

How's Your Serve?

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[0 : 00] Well, if you have your Bible with you, keep it open to that passage at the end of Colossians chapter 3. This is a very practical, very brief passage of application today.

We all want practical application, but when we get it, sometimes it feels a bit like, hmm, that's not really what I wanted to hear. And when it comes to living out the Christian faith, we have lots of questions for God.

But here in Colossians chapter 3, we get one short sentence for wives, for husbands, for children, for parents, and a couple of sentences for bond servants and masters.

And every single sentence sounds a little bit shocking to our modern ears to various degrees.

We've got problems with all of these statements. But our biggest problem is that when we come to this text, we all wear culture glasses, cultural spectacles.

We all have cultural frameworks. Because we live in Canada in 2020, we are like pirates. We have an eye patch over one eye when we come to look at the ancient text.

[1 : 11] We just naturally think our culture is better, more evolved, more ethically sophisticated than others are. So if we take the first line, wives submit to your husbands, it offends our cultural sensitivities.

And because today we see things in terms of power, anything that even seems to lessen the full equality of anyone just sounds wrong. The very idea of wives submitting to their husbands or children obeying parents or servants' masters sounds backward, a little misogynist, certainly outdated, even outlandish, and even outrageous.

And you may be interested to know that to the first readers, this was just as outrageous and shocking, but for completely the opposite reasons.

To tell a husband to tell a husband to give himself sacrificially for his wife or for a parent to raise his child in a particular way or for a master to do anything with their servant was unacceptable, outrageous, and deeply offensive.

And I'm saying this because when we come to the word of God, we all come with our cultural and personal prejudices. We all have glasses and eye patches which help us see some parts of the text very clearly, but make other parts very challenging.

[2 : 38] And the question we often ask ourselves is, what do we do with parts of the Bible that come into conflict, not just with what our culture holds to be self-evidently true, but with my own deeply cherished beliefs?

We don't want to put God on mute. We don't want to pretend we know more than God. Nor do we want to just take those parts of the Bible that we agree with and ignore and demote others that we don't agree with.

I mean, if we do that, we very quickly stop hearing the voice of God. And we end up with a God that looks a lot like us. We make God in our own image rather than God renewing us in the image of his son.

So what we have to do is we have to go back and look at what the Apostle Paul meant and what it means for us today. So I'm going to pray now as we look at this text that God would help us do these things.

Our Heavenly Father, your word is eternal and very powerful. And so we say together that we love your word.

[3 : 48] And we pray that you'd open our hearts to receive it and our hands to do it and our minds to understand it even more for the glory of Christ we pay.

Amen. Now, it's crucial for this little section to see the verse immediately before. That's why I had Lucy read it. Verse 17 starts our section and ends the last section.

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him, wives, husbands, children, etc.

What does it mean to do everything in the name of Jesus? Well, it's not the great asceticism and religious experiences of the new teachers in Corinth. It's this. It's living out the life of Christ in our marriage and families and work arenas.

Because these are arenas where we seek Christ and show Christ and serve Christ. What makes child raising so important is not what the culture says makes it important, but because Christ is there.

[4 : 55] When the mother sits through the night awake with a fretting child, she does it because Christ is there. When your child is acting out and is just not listening to you, Christ is there too.

And for those really difficult moments in marriage when you feel you don't know sure there's a way forward, Christ is there also. And it's such a relief to us that the apostle does not give us 5,000 rules to meet every situation.

He gives us something infinitely richer and more powerful, the transforming presence of Christ Jesus our Lord. Because the decisions we face in our family life and in our work life are sometimes so complicated.

And many of us are facing daily situations that others could hardly imagine. And in many of them there is no expert who can tell you what to do.

That's why I'm so glad that the apostle doesn't give us morals. He tells us that God is renewing the image of Christ in us as we seek him in our daily ordinary lives. And to try and do everything in the name of Jesus, the power of the Lord Jesus.

[6 : 07] So I want to have a word now just about the shape of the passage before we look at it. Verses 18 to 25. Verses 18 to 25.

