

Equality & Responsibility

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[0 : 00] Well, here we are. I almost thought it wasn't going to happen there for a minute. But I'm really thrilled to be here with you in person. It's fantastic.

It'll be very helpful if you have your Bible or your service sheet open to Colossians 3, 17 to 4, 1 that Daryl just read for us. This is one of those passages where I'm guessing there's only one question you're all thinking about right now.

What's he going to say about verse 18? Wives, submit to your husbands. I missed my wife reading it. So he's downstairs. And some of you are probably wishing that this was a service where your kids were actually staying in the service so they could actually hear me preach to them about obedience.

We'll do that another day maybe. But I promise we're going to give that verse 18, we're going to give it the attention it deserves. But on the other hand, there's a lot more going on in this passage than just that one sentence.

So recall for a moment everything we've seen so far in Colossians. In Christ, the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him who is the head of all rule and authority.

[1 : 11] The supremacy of Christ. Christ is all and in all. So that if Christ rules in all things, then this must mean that the rule of Christ impacts every part of life in Christ.

Christ. And Paul has taken us all the way from that cosmic picture in chapter 1, now all the way into chapter 3 to this very intimate domestic picture.

And think of this as a journey of concentric circles. Concentric circles of transformed relationships. Transformed relationships begin at the very center of our life with the transformed relationship with God through Jesus' death and resurrection.

You were dead in your trespasses, but God made you alive together with him, having forgiven you through Jesus Christ, nailing our record of debt to the cross.

Remember that from chapter 2? And this is our core identity now, in Christ as beloved children of God. But it doesn't end there. The next concentric circle was that transformed relationship which is the body of Christ, the church.

[2 : 16] And this is what we read about last week in chapter 3, verses 11 to 16. We bear with one another, forgiving each other, letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts so that we are one body in Christ.

And then now, we see here, in chapter 3, 17 to 4, 1, the rule of Christ transforming our households, our families, and our professional lives.

Concentric circles going out, out, out. Marriage, parenting, our workplaces, all conformed to Christ under his loving rule. And if you come back next week, we'll examine the final concentric circle, which is in fact, Paul's instructions about our relationships with those outside the church who don't know Jesus yet.

So then, transformed relationships in all of life, the rule of Christ in all of life, that's what we're talking about today. And before we look closely at the verses, I want us to consider them as a whole.

I want us to just step back and look at them big picture. And I want to do that by making a few principles, giving us a few principles as a foundation for reading these verses.

[3 : 23] So four principles. First of all, very simply, Christ cares about everyday life. There's no such thing as a distinction between public and private religion, between the sacred and the secular.

There's no such divide. In other words, your vertical relationship with your heavenly father spills over and it transforms all of those horizontal relationships with everything and everyone around you.

Which means that your decisions about where your children go to school, they matter. It means that when you have conversations with your spouse about managing your family's finances, those conversations matter.

It means that your attitude towards your employer or your colleagues at work, well, those matter. Christ cares about everyday life. Secondly, the rule of Christ brings a deeply counter-cultural equality and responsibility to all of life.

Equality and responsibility. Do you remember chapter 3, verse 11? Here there is not Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.

[4 : 34] So equality in the family of God. Paul directly addresses women and children and slaves here. And it's impossible for us now to feel the full weight of just how radical that is.

It's radically empowering for people whom the Roman world did not treat as human beings but as property. So you might be reading Colossians 3 today feeling like Paul is oppressing women here. We'll come back to that. But for Paul's original audience this letter proclaimed radical equality and empowerment. And equality for husbands and parents and masters too.

Because Paul is equally counter-cultural in treating those in authority as equally responsible to submit to the rule of Christ in all things. So second then, the gospel and the rule of Jesus brings both equality and responsibility to our transformed relationships.

Remember, we're just looking at this big picture. And thirdly, Paul's message is universal and particular. I mean, we've got to acknowledge that Paul's speaking in a very particular cultural context here.

