

# “From the Lord You Will Receive the Inheritance”

## The Ninth in a Series of Sermons on Colossians

*Texts: Colossians 3:18-4:1; Exodus 20:12-17*

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As Christians in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, we find ourselves increasingly at odds with much of our culture. One place in particular where the tension is great concerns the nature and character of the family—which according to Scripture is the fundamental building block of human society. Another related source of tension is the idea of calling, vocation, and the value of work—the task assigned to Adam in Eden. Both matters are addressed in our text; Colossians 3:18-4:1. Paul instructs the Colossians in the proper relationship of husbands and wives, of parents and children, and servants to masters. But he does so in the context of an entirely different cultural situation than our own, the Greco-Roman world of the first century. But while the details of the cultural situation of Paul’s day are substantially different from our own, as we will see, much of what Paul says to the Colossians about family and work, has a direct impact upon our current circumstances. So, there will be much for us here in terms of application.

We are continuing our series on Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae, which is the apostle’s response to an insurgent heresy facing the churches in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor. As best as we can tell, the Colossian Heresy seemed to be a combination of a heretical form of Judaism, mixed with some sort of local paganism. Paul’s response to this challenge has been to reaffirm the supremacy of Jesus Christ, who is creator, sustainer, and ruler of all things. It is Jesus who saves his people from God’s wrath on the day of final judgment through his death upon the cross. As Paul explains to the Colossians, all those who trust in Jesus are united to him in heaven, as he renews God’s people in the original image in which Adam was created, and from which he (and we) had fallen. Much of what Paul says about the role and purpose of the family echoes the creation account, as well as the cultural mandate, and flows directly out of his instructions to the Colossians as to how Christians participate in the new creation ushered in by Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension.

The Lordship of Jesus over all things will figure prominently in Paul’s discussion about family relationships along with that of servants and masters. Those teaching the Colossian Heresy were advocating the worship of angels, seeking visions, and distorting the law of God, in a futile effort to take control over the invisible forces and fates of the universe (the unseen). But learning secret religious principles and practicing rigorous self-denial may have the appearance of wisdom but does little to stop fleshly indulgence. The pagan impulse to master unseen spirits and spiritual forces is a vain attempt to gain an upper hand over things already in subjection to Jesus. After pointing out these spiritual principles and religious rules were nothing but the invention of men, Paul reminds the Colossians that Jesus has conquered death and the grave, and then ascended to the Father’s right hand, where his people are to set their hearts and minds so that we gain a heavenly perspective on earthly things.

In the second half of his letters, it is customary for Paul to offer a series of imperatives (commands) which flow from the believer’s right standing before God (justification). In his Colossian letter, however, Paul’s focus is upon our union with Christ at the Father’s right hand (the indicative). He describes the Christian life in terms of dying to sexual immorality and idolatry. He speaks of putting off sins such as anger, malice, and lying. He exhorts the Colossians to put on Christ, as one puts on clean clothes after a shower. This struggle with sin, depicted with the metaphor of a change in clothing,

characterizes the Christian life because all Christians are united to Jesus who renews us in his image, a life-long process which involves the stripping off (like dirty clothes) of those sinful behaviors for which Jesus died and which characterized our old selves (what we were in Adam), yet which are inconsistent with what we have become in Christ (a new self).

In Colossians 3:18-4:1, Paul returns to the theme of the Lordship of Christ, in this instance, by giving a new series of imperatives (commands) about the most fundamental of human relationships which flow directly out from the indicative of Jesus saving his people from sin and freeing them from the guilt and the power of sin (in his death and resurrection). Because we are in union with Christ, we all are to submit to Christ, who is the creator, sustainer, and ruler of all things. Wives submit to husbands, husbands are to love their wives, children are to obey their parents, and both Christian masters and slaves are to take a heavenly perspective on their earthly toil, labor, and responsibilities.