When the apostle speaks to the one who is more vulnerable, he grounds what he says in the Lord Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is the one who knows all about voluntary weakness.

And in each couplet, Paul does not say, he does not tell each group what their rights are. He doesn't say, wives, you've got the right to demand your husband give up his life for you.

Instead of speaking about rights, he speaks about our special roles and responsibilities. Not about what we are to receive, but what we are to give. So I want to look at these three couplets together. Firstly then, husbands and wives. Verses 18 and 19. And the first instruction is to wives. Verse 18. Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.

[7 : 34] Now, all Christians, if you follow the Lord Jesus, we are called to submit to other people, to each other, to authorities, to leaders in the church, young men, to submit to older men, wives to their husbands.

This is exactly Jesus Christ's attitude in his incarnation. In fact, the same word is used of Jesus as he grew up in Nazareth, where he submitted to Mary and Joseph.

This is not a command to women in general to submit to men, but wives to their husbands. It is not a command that wives obey their husbands.

That is a word used of children and servants. Yes, but it's the word submit. It's a completely different kind of relationship, husband and wife.

And it is voluntary. It's a self-choosing to place oneself under the leadership of another person. It has nothing to do with abilities or inferiority.

[8 : 36] It's got nothing to do with intelligence or capacity. It's deliberately choosing. Each Christian wife has to do with her husband. Today's New International Version and the King James Version come closer to this.

They translate it. Submit yourselves to your husbands. And Paul does not tell us how to do it. That's really up to each of us in our marriages to work up.

But he does speak about the heart motivation. And the thing about the motivation here is that it is just distinctly Christ-focused. Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.

It's not what's culturally fitting or sociologically fitting or personally and psychologically fitting. It's not based on creation or some natural law. It's based on your new birth.

Your new nature. The new humanity that you belong to. And since it is focused on Jesus Christ, it means that any submission to your husband cannot be absolute or ultimate.

[9 : 45] It means there are limits to it. Submission can never be an excuse to cover violence or abuse or denigration or degradation, which it has been so often.

There are many examples in the Old Testament of women making great decisions for God which defy their husbands. And in the lovely New Testament example in 1 Peter 3, a Christian woman is married to an unbelieving husband.

She certainly does not submit to his pagan beliefs but prays for him and seeks to win him quietly. And the question I think for those of us who are Christian wives is how do I serve my husband best for the sake of Jesus Christ?

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Love is the uniquely Christian word for love. It's the love that Jesus showed coming from heaven to be crucified in our place.

It's giving up your life for the spiritual good of the other. This is a kind of submission as well. It's letting go of your own rights.

[10:53] It's giving yourself over for the spiritual best of your wife in every decision, nourishing and cherishing her as Christ does. The question for the husband is what can I do to best serve my wife for the sake of Christ?

And when he says don't be harsh with them, it's literally do not be bitter with them. It's not talking about harsh behaviour making the wife bitter.

It's talking about the husband's inner attitude of bitterness. Don't have a heart of bitterness toward your wife. I mean if you're trying to put the needs of your wife ahead of your own, you might start to think I've been so giving.

When is it my turn? When do things come my way? That's a bitter heart. And there's great wisdom here. Paul is not just saying look after your wife, be tender with her.

But he's saying recognise the fact that when she exasperates and frustrates you, you don't withdraw, you don't shut off, you don't go passive aggressive and undermine her with quiet criticism or loud criticism.

[12:03] But you keep your heart in the sweet love of Jesus for her. Rebecca McLaughlin, who's an author, became a Christian in her adult life.

And she speaks in her most recent book of her struggle with this whole idea of roles and submission. And I quote, she says, As a feminist, the Bible offered me a radical narrative of power inversion in which the creator laid down his life.

She says, Children, about your parents and everything, this pleases the Lord.

There's something of a surprise here that the apostle expects children to be part of the congregation listening to his letter being read. And he addresses them directly as members of the church in Colossae.

And again, the children's motive is to please the Lord. Not because your parents are good parents and they deserve it. Not because this is the natural order of things.

