. But for some reason, and you know this, this is where we tend to be ourselves. In our family.

Or among our housemates. When we look at these verses, and if we were to take out the subjects and the objects, what we're left with are statements of submissive love and sacrificial love.

Ultimately, Paul does not require of one member anything that he doesn't require of another. All members of a household are to do as Paul earlier instructs the church to put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another, forgiving each other as they had been forgiven by the Lord.

[15 : 02] Let's look at these three pairings. The first is wives and husbands. There's generally two ways of viewing verses like these in scripture.

The first is an egalitarian view. And egalitarianism sounds like what you think it is. That is, there is an equality between male and female.

Men and women are fully equal in the church and in the family. And egalitarians would point to a verse like Galatians 3.28. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free.

There is neither male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Okay? Egalitarianism. On the other hand, a second view is called complementarian.

Complementarianism says much of the same thing that male and female are equal in terms of value and in every way. There's just a differentiation in roles. And they would look to the Trinity.

[16 : 07] Equality in the three persons of the Trinity. But a differentiation in roles. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And they would point to a verse like Ephesians 5.23.

Which says, For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church. And one finds both of these views in Anglicanism, in our tradition, in our denomination called the ACNA.

But with either view, the outcome of these verses, I would suggest, is the same. Because Paul says in Ephesians 5.21, the beginning of the household codes in that letter, a sister letter, the letter to Colossians, he writes there, that husbands and wives are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. And there we find freedom. Freedom in submission. C.S. Lewis wrote that if the home is to be a means of grace, it must be a place of rules.

The alternative to rule is not freedom, but the unconstitutional tyranny of the most selfish member. The opposite, the alternative, to rule, is not freedom, but the unconstitutional tyranny of the most selfish member.

[17 : 36] And if we're with ourselves, and we really know ourselves, and we see the depths of our hearts, we realize that we are the most selfish member. I, I know this, I'm the most selfish member in my family.

I'm the most selfish member of this church. But I find freedom in submission. We find freedom in submission to each other or in relationships and ultimately to Christ.

That frees us from tyranny of self. If we could properly associate submission with freedom, we would probably love the word. If someone is truly laying down their life for us, submitting to them doesn't sound like such a bad idea.

Now, single people, there's a lot of you here. And this, this also applies generally to life with each other in community and to life with your housemates.

Submit to one another. And it should also clue you in as to the kind of person you are to marry if you foresee that in your future. Now, too often it's attractiveness that determines the kind of person we want to marry.

[18 : 52] Wouldn't it be great if I could be seen on that person's arm? When we read Paul's instructions, it should make us ask about a potential mate.

Will this person prefer me over themselves? Could I submit to this person's preferences and character? In doing so, could we be of one will with each other, experiencing a life of mutual love, delight, forgiveness?

And for those of you who are married, submitting to each other means dying to one another. Let's look at the next pairing of children and parents.

It's notable that children are dressed at all in verse 20. This is a letter written by a spiritual giant intended to be read aloud to the whole gathered church in Colossae and then the children hear, hey kids, here's something for you.

Paul says children should obey. You know, the kids probably knew that, right? That they should obey. And yes, that's important. Yes, Paul wants them to obey. But I think this command is for the adults' benefit.

[20 : 15] And by placing children first, when children hear their name first, Paul is telling the adults that children are equally members of this congregation as the adults.

Not an afterthought, not a nuisance, but brothers and sisters, what a beautiful picture Paul is painting of a new humanity where children are held as equals of adults.

And then there's parents. Now the text says fathers, but we can read parents here. And the kids, by the way, as this letter is being read aloud, their attention has been gotten and so they're paying attention and they hear that parents are not to provoke their children lest they become discouraged.

Now parents had the right in this culture to exasperate their children whenever and however they wanted to, and Paul says, stop it.

Quit it. And the children hear that and think, well, I could obey a parent like that. A parent who's not going to exasperate me and embitter me. And let's quickly apply this, parents, and for many of you who foresee yourselves being parents someday, as parents, your children do wrong things.

[21 : 40] And they will do wrong things. That's what kids do. The temptation at that point is to, well, actually, after they do the wrong thing, often we as parents get angry.

