

Relationships Transformed by Christ

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[0 : 00] I just want to warn you that I'm going to take a little longer to get to the passage today, so I do still have it in front of you, but bear with me as we start. Now, for more than 200 years, I think the countries in the West have been on a quest for equality.

It all started way back in the age of enlightenment. But nowadays, this quest has reached fever pitch. And wherever you look, it seems people are hunting for any sign of inequality so as to rid society of it.

So racial equality, gender equality, marriage equality, and I could go on. Two big and influential nations, France and America, or USA, even have it in their founding documents.

Their revolutions were largely fought on this ideal. So for the French, their motto is, and I've got it on the slide, *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, which means freedom, equality, and brotherhood.

Likewise, the American Declaration of Independence begins thus. On the next slide, we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

[1 : 20] You can see where these ideas come from. Well, they come from the Bible. These truths are only self-evident, so the Americans think, because it's been revealed in the Bible, that all humans are made in God's image, for instance, of God as the giver of life, of Jesus as the savior who comes to give them freedom.

But now, equality seems to have become the ultimate goal in all things, hasn't it? It is the thing we use to judge everything else, including the Bible.

We no longer use the Bible to define equality, I'm talking about society, that is, but rather it's used to interpret the Bible. The Bible is seen through the lens of equality.

And that has caused us to come unstuck, I think, because for a start, what do we mean by equality? Is it equal opportunity? Or equal distribution of output?

Which, by the way, is just communism. It is. What do we mean by, do we mean equal representation, for instance, which I think is the bigger focus nowadays, equal representation on boards and parliament and the like.

[2 : 35] But I wonder if people actually realize that you can't have them all. So just take a look at these two bottles. Some of you might have been wondering what was there, for instance. Look at them for me.

And I ask you the question, and I probably need to go over there too, the lighting's not that great. But the question is, have I filled them up equally? Have I filled them up equally? You can see the pink bottle, but you can't see the maple syrup bottle.

It's there. So the question is, have I filled them up equally? Well, it depends, doesn't it? If you're wanting them to be filled up to the same equal height, then yes, it's equal.

As far as your naked eye can tell. But not if you want equal volume, right? Not if you want equal proportion. That is, I want the pink bottle to be half filled, just like the maple syrup bottle.

And that's the same with equality between people. If you want equal outcomes, you wouldn't normally get equal opportunity. You can't have equal opportunity, because people have different talents and strengths.

[3 : 47] And that's the dilemma for, example, when you want to impose, and I'm not trying to criticize this initiative, but it's the dilemma, when you want to try and impose quotas for females studying engineering, which is one initiative that was being talked about in the media.

You might do it to overcome historic disadvantage for females generally, but you're going to end up denying specific males who may suffer from other disadvantages, economic, you know, ethnic or whatever, through that quota.

And that's part of the problem, isn't it? Because inequality can arise from so many factors. Now, it doesn't mean I'm not trying to say we don't tackle discrimination, but I think we need to realize that this pursuit of absolute equality isn't possible.

Now, you might be wondering why I paint, go on rabbiting about this, but I paint this picture by way of background, because whether we realize it or not, this worldview deeply impacts us, even as Christians.

So much so that even though this is a noble ideal, it does color the way we read the Bible. And in particular, our passage today. Now, if you don't believe me, think what sort of questions you might have as I read it again.

[5 : 09] Verse 18. Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husband, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Father, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, and do it not only when their eye is on you, and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart, and reverence for the Lord.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord, as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a master in heaven. Now, even if you don't have an issue personally, I'm sure you are trying to, you know, in the back of your mind, you're trying to justify these commands to others in our society. Perhaps you're putting caveats around it.

[6 : 12] You're thinking, post-teaching is culturally bound, so it doesn't apply anymore. Or you might want to define submission or obedience to make it acceptable to today's worldview, which values and rates equality so highly.

But do you see what you've done when you've done that? We've interpreted the Bible with equality as the yardstick when we do that, haven't we? We can't imagine that perhaps, you know, equality is not a priority for God.

Now, you know, you probably hear me say, shock and horror, but maybe that's not the most important thing to God, even though He wants to be fair. And so, we immediately think all submission and obedience must equal, must mean inequality or unfairness.

But let's look at it a bit closer, because I don't know whether that's true. Firstly, Paul's teaching cannot be culturally bound. Why? Because Paul knows a thing too about equality.

He raised it last week. If you were here, in chapter 3, verse 11, he said that in the new creation, there's neither Gentile nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free.

[7 : 24] But Christ is all, as is in all. That's equality right there. In Galatians, he even includes male or female. That's the glorious thing about the new creation.

We're all equal in God's sight and renewed in His image. So, why then is He now straight away, in the next section, talking about submission and obedience? I mean, is He contradicting Himself? It can't be. Instead, He's actually calling them to submission and obedience precisely because of the new creation. Rather than casting these relationships aside, Paul says that now these relationships have been transformed by Christ, by being in Christ.