Our submission to the Lordship of Jesus has tremendous ramifications for us as God's people because, as Paul reminds us, our ultimate allegiance is to Jesus Christ—not to king and country (submission to which is a civil kingdom responsibility—not an ultimate one), nor to a spouse (though there is a place for submission within the household), nor to authority or power in the work place (through here too is there is proper sense of submission). The Lordship of Christ over all things means that Jesus is Lord over all human relationships—especially those which he establishes and sanctions as creator, redeemer, and ruler. As Paul told the Ephesians in a letter written about the same time, and in a passage virtually identical to our text, all talk of submission in human relationships begins with the premise set forth in Ephesians 5:21, “*submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*”

Any discussion in which we might engage about submission to one another according to God-given roles begins with the acknowledgment that all Christians must act in submission to Christ, who is at the Father's right hand. The Christian husband may be lord of his home (but that is a lower case *l*, because he first submits to the Lordship of Christ. The master too, may possess great wealth and power (but he/she too is a lower case *m*aster) because they are a subject of Jesus.

Even though Paul does not open his discussion of submission in the family and vocation with a direct assertion of mutual submission to Jesus as he does in Ephesians, in this letter he will describe human relationships worked out in a manner “fitting of the Lord” (v. 18), “pleasing the Lord” (v. 20), in the “fear of the Lord” (v. 22), and by willingly submitting to others “as for the Lord” (v. 23). He tells Colossian masters “you serve the Lord Christ” (v. 24), and reminds them that they have “a master in heaven” (4:1). We can properly say that submission to Jesus in all things is the theme of these verses (3:18-4:1), even as Paul discusses those fundamental human relationships in which Christians are to submit to others so as to please their Lord.

As we turn to our text, we begin with Paul's assertion in verse 18, “*wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.*” This matter has become so touchy in modern America that most wedding services drop the “s” word, even Christian weddings. I have heard audible groans from the audience when I include this in wedding vows. There are two reasons why this is the case. The first is that we live in a culture in which there are far too common instances of emotional abuse and domestic violence taking place within households. If by “submission” people think we are condoning such actions, they are greatly mistaken, which is why it is so important to define what, exactly, it means for a Christian wife to be in submission to her husband. What does Paul mean by “submission?”

The second reason why people object to language of submission is that we live in a culture which is

absolutely driven to erase any connection between the family unit and natural law—i.e., the creation order as originally given to humanity in Eden and assumed in the Ten Commandments (as in our Old Testament lesson—the second table of the law; duties toward others). For Paul, a wife’s submission to her husband, is directly tied to the natural order and the establishment by God of the family unit as the basic building block of society. The family was not established by the state, nor can it be defined by any current cultural consensus. But in our culture, a woman who willingly submits to her husband is thought to be a fool for listening to that Neanderthal Paul, who hated women (which is why he would not allow them to be elders or ministers), and who was supposedly homophobic because he sees marriage as a creational ordinance reflecting the very nature of things—God making us male and female to procreate, raise our families, and complement and enjoy one another.

In our super-heated and increasingly secular political and cultural climate, ironically, we find ourselves in pretty much the same place as Christians in Paul’s first century audience (like those in Colossae). There is much for us to learn from Paul’s pointing God’s people back to the creational order to understand work and the family. The secular west has rapidly shifted away from any reliance upon natural law (which sees work and family as grounded in the very nature of things) to positive law (wherein laws, courts, and culture attempt to define—or redefine things which Christians believe are grounded in nature, and therefore true at all times and places). Drawing upon the creation account, Paul teaches that there is a God-given order of things both within the family and the workplace. This is the way things are, the way God deigned them.

Yet, our contemporaries believe these same things (family and vocation) arise from the current cultural consensus, and are matters to be defined by a court, a legislature—something ever-changing. This makes Paul a first century patriarchal and bigoted Rabbi, with little or nothing to say to us today. After all, a family can be defined by cultural norms or fads—a family can have two daddies, two mommies, or one daddy and whole bunch of mommies. There are plenty examples that this redefinition of the family has the most dire consequences. Hitler and his national socialists saw the family as a vehicle to build a pure Aryan race—only Aryans could properly marry and produce racially pure Aryan children. Stalin thought the family unit was subservient to the collective—groups of people lived together without any traditional family structure and jointly raised children and worked the land (owned by the state), because Stalin thought the family interfered with absolute devotion to the state. Americans boast about creating non-traditional families, “modern families,” as some put it. All of these mock the natural order of things.