That's what parents do too, right? And then we have to apologize. And the temptation is to qualify the apology, to say, son or daughter, what you did was wrong.

I was right to correct you, but wrong in the way I corrected you. I was right to correct you, but I shouldn't have raised my voice. And I would suggest, and this is good with each other too, that we never qualify our apologies.

That's just always we say, son, I was wrong. I should not have raised my voice. It was ugly, and I'm sorry. I think children know when you're qualifying your apologies.

They can see through that. And I think that's a little embittering. Let's look finally at bond servants and masters. Now, the words bond servants, servants, and slaves are all translations of the same word, *doulos*.

[22 : 57] Some slaves served voluntarily. Most were considered property. On one hand, one might expect Paul to say the whole system is unjust and should be dismantled.

Slavery is condemned in the Bible. Man stealing is harshly condemned. Kidnapping is harshly condemned in the Old Testament. American slavery would have been a capital crime in the Old Testament.

On the other hand, we need to consider again the context and narrative. as much as one third of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves.

Christianity was already an extremely insignificant minority. For Paul to call for equality or justice, to call for the dismantling of the current system which included masters and bond servants would have led nowhere.

As a matter of fact, it would have been seditious fanaticism to try and destroy the fabric of the empire's economy. Had word gotten out that a letter had been written which said, masters, free your slaves.

[24 : 13] If they don't free you, rise up and resist your masters. If a letter had been written like that and read aloud in a little congregation, that congregation would have been wiped out.

Christianity was like a really small, minority, insignificant population. So what Paul does here is more subtle and it's radical.

Again, he addresses slaves first. In this day, one would not have expected slaves to be addressed at all. But Paul gives them first order of preference.

Paul here is proclaiming equality. It's not an abolitionist text, but it plants the seeds for what would eventually grow into what men would believe one day, that all men are created equal.

Each one has equal dignity, for they are each made in the image of their creator. What Paul's listeners are hearing is that master and slave are brothers.

[25 : 21] Can you just imagine after these were read, children have been addressed, the bond servants have been addressed. I can just imagine the reader, he gets to the end of this part, and before we're late to our bosses.

In our work, we are not to be people pleasers, for we are not working for men at all. When a Christian does his work, we are free from what Paul calls eye service. We don't present a slick version of ourselves or our work that is inauthentic, but work as if Jesus is their boss, aiming to please him, offering our best.

work. I think a good contrast between a cursed view of work and a Christian view of work is found in the movie *Chariots of Fire*.

Harold Abraham is one of the sprinters that the movie covers. This is one of the things he says, I'm forever in pursuit, and I don't even know what I'm chasing.

Does that sound like your job? Later he says, in one hour's time I will be out there again. I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor four feet wide with ten lonely seconds to justify my existence.

[27 : 06] Does that feel like your life at work? Work justifying your existence. Work being this toilsome, frustrating pursuit.

On the other hand, there's Eric Little. There's a point in the movie where he's having a conversation with his sister, and he and his sister have felt for a long time they would be missionaries to China.

She's struggling with the decision to be a sprinter, and he says, I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.

When I run, I feel his pleasure. When I fill out spreadsheets, I feel his pleasure. When I do taxes, I feel his pleasure.

When I paint, when I compose, when I trim the vineyard, I feel his pleasure. That's what it means to work for the Lord in sincerity of heart, confident in the inheritance that Christ had already secured for him.

[28 : 16] We're about to close. What Paul is pressing into the community, into family, and into work, are the implications of sacrificial, submissive love. We must, however, first admit that submission of any kind is an act of the Holy Spirit.

It's antithetical to our fallen nature, and perhaps insane, and even dangerous, in relationships, unless you are ultimately submitting to Christ and trusting him for your personal safety and benefit.

Submission doesn't make any sense in our culture, but it makes a lot of sense if your ultimate aim is to be like Christ, and you're trusting that God is using everything in this life to that end.

When I just said be like Christ, what I mean is we imitate the one who, in eternity past, said, Father, I'll go. Father, I'll obey.

I'll give my life for those whom I love, fully, sacrificially, unto death, so that they can have life, to be sons and daughters in our household, and live in love to one another.

[29 : 26] It's him, Christ, that we submit to. It's him we obey. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.