[5 : 48] Of course he is. It's the first century Roman Empire. It's completely different than 2020 Vancouver. He's addressing masters and bond servants.

Bond servants? I mean, that's just a sanitized word for slavery. And so we have every right to wonder how can this possibly be relevant for us today? And we do need to be very, very cautious, rightly cautious, about overgeneralizing these verses.

However, however, Paul's message does become universal for all countries and all cultures because of a particular thing. Because he gives us here a new motivation for all of our daily choices.

Yes, the examples and some of the particulars are contextualized. But the motivations are universal. And what is that motivation? Very simply, we say and do everything in the Lord.

So Paul binds our behaviors and our actions to the Lord seven times in these verses. As is fitting in the Lord, he says, this pleases the Lord, fearing the Lord, working heartily as for the Lord.

[6 : 54] From the Lord you will receive. You are serving the Lord. And it's all summed up in 317. Whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

So thirdly then, these instructions are particular to the Colossian context, yet nonetheless they hold universal application for all of us. So then with this groundwork laid, we're ready to take a closer look at these three transformed relationships.

Marriage, parenting, and the workplace. And let me summarize everything that I've said so far with a quote from Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. It's a somewhat depressing Russian novel that you may not, it may not be the first thing you think of when you envision transformed relationships of the gospel and the beauty of Christ.

I grant you that. But this is what Tolstoy says, all happy families are more or less like one another. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own particular way.

What is he saying? I think he's just agreeing with what Paul's going to say here. In other words, our families can all go wrong in so many different ways. But, if what Paul's saying is true, there's only one path for true human flourishing.

[8 : 10] Christians thrive and grow in their families when they subject themselves to Christ. When the family becomes a place where Jesus is worshipped and glorified. And when each member submits to the Lordship of Christ.

So, let's start with husbands and wives. Verse 18 and 19. Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord.

And husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. I know that this word submit, it chafes a little, doesn't it? Verses like this have been abused and misused by Christians and non-Christians alike to oppress women for generations.

However, submit here does not connote inferiority. It's not a synonym for bondage. Paul, in fact, deliberately uses the middle voice here in the Greek original.

Why? Because the middle voice suggests a voluntary submission. It makes the command a wife's voluntary choice out of reverence for Christ.

[9 : 17] Never out of fear or shame. And our Christian model for submission, whenever we come to this word submit in the New Testament, we must always think first about the divine order within our triune God.

Where Christ, who is equal with his Father, is willingly subject to him. 1 Corinthians 15 verse 28. We discover, therefore, that if Jesus the Son can simultaneously be at the same time equal with his Father and submissive to his Father, then somehow equality and submissiveness can coexist also in a human relationship.

But this submission must take place in the context of a husband's love. Just as Jesus' submission happens in the context of his Father's love.

Which brings us to verse 19. Husbands, love your wives. Do not be harsh with them. And Paul is making a revolutionary command here for husbands as well. Because first century men, they owned their wives, they owned their children, they owned their slaves.

And love was not an expectation in marriage. But neither is love here just some sort of emotional feeling. It's actually a covenant love that Paul's commanding.

[10 : 39] It's love that seeks the flourishing of the beloved rather than self-satisfaction. In fact, this is really the picture of love we've gotten all through Colossians. It's been a picture of self-giving love.

Remember Colossians 3, verse 12. Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. There's that loved word. The love that we receive from the Father is then poured out in what?

Self-giving love of compassionate heart, kindness, humility, meekness, patience. These are the fruits of love in Christ Jesus. only made possible in Christ Jesus.

But since Paul knows, it's still really actually quite easy for a man to just say to a woman, I love you, but the next moment treat her with contempt. He further qualifies the command.

Just to be clear, don't be harsh with her. Literally, don't behave bitterly towards her. And this bitterness, this harshness, it reveals a disease actually within the husband, which is self-centeredness that destroys genuine love.

[11 : 42] That little voice that says, she doesn't really appreciate me. She's holding me back from my full potential. And this bitterness starts to develop. And marriages are destroyed by this sort of hateful mental game that creeps into our thought life.