Although we find ourselves in a similar place as the Christians in Colossae—facing a culture which openly rejects God’s order of things—the historical and cultural circumstances in the first century Greco-Roman world are much different than our own. This is important to keep in mind when we develop application later. When Paul speaks of a wife submitting to her husband, he is speaking to circumstances completely unlike our own. As Steve Baugh points out in his outstanding commentary on Ephesians, the average American female now marries at age 26, while American males marry at 28. Just about 50% of these marriages last more than twenty years.<sup>1</sup> Both sexes, on average, live into their late 70s. So, when we speak of wives submitting to husbands, we are apt to think of educated women (many with careers) who have equal legal and social standing to that of her husband. If such a woman is her husband’s equal, why should she submit to him? It is a fair question.

But in Paul’s day things were much, much, different. Nearly 100% of the woman in view were between

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<sup>1</sup> S. M. Baugh, Ephesians: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016), 467.

twelve and seventeen years of age (the average age of a new wife was about fourteen). Men married much later, between eighteen and thirty. Many of these marriages were arranged and involved families uniting with one another, not love and romance—concepts completely foreign to the marriage relationship. The husband and wife, were usually strangers until the marriage was arranged and then consummated.<sup>2</sup> The average life expectancy for a woman at this time was the mid-thirties. Many women died young due to serious dietary deficiencies, especially wide-spread anemia (exacerbated by menstruation and certainly by the blood loss of childbirth). We now know this to be the case from archaeological and DNA research. Many women lived with chronic health issues—bronchitis, emphysema, TB, intestinal and digestive issues from parasites. Many died in childbirth, or shortly thereafter from blood loss, especially when in a chronically weakened condition. A woman’s greatest fear was that her husband may die young (the average life span for a man was about forty) and she’d be helpless, explaining why proper care of widows and orphans was so important in the early church.

So when Paul speaks of wives here, he’s speaking of women who were young, had survived adolescence and childbirth, were nursing children, enduring chronic illness, yet still doing the difficult physical labor which was expected of them in the household—carrying water, firewood, preparing food, etc. Many of these women were the second, or third wives of her husband, replacing those who had died previously.<sup>3</sup> The real housewives of Colossae had very little in common with any of the women of the modern world.

Yet, as Paul commands, the women in both cultures and under quite different circumstances (that of Colossae and our own) are to submit to their husbands. Notice that Paul does not instruct these wives to “obey” her husband as a slave would obey a master. Paul does not instruct women in general to submit to or obey men.<sup>4</sup> Paul’s principle of submission is that of a *Christian* wife to *her* husband, seen in light of their mutual submission to Christ. Paul has been clear that both sexes are divine image-bearers (Genesis 1:26-28), both sexes are heirs of eternal life (Galatians 3:28-29), and according to Paul women engage with men in the singing of Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. Submission is not a matter of cultural or biological inferiority, nor of one’s standing before God.

Submission, then, involves deference of the wife to the spiritual headship of her husband as an act reflecting her submission to Christ. In the case of a Christian husband (and mind you, the New Testament assumes that not all of these marriages were between Christians, as in the apostolic period many people came to faith in Christ, while already married), he and his wife both mutually submit to Christ. Furthermore, a woman’s submission to the spiritual headship of her husband must be understood in light of Paul’s subsequent imperative, “*husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.*”

In Ephesians 5, Paul connects a husband’s love for his wife, directly to Christ’s love for the church. This comparison defines the sacrificial nature of a husband’s love for his wife, but also ties creation and redemption together. That God ordains that the family unit be the basic building block of society necessitates a particular view of marriage—between a man and a woman with the general purpose of procreation and complementing one another. But the marriage union as a creation ordinance also illustrates God’s purpose in redemption—Christ’s love for his people, those who were given by the Father

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<sup>2</sup> Baugh, Ephesians, 470.

