

Life Together: Part 2

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[0 : 0 0] Now, the reason we're reading this passage this morning is because we've been going through a series on the book of Colossians. And so every week we look at the next passage and this is the next one. So we're going to read it together and then we're going to consider what the Lord has to say to us here.

We're going to read Colossians 3, starting at verse 18 and going through chapter 4, verse 1. Hear now God's word. Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Bond servants, 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.

Whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward.

[1 : 0 9] You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your bond servants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven.

Amen. This is God's word. This is the kind of passage that can make you squirm in your seat, right? Because Paul is firmly here within the category of things that you do not talk about at a dinner party, right?

This is worse than religion and politics. This is the role of women in the house. This is slaves and masters. And a lot of people will read a passage like this, and they'll say, they'll dismiss Paul and say, well, here is the proof we need, that Paul is just a man of his time.

And what a shame it is that this so-called man of God was so influenced by his own culture that he was not even able to condemn something so wrong as slavery.

And I want to suggest to you this morning that that would be to misread Paul, and it would be to misread what Paul is actually doing in this passage.

[2 : 2 7] Because if you read Paul carefully here, you see that what he's actually doing is the exact opposite, that he's actually offering a radical challenge to the culture of his own day.

And it's easy for us to miss because we come with our 21st century eyes to this passage, and so we misinterpret what Paul is actually saying. This passage is something that historians and theologians call a household code.

And it's the kind of thing that was very popular in the ancient world. You would have philosophers and teachers, and many of them would offer their students, or people who would come to them for advice, they would offer them a kind of household code like this that showed them how do you govern your house?

How do you deal with all the different relationships in your house? And of course, in the ancient world, a slave was a part of the house. And we'll talk about that in the next few moments. And what Paul is doing here is actually really subversive because he's taking this common idea of a household code, and he's saying, all right, here's the code, and here's what happens when the gospel comes home.

So he's actually showing how the gospel transforms the home. And that's what we're going to look at this morning. But at the same time, we also have to recognize that Paul is challenging you and me just as well because we live in a society that has never, no society before us has ever placed such an emphasis as we do on autonomy and on individual freedom.

[3 : 59] And Paul looks at every single Christian in the household of faith, and he says, part of what it means for you to live in the household of faith, whoever you are, wherever your position is, is to realize you're not your own.

Each of us are bonded to each other. So we're going to see that this morning. We're going to look at the two hardest relationships here just for the sake of time, which is husbands and wives and slaves and masters, because those are the two controversial ones here, right?

So first we're going to look at husbands and wives. And the first question you've got to answer when you come to a passage like this is, is this passage even talking to you and me, right?

Because could it not be the case that Paul is saying, this is how husbands and wives should relate to each other in first century Colossae, but that these principles don't apply anymore.

And a lot of people argue that when Paul calls women to submit here and when Paul calls men to act a certain way here, he's giving rules that are specific to this place and time, because Christianity would not have been taken seriously if Paul had said what was really on his mind, which is that these rules don't apply like they do here.

[5 : 15] Some people say Paul here is accommodating to the culture around him because people who were critics of Christianity would have said, you know, if wives don't submit to their husbands, then what Paul's doing is turning the world upside down and Christianity becomes dangerous and it could increase the persecution.

And I don't think that's what Paul's doing here for two reasons. The first reason is the way that Paul justifies his commands to husbands and wives. Do you see how he justifies it?

He doesn't say do this because the culture around you does it. He grounds it in God. You see in verse 18, he says, wives submit to your husbands, whatever that means. We'll talk about that in a minute.

Whatever it means, he says, wives submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. In other words, what he's saying is there's something about the way that God made man and woman that it's fitting for them to relate to one another in the way that Paul's commanding here.

More on that in a second. But what I want you to just notice here is how Paul justifies his command. But the other reason why we know that Paul is not just bending to the culture of his day is because if you read closely, he's actually challenging the traditional view of marriage in first century Colossae.

[6 : 33] And you see that in the way that he talks to husbands. And the burden that he lays on the husband, we can miss it because it's so ordinary to us. But you see in verse 19 what he says?

He says, husbands, love your wives. Okay? Simple, right? But when we read this passage, we read about wives submitting to husbands, and we find that language unsettling.

And then we read about the call for a husband to love his wife, and we say to ourselves, of course, it's so obvious you hardly even need to say it. But in Paul's day, these commands would have been received in the exact opposite way, where the culture would have said, well, of course a wife submits to her husband, but there was no such expectation that a husband would ever be called on to love his wife because the culture of the day would have said the purpose of the wife is to serve the husband, to meet the husband's needs, not the other way around.

And Paul's saying, oh, no, no, husbands in the name of Jesus Christ must love their wives. This is so countercultural that in all of the household codes that historians and theologians have found during this time period, not one of them, not one single household code ever commands a husband to love his wife, except Paul here in the New Testament.

