

Colossians 3:18-4:6

We've seen how the new self plays out in the church community, now Paul offers spiritual advice on the specific relationships in which individuals find themselves. What does the new self look like for me—husband, wife, student, boss, child, employee, etc.? Paul offers help here. This section is paralleled (verbatim sometimes) by Ephesians 5:22-6:9, and in both cases, Paul does not spend a lot of time here. The implication is that, if we can get a good grasp on who Christ is and what he has done for us, usually we'll just need a quick tutorial in day-to-day relationships.

It is interesting, however, to note what follows Paul's descriptions of the glory of Christ and God's infinite grace and mercy for us. We might be tempted to run around the streets shouting, "Hosanna!" or to spend 24 hours a day in prayer or reading Scripture. But what does Scripture say? Go home and love your wife. Obey your parents. Work hard. Be fair.

You don't necessarily run out and drastically change your life (though you might on occasion), rather you play out the new self in the context in which you live. Jesus again serves as the model, as we'll see, so in a sense, it is the old "What Would Jesus Do?" If he was a husband, a slave, a master, what would he do? Let's see.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

Family is the most basic unit that God has established (cf. Genesis 2:18), and it is here that Paul begins. The command given to each person implies the acts of the old self and the new self, and in each case, the act of the old self is the great temptation for that individual. Women struggle with wanting to take control while husbands struggle with selfishness and bitterness. In the flesh, children despise obedience and parents are tempted to overburden their children.

The issue of wives' submitting to their husbands is a controversial, but the need for husbands to love their wives is, in Paul's mind, just as dangerous and countercultural. On the first, remember that "submit" is different from "obey" (obviously, for Paul uses the word "obey" in the next verse). Wives are commanded to reverse the curse of Genesis 3:16 by voluntarily submitting to the husband, in the same manner that Jesus was equal with God and yet submitted to him. Jesus is also the model for husbands in the way in which he loved the church and "gave himself up for her." (Ephesians 5:25) Husbands are to love their wives sacrificially and hold no grudges against them or become cross with them (another translation of the word "embittered.")

Children receive the command to obey their parents, a command which echoes one of the Ten Commandments—"Honor your father and mother." The fathers (and "parents" is likely implied here) are encouraged again to think of their children before themselves.

Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of their inheritance. It is the Lord Jesus Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

While the word "slaves" grabs attention, notice that the word "Lord" appears four times in this section (it appears two more times in the previous section). Everything that the believer does is done in the

presence of the Lord. This idea comes to a head in the sentence, "It is the Lord Jesus Christ whom you serve."

Ultimately, believers (not just slaves), work for Jesus. Slaves spent their days doing manual labor and running errands, at the beckon call of the master, often unnoticed. In those mundane tasks, however, Paul says they are working for Jesus, the one who created the heavens and the earth and holds all things together. Accordingly, we should never work in a shoddy, selfish, lazy, or unethical manner. Ever. That ought to bring about some conviction. The telltale sign we're failing? We're working to "merely please men." To what extent is your work done with "sincerity of heart?"

We should deal with the question of slavery, of course, as this was a passage that Americans often used to justify slavery ("It's God-ordained," they said). First, there is some debate as to what this slavery looked like. Some scholars think that what is implied here is bondslaves, individuals working to pay off a debt or those who have voluntarily committed themselves to the master. The argument here is that Paul would never condone the racially motivated kidnapping, rape, splitting of families, and indefinite slavery that Americans practiced. Second, and more importantly, Paul is not dealing with the institution of slavery. He is giving instructions to individuals, telling them, "You act out Jesus in the place where you are."

Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

Another interesting point on the slavery discussion is that Paul commands masters as well as slaves, *and he does it in the same letter*. In other words, both slaves and masters were part of this congregation. (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:22-24) Paul assumes that social status is losing its grip within the church.

The masters should act as Jesus would act and, here it is again, do everything in the knowledge that the Lord is present and he will call them to account for their actions.

As with husbands and wives, Paul describes a situation where if each party plays their God-given role, everything goes swimmingly—slaves work hard and well, masters are just and fair, treating employees as humans. If either part fails to play their role, however, the harmed party is not released from duty—that is the stunning part of these instructions.

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.

Paul is an imprisoned, persecuted pastor here, but he does not write for his sufferings to be relieved but that he might honor Christ. He asks that the Colossians would pray that he would have an opportunity in which to share the Gospel (so there are wrong opportunities) and that he would be clear when he speaks. We like to think that we just go out and share the Gospel, and we should be diligent to do so, but remember that this is a work of God, the Gospel is a mystery that we need divine help in proclaiming.

The Colossians are challenged to themselves be devoted to prayer. "Devoted" implies passion, emotional investment, and, above all, perseverance. Would anyone describe you as a devoted pray-er? John Piper says that prayer, unlike a cell phone, grows stronger when it is used. Pray regularly, persistently, with an eye out for Satan's distraction and God's direction and "an attitude of thankfulness."

J.I. Packer says that we should measure ourselves not by how much we know about God nor by our gifts and responsibilities within the church but by how we pray and what goes on in our hearts. That is likely a convicting statement for most of us.

Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

Paul wants to share the Gospel himself but tells the Colossians that their main evangelism will be through responding. That raises the question, does your life provoke questions? If we act out our new self (compassion, kindness, etc.) to the extremes that God calls, it will provoke questions.

In responding, speak with grace—not necessarily about grace (though sometimes), but rather with the flavor of what God enables them to be, the fruit of the Spirit. The opportunity is short, so act wisely towards those outside the church. It will not look the same every time (notice the singular nature of “each” person), but will consistently be with wisdom.

In this instruction, Paul closes out this section on relationships—husbands/wives, parents/children, slaves/masters, believers/pastors, believers/unbelievers. In each case, Paul, through the Spirit, offers a command and a model, and in each case, we should see yet again, how far we fall short of the standard, and thus, how great is the grace that Jesus provides.

Sample Study Outline

- I. Pray
- II. Context—Who is Paul? Who are the Colossians? What have they been talking about?
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
 - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
 - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
 - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
 - d. Would Jesus show up late to class? In other words, how would Jesus act as a college student?
 - e. How do you feel about wives being subject to husbands? Husbands loving their wives? Does anything in you push back against you? Why is that? How should you respond?
 - f. Is Paul condoning slavery?
 - g. Do you feel equipped to speak the mystery of Christ?
 - h. What does it mean to have your "speech always be with grace?"
- V. Application Questions
 - a. Is there any area in which you need to obey your parents?
 - b. In your work, are you working to please men or the Lord? How can you change?
 - c. How's your prayer life? "Devoted"?
 - d. How can you live in such a way that will provoke questions?
 - e. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is:
 - a. Jesus enters into the context in which we live and that changes everything
 - i. Wives/Husbands
 - ii. Children/Parents
 - iii. Employees/Employers
 - b. Evangelism is a matter of prayer and wisdom
- VIII. Pray