So, let's just let that sink in for a minute. These commands here are a direct result of being in the new creation, not in spite of it.

Knowing that we're equal and free in Christ transforms these relationships in the world for us as Christians. Now, Paul turns to three typical relationships in the household, you know, husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and masters.

[8 : 37] And says that whereas they may have been forced to submit in times past or coerced to doing it grudgingly, now they are to do it willingly by God's grace and because of Christ.

To submit and obey does not make wives, children and slaves inferior to those they submit or obey. Instead, they do it as to the Lord three times.

So, verse 18, because it's fitting in the Lord. Verse 20, it pleases the Lord. And in the case of slaves, because they're not doing it just for earthly masters but for the Lord.

It is the Lord Christ they are serving. That is, it is Christ's own authority that they are submitting to when they submit to human husbands, parents, and masters.

It's an important way they are to serve the Lord. Now, I know with abuse of authority we're suspicious of it, aren't we? We resist submitting and obeying because we fear that we'll be hurt by it.

[9 : 44] And, you know, in some ways that's understandable. But the thing is, we actually need to realize that God has given us authority because that's a good thing.

We actually need authority in society, in communities, in relationship for it, for us to work and live and thrive. The cure for bad authority is not no authority but good authority because no authority is anarchy.

You see, when we have authority, what we do is we hand responsibly over to one person for them to make decisions on our behalf. That's how institutions work, be it governments, schools, churches, or families.

I mean, say you task someone, which I think has happened recently, to buy a 21st birthday gift on behalf of an entire group. When you do that, you've actually handed authority to that person, haven't you?

You entrust to them the task of not stuffing up. Choosing the wrong gift, overspending the budget, right? And that's true in a democracy too where we think, you know, we think sometimes that the power lies with the people but actually, when we elect an MP, we've given him or her authority or responsibility which comes with influence and power to act on our behalf.

[11 : 09] We might like the MP, you know, when they get to Canberra to do just what we want but imagine all the tens of thousands of voters in the electorate saying that of him. He's not going to be able to do that, is he?

No, we actually invest him or her with authority to use their own judgment and convictions to make decisions on our behalf. And then when they get to Parliament, they actually hand authority over again, don't they, to the government who exercises power on behalf of the Parliament?

Yes, a good democracy will need checks and balances but just look at what happens when authority fails. Just look at the UK for instance at the moment.

The government has lost its majority and so it has no authority essentially and yet they're not allowed to call an election because of some silly rule that they made four years ago or whatever to break that deadlock.

And so is the shambles, isn't it? They can't even, they don't even want to pass a motion of no confidence because they don't know who else to put into government because of that. So there's no proper authority and things are breaking down, aren't they?

[12 : 18] So whether you like it or not, authority is necessary. It's a good thing. It's God's way to establish order. That's why on the slide, Paul says in Romans chapter 13 verse 1, let everyone be subject to governing authorities for there is no authority except that which God has established.

And it's the same with marriage, families and households. It's God's way to help these relationships thrive and for his purposes to be achieved. And that's why I chose that reading in Deuteronomy today because in chapter 5 and verse 16, which is on the slide again, children are to obey their parents.

Why? Because you go to Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4 to 9, it enables parents to instruct them in the way of the Lord. And what happens when that happens? Back to Deuteronomy 5 verse 16, so that they may go well in the land.

Do you see how that relationship is made for thriving, for the children to thrive? They obey parents so that parents can instruct them so that everyone goes well in the land. So friends, even though it's hard, let's not be grudging about authority because when we rebel against it, Paul says in the next verse in Romans that we're actually rebelling not against the authority but against God.

Whoever rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. Now it's a two-way street of course because those in authority then have a corresponding responsibility.

[13 : 45] Husbands are to love their wives and not be harsh with them. Parents are not to embitter or discourage their children and masters are to provide what is right and fair. And they are to do this because they are acting on the Lord's behalf.

If people are submitting as to the Lord then the person who is in authority is exercising that authority on God's behalf. And so they must demonstrate His love and justice.

They need to reflect His character in these roles. They need to exercise authority for others and not for themselves because that's what God does Himself.

So He expects it of anyone who is in authority. And this is true not just for the relationships in the Colossians passage but if you're a boss or a pastor or a teacher or a leader Paul says in verse 25 that if you abuse that authority there will be a day of reckoning.

Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs and there is no favoritism. Now of course I say all this and it all sounds like a bit of a stick and no carrot but really it's not the stick that should drive us is it?

[14:52] But rather we should be attracted to doing this because if we live like that as God intended these relationships are actually wonderful and nurturing and life-giving.

When a husband lays down his life his love sacrificially and then the wife submits correspondingly what joy does it bring? Lots.