And what Paul's asking of husbands here is even more radical when you think about the flow of the whole letter, right? Because what's Colossians about? It's about the supremacy of Christ, but it's also about the way that Christ loves his church, the way that he goes to the cross for the sake of his church.

[8 : 10] And the demonstration of what love is in Christianity is the fact that Jesus goes to the cross, right? And so Paul is saying to husbands, he's saying, remember how Christ loved you and you've got to go love your wife that same way.

If you read the book of Ephesians, you also see another fleshing out of the same idea in the household codes. And Paul says it even more explicitly. He says, husbands, love your wives as Christ loves the church.

And how does he love the church? He gives himself up for her. So the role of a husband is to love his wife so much that he places her needs before his own, even to the point where he would give up his wife, his life, not his wife.

Even the point where he would give up his life is that if that's what was required to serve his wife's needs. And that's how the gospel gets home.

Paul is saying, you take what you know and you love about Jesus and you bring that home in the way that a husband loves his wife. I had a mentor put this really bluntly to me one time.

[9 : 24] He said, Hunter, you know, you go to work and when you come home, you can go home and you can sit in your recliner and you can turn on the television and you can open up your newspaper.

Or you can go home and you can go home and you can die to yourself. And that's what Christ calls you to do in the way that you relate to your family. Now, just as an aside, I think this explains partly why Paul never got married, because he knew he knew how serious was the call of a husband.

And Paul explains he said one of the reasons he never got married is because he knows he says if I basically says if I got married, I would always have to be placing my wife's needs above my own. And I could never simply say, where is Christ calling me across the world?

Because I always have to say, what does my wife need as well? Whenever I whenever I've been in meetings where young men have been, we call it examined for pastoral ministry to see if they're fit to become pastors.

One of the questions that always comes up is every single time is these young men come forward. They want to be pastors and they're always asked, what does your wife think about this? And it's not to say, have you made sure your wife knows that she needs to be following you in this?

[10 : 39] It's always to say, you know, does she really think that you're fit for this? Because she has a wisdom that you need to listen to. And if she's not on board with the life that you want as a pastor, maybe what Christ is calling you to is to lay down your desires for your career in order to support your wife and her needs.

So Paul's message to husbands here is not make sure that your wife knows what her role is. It's become the kind of husband that loves his wife and serves his wife so much that she would gladly follow him wherever he went.

OK, but that's the easy part. The hard part, the controversial part for us is this idea of submission. Right. And I think, again, the key to understanding what Paul's talking about when he talks about submission is here at the end of verse 18.

Remember what he says? He says, wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord. And the way that he says that tells you, tells you and me that Paul is assuming that his listeners have this understanding of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman and what it means for husband and wife to relate to each other.

That when he just says, as is fitting in the Lord, they know what he's talking about. And, you know, we could spend a whole semester, we could spend a whole year talking about all the different things that the Bible says about gender and the roles of gender and the way that that plays out in life.

[12 : 05] What I want to do is just to point back to one scripture in the Old Testament to kind of give an idea of what Paul's talking about when he says, as is fitting in the Lord. And it's all the way back in Genesis. In Genesis one, we find out that God made Adam and Eve on the sixth day and he made them both in the image of God.

Right. And so what that means at the very least is whatever submission means, it's not about who is greater than the other. Paul, the Bible comes to a world in the ancient world, which might have said, you know, the man is the great one.

The woman is the inferior. And the Bible comes and says, no, no, no. Man and woman equally together are made in the image of God. OK, but then you go to chapter two and in chapter two, what happens is the narrative of Genesis basically slows down.

So you can see in more detail what happened in Genesis one. And what you find out is the Lord, before Eve came along, God made Adam and God calls Adam to say he put man in the garden.

To work it and to keep it. And then it says after that, it says it is not. God said it is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him.

[13 : 24] Now, me and my nine year old, we got a real kick out of this passage a few weeks ago, because if you remember what happens after God says that God brings every animal before Adam to see if he can find a wife.

And it's a funny image, even if you're a child. Right. But then finally, let me let me say something about this word helper, because this word is it's really important to understanding the difference in roles here, because when we talk about helper often, when we use it in our common everyday language, we usually talk about kind of an assistant who helps you to do something that you could have already done yourself.

You know, someone who hands you the tools just to speed up your work a little bit. That word helper is it's a word that you've probably used at least once before in songs that we sing.

The word helper is the word easer. When you sing the song, here I raise my ebenezzer, hither by by help I've come. Ebenezer means stone of help. And when the Bible says that woman is a helper, an easer, what it's actually emphasizing the dignity of the woman, because it's saying I'm going to make for Adam someone who can help him do what he never could have done by himself.

The word easer is used in the Old Testament sometimes to describe military reinforcements. So it's not someone who hands you the tools. It's someone who gets you out of a jam.