<sup>3</sup> Baugh, Ephesians, 470.

<sup>4</sup> Baugh, Ephesians, 470.

to the Son, who redeems them, and then claims them as his bride.

Paul's point is that Christian husbands are to emulate Christ's love and care for his church, in their care of their wives. They are to provide for their wife's needs and protect her as far as possible.<sup>5</sup> This divine purpose in marriage (love and submission) is the way in which God intended for all people to flourish. The more we ignore this reality, the greater the wreckage in our culture. What is more, God has built this relationship into creation biologically (the distinction between male and female) and uses it to illustrate redemption—Christ redeeming his bride. The family is foundational to human life—courts and culture can define families however they wish—but the reality and importance of the family will outlive all cultural whims, fads, and laws saying otherwise. This reflects the way God has made things—our pagan and secular neighbors cannot escape this reality—try as they will.

In the world of Paul's day, his command to husbands to love their wives and not be harsh with them, was completely revolutionary and counter-cultural. While women did have limited legal rights (especially those women from well to do families), they did not enjoy anywhere near the same legal rights or cultural standing as men. The marriage meant that a young woman now had adult duties to perform—bear her husband's children, provide the necessities of daily life for her family, and put up with whatever the husband wished in his treatment of his wife. It was common for wives to be beaten, cheated upon, and generally mistreated. Those who see Paul as a woman hating bigot can only do so by denying the absolutely revolutionary teaching from the apostle that husbands must love their wives and treat them as would Jesus. A husband is to be Christ to his wife—not Pharaoh. This is the context in which the Christian wife is commanded to submit to her husband's spiritual headship.

The other fundamental family relationship that Paul must address is that of parent to child. In verse 20, he writes, "*children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.*" Of course, it was expected in the ancient world that children were completely subject to their father until they reached majority (the legal age of adulthood). This too reflects the creation ordinances (as published in the fifth commandment—"*Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*") It may help the children to know that in Luke 2:51, we are told that Jesus was submissive to his parents, supporting the role of the family as ordained by God.

One thing which is easy to overlook is that Paul speaks of "children" (both boys and girls), not just boys. In the Greco-Roman world girls were kept in (and around) the home together with their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, and were not usually seen at public events until ready for marriage. So it is quite remarkable that Paul speaks of children without differentiation of sexes. In any given society, there may be cultural roles for girls which are different from boys, but Paul sees both as members of the new covenant and both males and females are to receive the covenant sign and seal (baptism), not just boys (as with circumcision in the old covenant). This is remarkable and not to be overlooked.

Paul even goes so far as to instruct fathers, "*do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.*" Since the father submits to Christ, he is to reflect Christ's patience and kindness in the rearing of his own children—who are to be seen as the blessing of God. Although there are notable exceptions, many in the Greco-Roman world encouraged striking, slapping, and other forms of corporal punishment, so as to break the child's will to ensure submission. Given the immaturity of youth, and in light of Christ's mercy toward them, fathers are not to become exasperated with their children, and even

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce, Colossians, 164.

in the father's necessary discipline of his children (something also taught in Scripture), he must realize that youth is something his children will outgrow. Dad is not to be harsh. Firm, yes. Harsh, no.

The next fundamental human relationship mentioned by Paul is that of slave to master. Slaves made up the largest social caste in the Greco-Roman world. Unlike raced-based slavery in pre-Civil War America, slaves in Paul's world were the descendants of those on the losing end of combat with Rome-conquered peoples. Many slaves were treated as members of the family which owned them and they lived side by side with those whom they served. Many others—especially those consigned to hard labor—were treated terribly. There were also many freedmen, who had been emancipated by their owners and who became merchants, skilled tradesmen, day laborers, and even farmers. The quality of life of a slave depended almost entirely upon those whom they served—a cruel master made for a terrible life. A kind master who welcomed the slave into the family's life fared much better.