[13:32] And if you don't, there's going to be chaos. Not because if you disobey your parents, now you're going to have children and it'll come back to you. No, he's saying, children, you have your own independent relationship with Jesus Christ.

And right from an early age, the apostle wants them to know it's not about keeping all the rules, but living to please him. 21, fathers, do not provoke your children lest they become discouraged.

Now, this is a word to both parents. Sometimes the word is used to both parents, but it's particularly to fathers. Don't frustrate your children to embitter them.

And I think one of the ways this shows itself is that we parent out of faith, not out of fear. So much parenting is done out of fear.

And it can show itself in overindulgence or over strictness. Both of them can be driven by fear. Fear that you're not in control. Fear of how others will look at you. Fear of whether your children will really like you.

[14:33] Parenting out of fear is almost always transparent to our children. And again, there's great wisdom here. Our aim is not to discourage our children, but to encourage them, not by flattery or empty praise, but with clarity and compassion and Christlikeness.

And the third couplet, verses 22 down to 4-1, are servants and masters or slaves and masters.

Again, verse 22, the apostle speaks directly to the servants as fully capable members who are there on Sunday in the church at Colossae sitting next to their masters or sitting together in the masters on the other side.

I don't know. Now, there are all sorts of different kinds of slavery. It's one of the reasons why the ESV is chosen to translate the word slaves as bond servants.

The letter Colossians is being taken from Paul in Rome back to the church at Colossae by a domestic slave whose name is Onesimus. Onesimus comes from Colossae and ran away from his slave owner, whose name is Philemon.

[15:48] He was a Christian slave owner. Onesimus was not a Christian. But when he got to Rome, somehow Onesimus became a Christian and got in contact with Paul.

And now he is returning to Colossae and he has the letter of Colossians in his hand. And in his other hand, he has a letter to Philemon that Paul wrote, which we're going to look at after we finish with Colossians in a couple of weeks.

Now, it might be helpful to know that slavery in the Roman Empire was not at all the same thing as the transatlantic slavery of black Africans, which helped a number of countries build their economies, including the USA.

Slavery is as old as civilization. If you were a Roman citizen, you could never become a slave. But around about the Roman Empire, the different forms of slavery.

If you were a Scythian slave, and I mention this because Scythians are in verse 11, you were owned by the state and you had a position of some prestige. You were part of the military police.

[16:55] You were armed in Athens. In Rome, most slaves were prisoners of war. Instead of just being taken off and executed, they were put to work in houses of those who could afford them.

Very few were enslaved for the entire lives. A number of them, many of them were able to buy their freedoms. I'm not trying to say it was a happy life. And the Bible is absolutely clear that buying slaves or trading slaves will earn the judgment of God.

Paul himself says this in 1 Timothy. He puts it in a list with murder. I think the question for us is, why don't the Bible writers just say that every form of slavery is bad and wrong?

Stop slavery. I mean, it's demeaning, degrading, and disgraceful. Why doesn't the Bible call us to abolish it? And the new atheists have glommed onto this accusation.

They say, you see, the Bible is for slavery. You have a horrible God. I'm not going to believe in him. And in response to that, a number of modern commentators have tried to sweep this under the rug.

[18:01] They want to try and marginalise what the New Testament is saying about slavery. And in my view, they're false moves. But I want to mention two to you just before we look at the text.

The first is the chameleon theory. I grew up in the bush in Africa. And we used to play with chameleons. And they're little, they're lizard-like creatures.

They're very slow moving. And they have this astonishing ability to change the colour of their skin to be like the colour of the surface of what they're sitting on. It's a protection.

It's a camouflage technique. And so we used to pick them up and put them on the red brick. We'd put them on the concrete, white concrete, and see them change colours. Well, I think this is an effort to rescue Paul from Paul.

People who take this view say Paul is deliberately accommodating his teaching because he doesn't want to upset the apple cart too much. He won't speak against slavery because he's frightened of offending Roman sensitivities.

[19:06] It's an extraordinary suggestion about the apostle who talks openly about the offence of the gospel to Greeks and to Jews, who was imprisoned for what he said and stoned and left for dead, who's writing a letter here in Colossians about the supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ in an empire where there was only one Lord who was Caesar.