[14 : 57] And sometimes the Bible refers more often than not, it's God who is the easer in Scripture. So here's just one example in the Psalms. It says our soul waits for the Lord.

He is our help or our easer and our shield. And you see, when when the Bible says that woman's origin story is that she was made to be a helper, it's not to say that she is second place.

It's to say that she is doing something in creation that was incomplete before she was there. And, you know, because she was made second, it's tempting to think that means that she's second place.

But really, if you think about it, in the creation story, creation gets better and better and better so that when God makes Adam and Eve, they are the climax of creation. And in the same way, you could say that if anyone is the true climax of creation, it's the woman, because it's not until she is made that the Lord can say this creation is very good.

Now, now, because she is here, it's complete. And you can see the beauty of the moment, because Adam, what does he do when he sees her? He sings. He writes poetry.

[16 : 14] He says, this at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. So all that to say, whatever submission means, it's not slavery.

And in fact, did you notice that the word that Paul uses to describe how a woman responds to man is different from the way that a child and a slave responds to the master and to the father?

Because for the child and the slave, it says obey, which means do what they say. But submission is a different word. So it's saying it's not that you always do exactly what this person says.

It's a different kind of relationship. It's to put it in terms of Genesis. It's Eve coming alongside Adam and helping him do what he never could have done himself.

Now, we have to caveat that and say that's not to say that therefore men and women have the same role. Because what it says is, it says, I will make him a helper suitable for him or fit for him.

[17 : 16] The literal translation there is, I will make the opposite of him. I will make like opposite. So she completes him. She completes who he is, but by being what he is not, by being what he can't be himself.

And one way that you can see the differentiation of roles here, even in the Genesis story, is if you pay close attention, it's Adam that God tells don't eat the fruit.

And so the assumption is that when Eve finally is created, it's Adam's role to tell her the word of God not to eat the fruit. And the fall is this tragedy where all the roles are reversed.

So Eve was called to be Adam's helper, his true aid. And in the garden after the snake, she comes to him not as his helper, but as his stumbling block.

But in the same way, Adam was called to be the one who led Eve and watched over her. And how does he respond? He responds by just giving in to the temptation right there.

[18 : 22] So both of them failed in the way that they were made, in the way that God called them to be made. So all that to say, conclusion about husband and wife marriage, the beauty of a gospel-centered relationship is that the wife lets the husband take the lead spiritually.

But what does he do with that leadership? He puts her needs before his own so that, in a sense, both of them are always serving one another. And that's how Paul in Ephesians says the gospel is a picture of marriage, because both of them are sacrificing themselves for the other.

And that's the beauty of marriage. And Paul is saying, live in the light of that. Live in the light of the gospel story. Okay, now briefly, masters and slaves. If husbands and wives is not controversial, masters and slaves definitely is controversial, right?

And part of the complication here is that when we come to this passage, we read about masters and slaves through our own cultural history of masters and slaves.

And you read this, and the temptation is to say, there is Paul affirming slavery, which we all agree is wrong. And there's two responses to that.

[19 : 35] The first one is, what you've got to see, at least, is that the kind of slavery Paul is responding to is a very different type of slavery than we find, for instance, in the 1800s and the 1700s.

The kind of slavery in Paul's day was not race-based. It was usually time-limited for some purpose, like to pay off a debt. That's why, in the passage, they call them bond servants.

And one reason they used that word and not slaves, even though you could translate it as slaves, is because they're trying to avoid the reader thinking that slaves is what we think about in the 1800s.

Slaves in Paul's day, the kind of household slaves that he's talking about, were often highly educated, often set over the affairs of the household in a kind of managerial position.

They could earn wages, and they were often placed in authority over free people because of the skill set that they came with. So Paul here is likely interacting with people who are well-educated, possibly paid, and for whom servitude was a temporary position.

[20 : 43] So all that to say, even if Paul were affirming here the kind of slavery that he was familiar with, you'd have to at least say it's not the kind of thing that we think about when we think of slavery.

But I think you've got to go one step further. Because if you read closely, Paul never actually endorses the institution that he's talking about here in the same way that he endorses the husband and wife relationship.

Whenever Paul talks about marriage, he always talks about marriage like it's something that has its roots in the very nature of who we were created to be. He never talks about slavery in that same way.

And a lot of theologians, this is not an original idea to me, a lot of pastors and theologians argue that the way that Paul describes the master-slave relationship is such that even though he never outright says it's wrong, what he's actually doing is he's laying the groundwork for a world in which slavery cannot exist.

Because Paul looks at masters here, and what does he tell them? He says, you have to treat your servants with justice and fairness. And again, he's challenging the culture because this is a culture that says, my slave is my property.

[21 : 59] And Paul says, oh no, whoever you have in your house, you have to be fair with them. You have to be equitable with them. They are not merely a means to an end, a means of profit.