Love for my wife in Christ is a self-forgetting for the sake of my beloved. It's laying down my life for my best friend and covenant partner. And we're reminded again by Paul that our motivation for loving and submitting is always that it is fitting in the Lord.

It's fitting in the Lord, meaning that behind a married couple's choices to love and submit will always be actually the first choice, which is a deeper commitment to, first of all, to love and to serve Christ. Remember what I said as we began. We're seeing here the outpouring and the practice of Christ's rule in all the areas of our life. And so, therefore, the intimacy between husband and wife is actually an act of worship.

It's an act of worship that mirrors and imitates the love and submission of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit to one another. Well, what about parents and children?

[13 : 01] Let's think about verses 20 and 21. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children lest they become discouraged. And maybe you automatically think of little kids here.

But I want you just to step back and remember that all of us are, in fact, children. And as long as our parents are still alive, we have to ask, what does it look like to honor my father and mother as an adult child as well?

That can be very difficult, can't it? But let's begin with young children first. Our culture is pretty double-minded about obedience these days, isn't it?

It's double-minded like this. I remember when our kids were young, I experienced the dreaded shopping mall meltdown. The meltdown where my kids are lying on the filthy linoleum floor in the safe way, screaming in public, meltdown.

And I'm trying not to make eye contact with strangers as they walk by judging me with their body language. And they're judging me saying, what an undisciplined child.

[14:08] Shame on you, you horrible father. But then there's this actually complete flip side that's equally judgmental here on the West Coast, which is whenever you mention that you discipline your child for their behavior.

So a friend might look at you and kind of shake their head and say, maybe I need to tell you a little bit more about child-centered parenting and why our daughter calls mommy and daddy by their first names.

Have you met people like that? So that there's this kind of, where do I come, what am I supposed to do? How can they both be right? But the real question here is really just this.

How can a Christian child express his or her desire to love and serve the Lord Jesus? That's the question. And Paul's giving us the answer.

The answer to our children is obey your parents in everything. Why? Paul gives us the reason, because it pleases the Lord. Which means that actually this is a discipleship thing.

[15:15] Moms and dads, this means that training our sons and daughters in obedience is actually a tangible, practical, daily way that we train them in discipleship. that we train them in fact to love and serve Jesus.

And are there limits to obedience? Of course there are. Of course there are limits. I mean, Paul says obey in everything, and our flag goes up, right? But it's not a blind obedience. I mean, a child should never go against their Christian conscience, nor should we ever ask them to.

You know, like I get to the ferry lineup and I say, kids, just get under the blankets, daddy's going to pay for the ferry. I would never want to ask my children to do that. Because hopefully they would disobey me.

And this command here is further qualified by Paul's command to fathers not to provoke their children. And this one I take to heart because I really like to tease my kids, especially when they're being unreasonable, when they're complaining a lot.

I love to tease them. But Kim often reminds me of this verse, when I get close to kind of crossing that line into provoking them. Paul warns parents that coming down too hard on our kids can actually cause them to grow discouraged.

[16:27] It's literally to lose heart. And perhaps, just perhaps, one reason that Paul singles out dads here and says fathers and not fathers and mothers. Maybe it's because men are more likely to be brash in their criticism.

Or maybe it's because as earthly fathers, we actually hold this added weighty responsibility of being an analogy, becoming an analogy or an example of what it is to be, what it is that our heavenly father is to our children.

I mean, we all know people who really struggle with calling God father because of their own associations with that word from their childhood experiences. It's a big responsibility for dads.

So let me just close this section by returning to that question of how this command relates to us once we're adults.

Does it even relate? And whether we're single or married, clearly our adult relationships with our parents, they need to change and they need to grow, leave and cleave when you get married, for example.

[17:34] It's not healthy to simply go on obeying your parents in everything. However, in Western culture at least, we've almost certainly swung completely over to the opposite extreme, belittling and ignoring the wisdom and experience of our parents' generation.