When a child obeys wholeheartedly and is encouraged by the parent's instruction it's so uplifting to see. And that's because the beauty of these relationships are actually giving us a glimpse of our eternal relationships.

You see a godly marriage reflects Christ's marriage to the church where the church is to submit to Christ. Paul doesn't elaborate here in Colossians but he does it in full in Ephesians chapter 5.

Likewise godly parent child relationships reflect God's relationship with his children. And so good masters point to God as our master. This is true of all authority when exercised correctly they point to the beauty of God's relationship with us.

[16:06] And so God's agenda for us for our relationship is much bigger than ours isn't it? We might be focused on fairness and equality that's the world's own yardstick but God is more interested in pointing us to ultimate eternal life-giving realities.

So I do want to encourage all of us here to just see our relationships in that light. God is using them to point to something greater than us. Something far more important than the earthly relationships themselves.

So let me close tonight then with some of the bullet points down near the bottom. I do want to encourage us tonight because I know some of us find this idea of submission and obedience hard to swallow.

So first to wives who are called to submit. Please don't think yours is an inferior position. God hasn't treated you unfairly but remember your true identity and glory in Christ.

We're people of great value and status not whether we're married or husband or wife no we're of people of great value and status because of what Christ has done for us on the cross. We're people of great worth because we belong to the new creation.

[17:25] And I know that society today tells us otherwise but don't listen to them listen to God in his word instead. After all did you know that Jesus himself was equal with God and yet as Paul says in Philippians did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

Rather he made himself nothing. The submission does not take away your equality nor your dignity. And yes it's hard when your husband isn't Christ-like but again as we saw in last week's passage we're called to bear with him and forgive his mistakes.

Now don't hear me wrong. I'm not referring here to abuse. If that's going on then that's not the meaning of bearing with him. Please come and talk to me about those things.

We're not talking about abuse here. It's also true that with every couple there's no one way to do submission but rather couples need to work it out together.

It doesn't mean for example losing your voice in marriage. but submit because it's actually bringing glory to God. And even if your submission isn't reciprocated know that Christ the eternal husband of the church he will honor you for that.

[18:49] And it's his commendation at the end of the day that you seek not just your husband. Similarly if you're a child and one of them is mine personally here tonight obey your parents.

Even though you might think they don't understand you remember no parent is perfect. I'm not Emma you do know that. And they will fail you even with the best of intentions but obey them anyway because again Jesus who was sinless and divine he obeyed his earthly imperfect and sinful parents.

And for all of us who are subject to authority even pagan authority who have no regard for God let us respect that authority because ultimately it's been instituted by God.

And when it seems too much to take you know that boss that's just then ask God to help you look past that ungodly authority to the one who stands behind it to God himself to the Lord to our heavenly master.

it's him the Lord Christ that we're serving so let's do it with our hearts and our minds. And remember one day as Paul promises the Lord will reward us in heaven.

[20 : 12] So never fear that our efforts would be in vain. And finally for those of us who find ourselves in authority just as Paul says to earthly masters in chapter 4 and verse 1 we need to remember that we have a heavenly master we will have to answer to one day.

And if you ever need to know what the right thing is to do then look to God himself look to Jesus ask what he would do. And if people don't respect your authority or your sacrificial leadership then remember not to be unfair to them not to treat them harshly to be gracious because that's exactly what Jesus did when people did not follow or listen to him.

And if they are Christians as well remember this they belong to the new creation just as you do. She's not just your wife she's a co-heir with you in Christ.

He or she is not just your child but a precious child of God. And he or she is not just your employee or your subordinate but a brother and sister with you in God's kingdom.

kingdom. And remember that one day none of these earthly relationships will exist anymore. Alyssa and I sometimes wonder what will happen when we get to heaven.

[21 : 34] I tell her that she'll get an important role in the new creation. Like maybe one of God's chief gardeners in charge of the veggie patch. You know. I on the other hand will probably just be a lowly Downton Abbey servant.

I'll be washing her garden boots, polishing her garden tools. And when that time comes, you know, I just hope that she'll still remember me. That I once used to be her earthly husband.

You know, maybe just take some time out from her important duties and come and say hi to me.

And then I'll say, you remember me? I was that husband, you know, for 20, 30, 40 years.

But that's our future, isn't it? In heaven, we're all only going to be subject to Christ, not to each other. In heaven, only God will be our father and master.

But while we're still in this world, we're called not to cast off our earthly relationships, but to transform them for Christ and to use them to prepare for the new creation and to point others to it and to its glory.

[22 : 41] Let's pray. Father, thank you that in Christ our earthly relationships are transformed to bring glory to your son and to you.

We know that in Christ there is no slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile, but that Christ is in all. Help us to know deeply our true identity and glory in Christ, so that we may live in submission and obedience to others if called to do so in our roles, and to exercise Christ-like godly authority when appointed to do so, so that in all our relationships we might bring glory to your son.

In his name we pray. Amen.