And a lot of times when people preach in the book of Colossians, they always preach Colossians and Philemon together because Philemon happened in Colossae. And what happens in Philemon, it's one page, you should read it later.

Philemon is the story of how a man named Onesimus, a slave, ran away from his master. And so Paul's writing back to the master, sending Onesimus back to him.

But do you know what he orders Onesimus, what he orders Philemon to do? He says to Philemon, quote, treat Onesimus no longer as a bondservant, but as more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother.

And you hear that and you have to say, it begs the question, how could an institution like slavery persist in a place where somebody like Paul is saying, your slave is your brother.

[23 : 07] And you have to live like that's true. It lays the groundwork for a place in which slavery just can't, it dies on the vine because theologically it doesn't work anymore. They're not property. They're humans in the image of God.

But then, of course, what do you do? How does that speak to us then if Paul's not affirming slavery? Well, one way that we can read this is to say, Paul speaks to us today.

In his words to a master, he's speaking to us as employers, to those who are employers, to those who have people under their command who they do give instructions to and who do listen to everything that they say.

And his words to employers are basically, you are accountable to God for the way that you treat your people. And you're accountable to God for the wages that you pay them.

A beautiful example of this in the Old Testament, you may have never, you may have walked right past it, is the fourth commandment. Have you ever thought about, the fourth commandment is the commandment to rest on the Sabbath day.

[24 : 08] Have you ever thought about that commandment as a commandment that had to do with economic justice? Because if you read it, what Paul, what the commandment says is not just you shall rest on the Sabbath day.

What it says is you shall rest on the Sabbath day and all of your animals and all of your servants and everyone in your house. In other words, God is, God tells the people of Israel, you as an employer are required to give everyone in your house a day of rest.

And that implies something else, which is that you have to pay them enough on the other six days so that they don't have to work on the seventh day. The fourth commandment was God's way of protecting his people because where had they just come from?

Slavery. And God's saying, in this new country I'm creating Israel, oh no, everyone gets a day of rest. I command it and employers have to abide by that command. That's just one example.

But then here at the end, Paul speaks to servants. And we can read this as employees because if it's true of a servant, it's certainly true of an employee, right?

[25 : 17] And what is he saying? The point is not know your place. The real point that Paul is driving at is know the dignity of your work.

Know the dignity of your work, that it comes not from what you do, not the type of work that you do, or the way that your work is viewed by the culture or the salary that it brings in.

Paul looks at every servant in the house and he says, your work has dignity because your work is for the Lord. All work, if you're a Christian, everything you do ultimately is for the Lord.

Whether you're the servant of the house or the master of the house, it's all for the Lord and for his sake. This came home to me a couple of years ago when I was sitting next to the janitor of a seminary that I was visiting in Scotland.

And this janitor had had a radical conversion out of a life of some serious drug abuse and other things. And now he was the janitor of the seminary of all places. And I always remember he had a strong British accent, which I won't try to imitate.

[26 : 22] But at one point he looked at me when we were talking about his work and he said, I clean toilets for Jesus. And he said it with the biggest smile on his face that you could ever imagine.

And part of the reason that he said it was because he was actually working at a Christian seminary. But Paul is saying, you'll never understand work the way that it's meant to be understood until you can see your job.

Whether that's as a mother, as someone who works out of the house, whatever job you have, until you see your work as a service to Christ. And that's what gives your work dignity.

There was a woman named Dorothy Sayers who was a, she was a writer back in Britain in the 1800s. And one of the things that she wrote about once was why the church was having so much trouble resonating with the culture around it.

And there were obviously a lot of reasons to that. But one of the things that she said was, one of the reasons why the church has trouble speaking to people is because the church has trouble explaining to them how the gospel affects every part of their life, even their work.

[27 : 28] And she put it like this. She said, is it astonishing that the church has lost its relevance? Is it astonishing? How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern for nine tenths of his life?

The church's approach so often to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to telling him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours and to come to church on Sundays.

What the church should be telling him is this, that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables. In other words, he's saying, whatever your job is, you have a holy calling, which is in your work, you are serving the Lord.

So if you're a carpenter, make good tables. If you're a teacher, teach well. If you're a pastor, at least try to preach well, right? Whatever place God has placed you in, you are serving the Lord.

And just as a side note, that's also what kills work as an idol, because you're no longer going to your work to earn your identity. You're saying, I go to my work with my identity in Christ, and I don't need my job to have a high salary.

[28 : 43] I don't need my job to come with dignity in and of itself, other than simply knowing that I'm serving the Lord. So Paul looks at masters and servants and husbands and wives and fathers and children, and what he says to each of them is, let the gospel in.

Let it in to every part of who you are in every moment of your day. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, let this be true of us. Let us see the implications of Christ in every part of our lives.

In your son's name we pray. Amen.