Okay, Boomer, I only suggest that there might be something here for further prayer and reflection and humility. Perhaps our adult relationship with our parents actually also provides us with an opportunity to express somehow our love and service to Christ.

And let's turn thirdly and briefly to Paul's longest series of commands, which he gives to masters and slaves. And even though Paul gives twice as many words to this third category, I'm giving the least amount of attention to it today for two reasons.

One is, I feel like this is a family service and it's kind of a unique opportunity to really speak to an audience that is particularly focused on these two first relationships. And then also secondly, in two weeks time, we're actually going to come back to this topic, the topic of workplace relationships.

We're going to do a whole sermon on the book of Philemon, which is really just a case study in all the themes that I'm going to introduce. So Paul is teaching the Colossian church about the implications of Christ being all and in all.

[18 : 52] And we've been talking about transformed relationships in all of life, the rule of Christ in all of life. When we read verses 22 to chapter 4 verse 1, we're taking a noticeable step back though in time, right?

It really feels like we're going back to 2,000 years ago. So let me just make a few observations about the master-slave thing in Paul's context. Slavery in Paul's Roman context, it's not the same thing as slavery the last 400 years.

But that doesn't excuse it. It doesn't permit it. And Paul is not condoning slavery here. But it's important to remember slavery in the ancient world was not race-based. It wasn't permanent either. Many slaves purchased their freedom after a time of service. slaves lived and worked in a wide-ranging social strata. So some of them, yes, worked in appalling conditions, but others worked and lived as part of an extended family in more favorable conditions.

Nonetheless, I'm still very cautious about applying these verses to our modern context. But I do think verse 17 gives us perhaps a framework for doing so. Whatever you do in word or deed in everything, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

[20 : 08] And I think Paul's giving us a theology of work here. He wants all workers to know, including slaves, that in and through Christ we are no longer doing our work in service to our master or our boss, but in service to the Lord.

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Verse 23, whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men. Paul says that this will mean avoiding two sinful attitudes at work.

He calls it eye service and people pleasing in verse 22. What's eye service? It's when we only work hard when our boss has his or her eye on us. Or we only work hard to catch our boss's eye to gain favor.

And what's people pleasing? It's sacrificing our integrity for the sake of fitting in with our colleagues or getting ahead on the promotional track. I remember when I started a union job in my 20s and a senior employee took me aside a few days into the job and warned me not to be too keen in my work.

take your lead from all of us she said. We don't need you coming along and raising the bar around here and making us all look bad. Now maybe you have a job which frustrates you.

[21 : 29] Maybe you have a boss you don't really admire. You don't enjoy working for them. So it's easy to justify shoddy work as a sort of passive aggressive way of sticking it to the man.

But what if you could see your work as in service to Christ rather than to your company? Can you do that? Can you do that work in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him?

And if you're an employer, a supervisor, a manager, Paul reminds you that even though you are in authority, you serve a higher master. Chapter 4 verse 1. You hold this power but it's also an opportunity to seek the dignity and the welfare of your colleagues and to refuse to commodify people and treat them as a means to an end.

It's an incredible privilege and responsibility to be a boss. So remember that in leading your team, in managing your business, you are serving Christ who calls you to be the first, to be the last, to be the last, and the last to be the first.

And as we conclude, draw this all together. Paul's been taking us all the way from the cosmic to the domestic. showing that our Savior and Lord who rules all things, he cares about and he desires to rule over every part of our life.

[22 : 51] But we're walking with Christ in a very imperfect world. And we're sinners, saved by grace, in relationship with other sinners. And these are very challenging commands for any of us.

things that we need to be gracious with ourselves. And we need to forgive one another often. So I encourage you to take and make these verses an ongoing conversation in your relationships.

Pray through these verses. Continue talking with your spouse or your trusted friend about what Paul's saying here, how it applies. Ask them to point out blind spots in your life.

be open therefore to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and the need for repentance and change in response to his word.

Amen.