That he should adapt his teaching and not really say what he means for fear of offence, I don't think is believable. I don't think the chameleon tactic works.

The other tactic is the termite tactic. And those who take this view say that although Paul seems to allow slavery, he really wants to undermine it.

So he puts termites in its foundation so that ultimately we will work out what he really meant and abolish slavery. And there is something in this. There is a tension in all of Paul's letters between the radical equality that we have in Jesus Christ and how to live that out in a world that is passing away. If you have your Bible open, remember how the apostle Paul has just described the new humanity in verse 11. Here, in the new humanity, there is not Jew or Greek, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.

[20:38] This is the most radical equality before God. And it seems to do away with all distinctions and differences that so trouble us. But then almost immediately, Paul goes into husbands, wives, children, parents, servants, masters.

I think we have to recognise that the apostle puts these two passages side by side deliberately. And to downgrade or demote one passage or put one passage over the other is just imposing our own ideas on Paul.

The radical equality that we have in Christ Jesus is life changing and it is world changing, but it's clearly not meant to eradicate all distinctions in this life. In fact, the early Christians had a lot of trouble receiving and applying this radical new equality in Jesus Christ.

So in Corinth, the radical equality of the gospel led some to abandon their marriages altogether. Marriage is cancelled, they thought.

And if you did stay in your marriage, it would be a sexless marriage. Some people today want to apply the termite, this termite principle to marriage as well.

[21 : 57] But marriage and slavery are apples and oranges. Marriage is described by God as a gift from God and holy, but slavery is never described in that way.

And here in Colossae, the new teaching has relegated the ordinary domestic life to an inferior status. But Paul wants the Colossians and us to understand that we live out humanity in the ordinary, common, domestic realities of family and work life.

And when we get to the letter of Philemon, Paul tells the master Philemon to receive the slave or the servant Onesimus back, and I quote, no longer as a bond servant, but as a dear brother, as you would receive me.

So, although we cannot draw a straight line between ancient bond servants, masters, and today's employees and employers, I think we can draw a crooked line.

And there are principles here about how we serve those above us and below us and around us in the workplace. 22, bond servants. Obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye service as people pleases, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

[23 : 16] So to those in the position of weakness, the apostle says, the way you serve those above you is not by trying to get away with a minimum so that you'll be seen.

You know, here comes the boss, look busy. Or even for the boss's approval, but your motivation is toward Jesus Christ. Because the Lord Jesus sees all our serving, even the most menial and mundane.

And in verse 24, you know, servants, he says, that although your earthly, your worldly inheritance may not be as big as those who employ you or own you, your heavenly inheritance is on equal terms.

It'll never lessen, never fade, never cease. And before he speaks to those at the top of the food chain, Paul levels the playing field completely.

And he says, we all stand before one judge, Jesus Christ, who's completely unimpressed with all the things that we think are so important, money, power, and position. Chapter four, verse one, he finishes by saying, masters, treat your bond servants justly and fairly, knowing that you have a master also in heaven.

[24 : 32] Justly, fairly, with rightness, and literally, equality. So if you're a boss or an owner of a company and you belong to Christ, you're there to serve the needs of those who work for you, not by just being scrupulously fair, but by serving them in Jesus Christ.

I had dinner a few years ago with a guy who is the president and owner of a very large company.

And as we had dinner, he said, I said, how many people work for you? He said, 30,000.

I said, that's impossible. I said, how is a Christian? Do you serve them all? Oh, he said, it's so complicated. And he tried to explain to me. And I was so glad it was him and not me.

But Paul is saying, don't give in to the temptation to abuse your power or think you deserve it.

You're accountable to the Lord. The one who works for you belongs to Christ just as you do.

And he or she is just as important to Christ as you are. So, this is where our new humanity is worked out. This is how we do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 46] And this is how God is changing us from one degree of glory into another. And we need to ask God to change our hearts and strengthen us for our daily serving. Amen.

Amen.