As the largest single demographic group in the Greco-Roman world, and given that many of the first Christians came from this social caste, this is a matter which Paul must address—especially so, when there were masters who owned slaves who attended the same church, a condition implied by Paul's comments to both servants and masters. In verse 22, he writes, “*bondservants, 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.*” Paul's exhortation is straight-forward. Slaves are to serve as witnesses to Christ and the gospel by working hard, doing all things well, and through loyalty to their master—not flattery or deceit. They are to serve their earthly master as they would serve the Lord himself.

The great paradox here is that a Christian slave is a freedman in the Lord. As such, the slave-master relationship reflects the fallen world, not the *new* creation breaking in upon this evil age.<sup>6</sup> In fact, a slave might actually serve as an elder or deacon in the same congregation in which his master is not suited for holding such an office. Yet, until the end of the age comes, slaves confined to this caste must do everything possible to obey their earthly masters—so long as what the master commands does not conflict with God's word. In fact, in verses 23-24, Paul instructs them, “*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. You are serving the Lord Christ.*” If the Christian slave serves a non-Christian master, they work to further the reputation and cause of Christ.<sup>7</sup> If they serve a Christian master, well then, all the more reason to see oneself as a servant of Christ in all that one does.

But even in those instances when a Christian slave has a cruel master, they should still keep a proper attitude, knowing that “*the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*” God vindicates his own, and there is indeed coming a final judgment when all wrongs will be made right. In God's sight there is no partiality, all will be judged accordingly. As Paul told the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 5:10), “*for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.*” Those cruel masters who have mistreated others will give an account to Christ himself, who thankfully also acts as advocate and defense attorney (paraclete) on behalf of those who are his, and for whom he has died.

As for Christian masters, Paul reminds them in 4:1, to “*treat your bondservants justly and fairly,*

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce, Colossians, 168.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce, Colossians, 168.

*knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”* Paul reminds all those who hold slaves that as divine image-bearers, they are to be treated fairly. In those cases where the master is a Christian, the way he treats his slaves reflects his own submission to Jesus, the master’s own Lord. Paul exhorts Christians in this position of responsibility to remember that they too are bondservants of their creator and redeemer. They must treat others as Jesus has treated them—with patience, kindness and mercy.

Although there is a huge cultural and situational difference between that form of slavery which dominated the Greco-Roman world, and voluntary employment in the modern world, a fair bit of application does carry over. Christian employees demonstrate their submission to Christ, as well as their acknowledgment that God ordained work as one of the ways we reflect the divine image, when we strive to be the best employees possible. We know that we live in a fallen world, where work has become toil, where there are bad bosses, bad companies and jobs, and bad employees. Nevertheless work is ordained by God. The same holds true for those in positions of power and responsibility—they may be the boss in an earthly business, but they serve a heavenly master, the Lord Jesus. Paul exhorts such people to treat those under their charge as though is the case. Power and authority carry responsibility.

As we wrap up, it should be clear that the cultural differences between first century Colossae and modern America are vast. But in both situations, Christians found themselves struggling to be faithful to Christ at a time when their contemporaries were doing everything possible to throw off the natural order as created and ordained by God, and to live as though they personally created the reality in which they now live. Whether in Colossae or America, God creates the reality (the world and its institutions) in which we live, and from which we cannot escape. This is his world, his rules, his divinely ordained institutions—the family as the basic foundation of society, and work as the suitable objective for his image-bearers (the cultural mandate).

As Christians, we know that the world is a fallen place. We know that human relationships in the home and workplace are fractured, distorted, and dysfunctional. But we also know that the same Jesus who died for our sins and who was raised for our justification, has ordained these institutions for the well-being of his people. These earthly institutions reflect (even if, faintly at times) and point us to the heavenly inheritance earned for us by Jesus, who reminds us in the midst of this fallen world, that *“from the Lord, you will receive the inheritance.”* That inheritance to us in Christ is not stained by human sin nor tarnished by Adam’s fall. That inheritance is eternal life in a new heaven and earth, where there are no more tears, pain, suffering, and or sweat, no more bosses, no more servants. For there we will be the bride of Christ, and all things will be in perfect submission to him.